Filthy Rich

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Published by Headline Review

Extract

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Chapter 1

Mary Longshott looked at herself in the mirror. It hung, bevel-edged and age-spotted, in its carved gilt frame, on the wall between two of the stately windows. The light through the long Georgian panes was bright yet subdued. It fell lovingly on Mary, giving the pale oval of her face a creamy glow and deepening the green of her thickly lashed, wide-apart eyes.

Her thick hair, tumbling about her shoulders and the dark brown of black coffee, shone too. Mary shook it, surprised at its shimmer considering it had not been brushed since this morning. Bed hair. Four-poster-bed hair in her case. Taking the scrunchie from her slim wrist, she pushed thick handfuls through it, tucking any further stray wisps behind her discreet white ears. She twitched her small, tip-tilted nose and smiled at herself, grateful for the still-fine cheekbones, the generous pink mouth and the lack of lines despite being over the threshold of thirty. She was still pretty. Very pretty, Monty said, but then he would, Mary thought indulgently. The green eyes in the mirror laughed back at her.

She was aware, as she stood, tall, slender and straight-

backed before the row of windows, of the room extending behind her. The central salon was the house's most important room, built to receive esteemed guests and reinforce the family's status. Her predecessors as lady of the manor would have had their greatest successes here. Mary often imagined them at balls and parties, their diamonds winking in the candlelight, their pearls glowing, their silks rustling, their perfume trailing as they worked the ornate room, seemingly relaxed but with bright eyes everywhere, introducing this person to that person, tweaking that situation, supplying a rejoinder to this remark, laughing at that one and conducting, in the subtlest manner possible, the complex and demanding symphony of a brilliant social occasion.

There was no trace of such events now. The room was silent. The last notes of the orchestra had died out long ago, the candles blown out and the last guests had been gone for years.

Rather to Mary's relief, it had to be said. She was gentle and timid and parties terrified her. She would have been happy in the kitchen, sending up the syllabubs, rarebits, champagne jellies and whatever else people at such parties expected. But being out in the spotlight, the social motor of a brilliant occasion; it made her feel queasy to think about it.

Mary gazed down the flight of wide, shallow steps which led from the mansion's grey stone portico to the drive which, despite its patchy gravel and sprouting weeds, wound with a nonchalant magnificence between the trees in the park towards the far-distant gates and Weston Moor beyond them.

She imagined, without actually hearing it, the fizzing sound, faint but unmistakable, of a lark. There were lots of larks on the moor, singing away as if lacking a care in the world. They never failed to make her feel better, or to remind

her how beautiful it was up here. Even on a drizzly afternoon in early June, like this one.

But drizzle could be delicious; wetness on leaves, grass or flowers seemed to release all the pent-up scent within. A rose after rainfall had to be the sweetest smell in the world; the diamond raindrops on the petals cold to the nose, the sweet, powdery scent as if the whole of summer had been distilled into the tight twists of one pink flower.

She couldn't just stand here, Mary knew. There were things to do, as there always were. But dragging herself away from the view was difficult. It was so familiar, and yet never the same. In the winter the landscape before the house brooded beneath skies that could be anything from palest duck-egg to deepest rose. The frosted oaks and chestnuts would hang with diamonds, frozen puddles would flash in the sun and snow would stipple the curving landscape, lying in the lee of dry-stone walls and revealing the contours of ancient ploughwork.

Early spring – in particular May, Mary's favourite of all the months – was a dream of green and white; the hedgerows heavy with scented hawthorn blossom, the cherry boughs ebullient with flowers, the sides of the road foaming with the delicate greenish white of cow parsley.

Then came June and summer – brasher and less virginal than May; the fields a brilliant green galaxy blazing with yellow meteors of dandelions. Poppies flamed in the hedgerows, foxgloves sent up fleshy fireworks of magenta and, more rarely, white. On the horizon the purple ridges of hills, so still and distant in winter, seemed nearer now, alive with the movement of clouds passing quickly overhead through the warm blue.

Mary pulled her gaze from the park gates back to the

parterre below the portico. There was little to show that these had once been formal gardens, planted with box and roses, dotted with statues, glittering with the curved jets of fountains. Nothing apart from coarse grass grew at Weston Underwood now. She would have tried her hand at horticulture, but it had been explained to her soon after her arrival that all the Weston Underwood land was barren. Creeping lead poisoning from the spoil heaps the once-booming lead mining industry had left scattered about the moor was to blame, apparently.

Considering that lead was the source from which her husband's ancestors had gained their wealth in the first place, the practical Mary had seen no point in bemoaning her gardening lot, or, rather, little. Had there not been lead mining, there would have been no Weston Underwood. And therefore no Monty, either. So, given all there was, the absence of a few courgettes and floribundas seemed a small price to pay.

Mary turned on her heel to return to her duties, but was instantly distracted again. Her eyes seemed pulled up by their own accord to another of her favourite views: the salon's ceiling. She could not look at it for long; the awkward pose made her neck ache, but never a day went by without her admiring it. It was seventeenth century, depicting a vast and gaudy sunset upon whose billowing pink-and-gold-tinged clouds a number of mythic occurrences were playing themselves out. There were the Eumenides, the Furies, one of whom was brandishing the scissors with which she would cut the thread of a man's life. There were the wild-eyed white horses and the golden chariot of the sun god, Apollo.

According to Monty, who had lived at Weston Underwood all his life, the characters on the ceiling had the

faces of people employed in the house while the painter was working. The serene countenance of the saffron-robed Venus at the centre was reputedly based on the chatelaine of the time, the beautiful Lady Amelia Longshott. She had, Mary knew, a reputation for being as capable as she was lovely. Mary's glance flicked back to the mirror again to catch herself looking guilty. The thought of Lady Amelia always made her feel inadequate. When Mary thought of the balls in the central salon, it was Lady Amelia she most frequently imagined at the glittering centre.

She comforted herself by reflecting that Lady Amelia, for all her brilliance, had done considerably less well than Mary so far as husbands were concerned. The two men, however, shared the same name. Lady Amelia's Montague, so family legend had it, preferred to spend his time and money adventuring round the world in search of treasure, wars, fame or other excitements, which very possibly had included other women. Lady Amelia, nothing daunted, had apparently occupied herself in his absences by running the house with brisk efficiency.

Mary looked down at the wooden floor, rising and falling like the waves thanks to the centuries of damp beneath it, rubbed her neck and then looked up at the ceiling again. The handsome, somewhat self-satisfied face of the Icarus on the ceiling, the deluded youth who took stupid risks in pursuit of personal glory, was said to be that of Lady Amelia's frequently absent husband. He had been a big spender with it; his wife's enormous dowry was promptly blown on building a new house – the one Mary now stood in – and in financing her husband's exploits. Had Lady Amelia ever regretted marrying her Montague? Mary wondered.

Mary had never regretted marrying hers. Monty was very

far from being a normal sort of husband, admittedly, and their life together was, in the view of many, positively eccentric. But that was its attraction. Until she had met Monty, Mary's life had been about as normal as her age, education and situation could possibly have made it. And until she had met him, Mary had had no idea that this was not what she wanted, or that there were alternatives.

A twenty-something secretary in a London auction house, she had been sitting, as usual, at her desk outside her boss's shiny mahogany door, when the Head of Eighteenth-Century Paintings had suddenly demanded her presence. Smoothing her rather Sloaney printed skirt, and tweaking the pressed white collar of her blouse, Mary checked her black polished pumps and entered the presence.

Five minutes later she was looking, aghast, at the short, pink, prematurely bald, prematurely aged Head of Eighteenth-Century Paintings. He moved his florid neck uncomfortably in his pale blue and white checked shirt, set off by an unbecoming yellow tie. For someone who was supposed to be an art expert, he was, Mary had always thought, a terrible dresser.

'I'm awfully sorry, Mary.'

Mary had fixed him with as steely a glare as she had dared. That some impoverished aristocrat called Montague de Vere Longshott, in some place called Weston Underwood, near some town called Mineford, somewhere in the Midlands, wanted to put some of his collection up for sale had, up until that moment, been of interest to her only in so far as it affected her boss. In other words, as far as she had to make arrangements for him to go and inspect the works, which she duly had done, as she had done for similar 'go-sees', as he called them, many times before.

But the Head of Eighteenth-Century Paintings' wife had had other ideas about this particular go-see. She had demanded, on the same day he was expected at Weston Underwood, her husband's presence at their daughter's prep school's annual fête, an event of apparent great prestige attended by celebrity parents. The Head's wife, who even gentle Mary had realised was inordinantly socially ambitious, had apparently volunteered her husband's services as a human fruit machine. 'Mary, I'm sorry, but I've got no choice,' the Head of Eighteenth-Century Paintings had admitted sheepishly through his fingers. 'Be a love and go and see Longshott for me, would you?'

'Me?' Mary had exclaimed. 'But I don't know the first thing about paintings.' It occurred to her that perhaps, actually, she ought to; she had been working in the department for six years.

From behind the safety of his large mahogany desk, the Head had looked at her dolefully with his protuberant blue eyes. 'Well I don't know the first thing about being a human fruit machine,' he had riposted. 'It rather worries me, to be frank. Where exactly does the money come out? Not to mention go in?'

Mary had no idea. Nor did she care. The point so far as she was concerned was that that night, that upcoming evening, had been a red-letter day for some time. It was the night she was doing dinner for six at the house of Richard, a rich if disdainful stockbroker she had met at the wedding of a mutual friend and embarked on a tentative relationship with.

He was a definite upgrade on the standard of looks and success she had thus far been used to. Despite her beauty, she was too shy to assert herself with men, and most of her

previous liaisons had been with the predatory types who preyed on gentle girls. Chief among these had been a fattish, pompous, forty-something captain from Knightsbridge Barracks and an unsuccessful property developer who pretended to potential investors that the smart flat Mary's wealthy consultant neurosurgeon father had bought as a home for his only daughter was in fact his own. Both captain and developer had used the same tactics: portrayed themselves as lost causes in order to appeal to the shy, sensitive and motherly side they sensed was there, and then, having won her affections, bullied and exploited her.

Love and relationships had not turned out quite as Mary imagined them. The handsome prince whom, fuelled by her storybooks, she had imagined marrying in her earliest childhood had miserably failed to materialise. But Mary had never failed to hope that he might. 'Oh, Mary. Get real,' her friends would tell her, impatient and indulgent in equal measures.

Mary had tried her best. She had got real to the extent of accepting she was not clever enough to be the doctor or vet that had been her other great dream in childhood and trained as a secretary instead. But she had never stopped helping any vulnerable creature she happened to come across, whether it was a beggar outside the tube station, a child with a scraped knee, a cat with a cut paw. And her dream of a prince remained alive, too.

Was Richard that prince? Mary hoped he was. Given her chequered romantic history and advancing age – she was now twenty-five – it was, she knew, her stern if well-meaning parents' dearest wish to see her happily settled with a rich and handsome husband in a chintzy Chelsea townhouse. She was conscious that the dinner at Richard's house – which was both in Chelsea and abounded with chintz and striped

wallpaper, not to mention bins festooned with hunting scenes – was her big chance to impress both parties. As well as Richard's friends, who all seemed as smart, successful and intimidating as he was and somewhat reluctant to accept her into their circle.

But Mary had a trump card which she planned to play that evening. However good Richard and his friends may be at assessing whether General Electrics would go up or down, or how Rio Tinto Zinc was doing, they could not, Mary knew, cook like she could.

Food was her one real skill. After school she had wondered about going into catering, but her father, who Mary was terrified of, told her it was a crowded market with low profit margins and she would almost certainly fail. Even though secretarial work, which he had recommended and which she had subsequently obediently trained in, didn't strike Mary as being exactly uncrowded nor particularly profitable. But she had kept up her interest in cooking, and delighted in giving dinner parties for work acquaintances she got on particularly well with, or her few schoolfriends who remained in London and had not yet married and disappeared to the country, the suburbs or abroad.

For Richard's dinner she had devised a menu of chicken in grapes and cream sauce followed by summer pudding. The combination had that rather eighties feel that always went down well with Richard's sort of City person. While Mary had made the summer pudding the night before – it was in a plastic lidded bowl in her bag – the rest had yet to be bought and she had planned to nip to Sainsbury's on the King's Road on the way round.

But now, to judge from the way the Head of Eighteenth-Century Paintings was looking at her, she was expected to

drop everything for work reasons. Richard, of course, often had to do so – they had been together a mere four weeks and he had blown her out three times already: 'the bloody office, I'm afraid'. But he clearly would not expect it of her.

Mary felt panic rise. It was now mid-afternoon. If she had to take the train to the Midlands, do whatever it was she was expected to do and get back to London, she wasn't likely to return before the cheese course. Which at this stage had not yet been bought. Mary felt like bursting into tears. It was an unexpected blow to what had seemed a certain evening of triumph. She raised miserable, watery eyes to the Head of Eighteenth-Century Paintings.

'But I don't know anything about paintings,' she repeated.

'Don't worry,' her boss assured her. 'You don't have to.'

Mary stared back, almost jolted out of her misery by amazement. What was he saying? That he himself was a fraud? That, despite his billing, he didn't know anything about paintings either?

Guessing her thoughts, the blue protuberant eyes grew alarmed. 'No, hang on a minute, Mary, you've got the wrong end of the stick. I'm saying *you* don't have to know about paintings because *I* do. All I want you to do is go up and take pictures of them. That'll do for starters. Then I'll follow myself as soon as the diary permits. But for now, just take the train ticket and get up there,' the Head of Eighteenth-Century Paintings instructed. 'I don't want us to miss out on a Poussin or whatever. You never know with these provincial stately homes. They can be full of surprises.'