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Distant Images

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Published by Hodder

Extract

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She saw him the moment she entered the ballroom and her first thought as their eyes met was, it really does happen! She had read many novels, most recently *Diana of the Crossways* by Mr Meredith where the hero and heroine fell in love at first sight. Though like most young women she was a romantic at heart she had not believed it could really happen. She was wrong!

He was one of the cavalry officers leaning against the far wall. A table ran along its length, laden with bottles of champagne, Madeira, sherry, cut-crystal bowls containing punch and dozens of matching glasses waiting to be filled by uniformed flunkeys wearing white wigs and stockings. He was drinking champagne, an expression of utter boredom on his indecently handsome face, an expression that altered dramatically when his eyes met hers. He was dark, dark as the gypsies who wandered through the villages scattered about St Helens, selling pegs and sprigs of heather and offering to tell your fortune if you crossed their palms with silver. His hair was almost black, like the smooth wing of a blackbird, but it was his eyes that held her attention. They were a vivid, startling blue, heavily fringed with thick black lashes above which his eyebrows swooped fiercely. The shade of blue was one she had never before seen, at least in a man's eyes. It was the colour of the speedwell that grew in the wall at home, or was it the cornflowers that carpeted the meadows surrounding the park in which Lantern Hill stood? She didn't know, nor did she care, for he was the most beautiful young man she had ever seen.

As was always the case when the family entered the ballroom, or indeed *any* room, the two young daughters became the focus of everyone's scrutiny, male or female. They walked a little way ahead of their parents, though walking hardly described the way they moved, for they seemed to glide effortlessly, their expensively shod feet barely touching the polished ballroom floor.

"Great God, Dicky," drawled the tall, immaculately turned-out cavalry officer whose glance had captured one of them, "who is that glorious creature?"

"Which one?"

"Well, either would do but I must admit to being rather smitten with the one in the pink dress."

"My dear chap, you have as much chance of dancing with Mrs Langtry as you have of getting one of those two beauties on the floor. Their father is like a dragon and well known for his animosity to any man who shows an interest in them. Their would-be suitors are legion."

"I saw her once, you know, when she was in her prime."

"Who?"

"The Jersey Lily. God, she was sublime, but these two compare very favourably, particularly the one in pink." The officer drew deeply on his cigar and his eyes narrowed speculatively but Dicky laid a cautionary hand on his arm.

"Hugh, I'm warning you, don't go charging in there in your usual high-handed fashion. Not unless you want a bloody nose from their father. He has a fiendish temper. Find someone who knows them and ask to be properly introduced."

"Who are they? Their names, man?"

"They're the Goodwin twins, Beth and Milly. The most popular and eligible young women in Lancashire. Not only are they lovely but they will be very wealthy, for their father owns God knows how many factories, glass works, brick works and other business concerns too numerous to mention."

"Of the manufacturing class then?"

"Yes, and he's aiming for a member of the peerage at the very least for both of them. Come to think of it you might have a chance. But you'd have to mind your manners."

"Would I, by jove! Well, I can be very charming when I choose, Dicky, old boy and—"

"Here's a chap who might be able to help you," Dicky interrupted as a third officer joined them, as tall as they were and, like them, wearing the full dress uniform of their regiment, the 3rd Battalion of the King's Regiment (St Helens), which was stationed near Longworth. His scarlet jacket had a high collar cut square in front and hooked closely beneath his proudly lifted chin. Gold braid adorned it and the blue facing of the cuffs. A blue sash was draped over his left shoulder, ending in a fringe level with the bottom of his tunic. His trousers were dark blue with a gold stripe down the outside of each leg and a red leather belt was strapped to his lean waist. His buttons gleamed, as did his eyes, and his teeth shone white in his brown face, for the regiment had only recently returned from Egypt to where the army had retreated after the fall of Khartoum two years ago. His brother officers, many of whom were dancing, were just as colourfully and magnificently turned out, surpassing even the fashionable and expensively dressed ladies. He was attractive, his hair the colour of dark chocolate, straight and heavy and, since he despised the pomade most of the gentlemen of the day used, was always falling over his brow. He was tall, wide-shouldered, his waist and hips slender and his long legs were in perfect proportion to the rest of his body.

"Help you with what, Hugh?" he enquired languidly, for it was the fashion among the officers to be languid.

"You know the Goodwin family, don't you, Todd? Aren't you connected with them in some way?"

Lieutenant Todd Woodruff smiled as he reached for a glass

of champagne, taking a sip before he answered. "I am. My mother is their housekeeper and has been for many years. I was brought up with Beth and Milly and it's thanks to Noah Goodwin I was able to buy my commission."

"You don't say, old boy. How very intriguing," drawled Captain Hugh Charles Thornley, sixteenth baron in a line that stretched back into the dim and distant days of Henry VII and who to his knowledge had never had anything to do with the son of a housekeeper. Each baron had married money and once there had been land in Cheshire, Yorkshire and Scotland, but all that had gone, along with their great wealth, gambled away by this man's father. All they owned now was their ancestral home at Thornley Green and the rents that the land provided. Hugh, Lord Thornley had chosen the army as his career. Generations of Thornleys had been distinguished for their military prowess. Indeed he himself had fought courageously in the Boer War six years ago. He was recklessly daring, wild and dashing, seemingly unaware of danger to himself and the men he led, and his mother repeatedly begged him to come home and look after his inheritance but so far he had resisted. Though it caused great hardship Lady Thornley managed to supply him with a small allowance just big enough to pay his mess bills. He was a gambler, like his father, but, unlike his father, a lucky one and so far what he won kept him in the style expected of a captain in a cavalry regiment. Since he had reached the age of eighteen his mother had been on the lookout for a suitable, *wealthy* young bride for him. Of his own class, naturally, which was well bred, well polished, privileged and cultured. None she had presented for his inspection had yet met his high standards!

"Perhaps you could present me to them," he drawled, helping himself to another glass of champagne. He had been aware that Todd Woodruff came from a less privileged background than his own, but then didn't all his brother officers? He

was not at all sure he cared to be associated with a man whose mother was a mere housekeeper. Still, if it got him into the group of laughing, chattering guests, one of whose daughters he had taken a fancy to he knew he must remain civil. Once he had her on the ballroom floor he would have no need to remain with them. He would whisk her off to some quiet corner with a bottle of champagne and two glasses and engage in the dalliance that was the stuff of life to him!

The party of five that had entered the room was soon surrounded by a dozen people, most of them elderly, for Abby and Noah Goodwin, Abby forty and Noah approaching fifty, had a great many friends. Besides the two exquisite girls and their parents there was a man who seemed to be in his late twenties or early thirties. He was tall, lean, with an athlete's build, and those who had visited the great seaport of Liverpool and seen the diverse nationalities that passed through it would not have been mistaken in thinking that he had a Nordic background. His thick, curling hair was so fair as to be almost silver and his eyes were the deep, dark aquamarine of a Norwegian fjord. He was not handsome in the accepted sense, but his face was pleasantly good-humoured with a wide, mobile mouth that appeared to be always on the verge of a smile.

The party gathered round a table where a white-haired gentleman and a pretty, elderly lady smiled up at them, the lady putting an affectionate hand on Abby Goodwin's arm. Abby, who herself was still very lovely at the age of forty, sat down on a velvet and gilt chair beside her, and after nodding and smiling at several other ladies who were also seated, was soon engaged in earnest conversation with her.

"Are you well, Laura?" she was heard to say. "You look very smart in that gown; the colour suits you. And John? Has he recovered from his cold?"

"Oh, yes, but I still had a great deal of trouble getting him

here. You know what he's like about these kinds of functions. The girls look very smart, but should that surprise me?"

The gentleman, Noah Goodwin, the fair young man and three other striplings who obviously thought they might have a chance with one of the Goodwin twins, stood beside them. Champagne was offered and though Noah Goodwin frowned slightly when his daughters took a glass each, he allowed it.

"Who's the fair chappie?" Captain Hugh Thornley asked his companion. His eyes were still narrowed and there was a hard twist to his well-cut mouth. He had straightened up, lifting his chin with the inbred arrogance and pride of a man who is not accustomed to being denied, which of course he did not expect to be.

"Now look, Hugh, it's no good—"

"I only asked who the fellow was, Todd." Hugh's voice was deceptively mild. "There's no harm in that, surely." He emptied his champagne glass and reached for another.

"His name's Archie Goodwin. He's some sort of relative of Noah Goodwin. He helps him to run his businesses and lives in the old family home at Edge Bottom by the glass works. There's some mystery about the time he came to live with them twenty years ago, but like me he was educated at the local grammar school. I always wanted the army and won a place at Sandhurst but Archie went to university and has a degree in engineering. He's a nice chap and is well thought of. I think . . . perhaps I shouldn't say it, but I believe he has a soft spot for Beth."

"Has he indeed? She's the one in the pink dress?"

"Yes, but listen to me, Hugh, if you have designs on her—"

"*Designs on her!* What a terribly dramatic fellow you are, Todd. Isn't he, Dicky? Did you ever hear such a thing?"

"Well, you do have a certain reputation with the ladies, Hugh, and this one is a decent girl from a decent family so if I were you I'd look elsewhere."

"But you're not me, Dicky, old boy. And if I'm not mistaken,

and I seldom am when it comes to the ladies, *she* has an eye for *me*."

He was right, for Beth Goodwin's eyes, a gleaming silvery grey, turned constantly in his direction and she was aware that if she didn't stop it and take more of an interest in the general conversation her mother would notice. She thought Milly already had because she kept turning to look where Beth did. Todd was there with two other officers and when he caught their glances he bowed in their direction and raised his glass.

"What does that young fool think he's up to?" Noah Goodwin growled, scowling at Todd. "Bowing and scraping like a damn fop and who are the two other grinning jackanapes with him? They need to mind their manners or I'll have something to say to their commanding officer."

"Oh, Father, for goodness sake. They are only being polite. Can't a man bow in our direction without you taking umbrage?"

There was a sudden rush of young officers and gentlemen in the formal black and white of evening dress begging to be allowed to put their names in Beth and Milly's dance cards and within minutes both girls were on the floor dipping and swaying to the lilting music of a waltz. Beth, whose gown Hugh Thornley had described as pink, was in a soft ivory rose, so pale there was scarcely any colour in it at all. It was low-cut, revealing the top curve of her small breasts and the satin smoothness of her shoulders, with short puffed sleeves. Though the fashion was for lavish trimming none of the Goodwin women, including their mother, cared for it. It was said in the fashion magazines that it was "impossible to put too many flounces, puffings and flowers on the tarlatan, gauze, grenadine or tulle skirts of ball dresses" but the Goodwin women were satisfied with an overskirt edged in narrow pleated ruching which draped over the small crinoline at the

back. Against her mother's wishes Milly was in a vivid turquoise blue silk. Abby Goodwin thought it too striking for a young unmarried woman but as usual Milly had her way. It was much the same design as her sister's and both sported an enormous silk rose, matching the colour of their gowns, in the centre of the coil of their upswept glossy copper hair. Many of the other ladies were in the startling, bold colours that were coming in to vogue, maroon, mustard yellow and emerald green being prominent, sometimes with a mixture of three or four colours and materials so that the swirling mass of dancers might have been allied to peacocks or parrots from the jungle.

The ball had been advertised as a "Masque of flowers" and the entire Town Hall, from the steps at the entrance to the ballroom itself was decorated profusely with every flower in season. Great arrangements of roses mixed with Canterbury bells, gypsophilia, carnations of every colour, sweet william, pom-pom dahlias and hothouse magnolias filled the air with their fragrance. The ballroom was packed with the influential, the wealthy, the prominent, the élite of St Helens, those who could afford the price of the very expensive tickets to this ball, which was being held in honour of their Queen. It was 1887, Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee, fifty glorious years on the throne. Yesterday had been a triumph as the nation had been wholly given over to the thanksgiving celebrations that had taken place the length and breadth of the land. There had been a great Jubilee procession from Buckingham Palace to Westminster Abbey in London, the route decked with flowers and flags and edged with cheering crowds of Her Majesty's loyal subjects, many of them come from the provinces to see their Queen on this special day. Triumphal arches decorated every street corner under which the procession passed. There were guards of honour formed by the Grenadiers, the First Life Guards, the Indian Cavalry, cadets from Woolwich and Sandhurst and many others. A fanfare of trumpets heralded Indian

princes, a maharajah ablaze with jewels that outdid those worn by Her Majesty, and royalty from many great countries. From open barouches the royal family waved and smiled graciously, Her Majesty seated with her eldest daughter, the Princess Imperial of Germany, and the Princess of Wales. Their barouche was surrounded by a brilliant cavalcade of horsemen composed of her sons, sons-in-law, grandsons and grandsons-in-law. She was greeted rapturously by the crowd. The description of the ceremonial had been read out that morning at the breakfast table by Noah Goodwin and now they were here to celebrate the historic occasion with a ball whose splendour had never before been seen at the Town Hall.

Noah Goodwin, the inevitable cigar clenched between his white teeth, glanced round him appreciatively, bowing to acquaintances, but his hand was inclined to hover at his seated wife's shoulder, for it was well known in St Helens that he doted on her and could not bear to be parted from her for longer than was necessary. Many of the gentlemen, having deposited wives and daughters among the other ladies in a safe, well-chaperoned position at the edge of the ballroom, were making their way to the gaming-room where card tables were set up but Noah remained beside his beautiful wife and daughters.

Hugh Thornley ground out his cigar, placed his emptied glass on the table, lifted his imperious head and, ignoring the open-mouthed stares of Todd Woodruff and Dicky Bentham, strode arrogantly around the edge of the floor, not in the least surprised when the crowd parted before him like the Red Sea before Moses. He meant to bow courteously to the manufacturer and his wife, for though they were socially far beneath him they had what he wanted, which was one of their lovely daughters who had been returned to them by their last partners. Already two officers were hanging about waiting to claim them for the next dance. He meant to introduce himself, his name and title, naturally, overwhelming them into allowing

him to scribble his name in their dance cards, both of them, for he, a practised seducer, had noticed that the sister in the turquoise gown was looking at him from under her dark lashes, the corners of her mouth lifting in the beginnings of a flirtatious smile. If he could manage it, and he usually could, either with his good looks, his charm or his title, he meant to take one of them into supper.

"Good evening, sir." He smiled boldly into the astonished face of Noah Goodwin. "May I introduce myself. My name is Thornley. Captain Hugh Thornley. I have a place at Thornley Green." He bowed to the equally astonished ladies, knowing he had no need to mention his title, since everyone knew of Thornley Green and the rank of the gentleman who lived there. But he had not reckoned on the pride, the temper and the arrogance, matching his own, of Noah Goodwin, who cared nought for titles and even less for a cocky young fool who thought he could get round him with smooth words.

"Oh yes?" he asked menacingly. He was seriously displeased and those who knew him shrank a little. Did this handsome young captain know what peril he was putting himself into by casually approaching the wealthiest, most powerful man in St Helens? Noah Goodwin was obsessive about his wife and his daughters and though he was well aware he had nothing to fear where his wife was concerned, for they were devoted to one another, his daughters needed watching every minute of the day and night. Particularly Milly!

Hugh Thornley straightened his tall frame and at the same time did his best to curb his inclination to tell this manufacturer to go to hell! He would have one of these young women on the ballroom floor as soon as possible and the fool must be made to see it, but he knew he would do his cause no good if he did what he longed to do and that was ignore the father and sweep one of his daughters into his arms.

Noah glared at Beth and Milly as though they had caused

this incident, which of course they had, but could he blame them when they were so incredibly pretty that every insolent pup in the room wanted to dance with them. They were so perfect, his daughters, so exactly as his wife had been at the same age, but they both had spirit, a strength of spirit come from their mother and from him, especially Milly who was eyeing this young lordling with an appreciative eye. He could not tell what the expression was on Beth's face as her eyes were cast down as though she had something to hide.

"I would be honoured if I might claim a dance, sir, from one of your lovely daughters. Todd Woodruff is a friend of mine—"

"Is he indeed and why should you think that makes a difference?" Noah's face was thunderous and his wife laid a hand on his sleeve.

"Darling, don't you think—"

He threw it off. "No, I don't, Abby, and I'll thank you not to interfere. I will not have every Tom, Dick and Harry sniffing around our girls. Tricky young fools believe—"

"Sir, I object to that and I must ask you to apologise for the insult you have offered my family name. I have introduced myself in a perfectly gentlemanly way, asking politely if I might lead one of your daughters into a dance—"

"Well, let's get the thing over and done with, shall we? No, you may not lead one of my daughters into a dance. Good God, man, we don't know you and as for—"

Hugh Thornley's face became alarmingly shuttered and without expression and his eyes darkened until they were almost black. That this man who came from what he considered to be no better than the working classes should have the effrontery to question him, to stand in his way, to thwart him who had been indulged all his life, by his mother and by his nanny, was insupportable and by God he'd make him sorry for it.

"I am Hugh Charles Thornley, sixteenth baron of Thornley Green, sir. My father was—"

"Aye, lad, we all know who your father was and what happened to him so don't come here with your dandified ways—"

"Father, please, Captain Thornley is doing no more than asking for a dance. Anybody would think he had offered you some appalling insult the way you are behaving. I for one will dance with him. You don't mind, do you?" Milly turned and smiled brilliantly at the young second lieutenant who was hovering at her elbow and whose name was scribbled in her dance card.

"No . . . er, no," the young officer stammered, backing away from the frozen face and threatening figure of Captain Hugh Thornley, for the captain's reputation, not just as a gambler, a womaniser but the best swordsman in the regiment, was well documented.

"Milly," her father thundered and this time his wife hastily stood up and began to urge him towards the floor, for the commotion about them was beginning to excite attention. An officer in the full fig of a lieutenant-colonel was making his way towards them, since it seemed that one of his officers was the cause of it.

Abby was eager to get one of her daughters into the arms of the alarming Captain Thornley and on to the floor before a worse situation blew up. "Come, darling, do dance with me. Milly will be quite safe with the captain, I'm sure. She can come to no harm with the whole of St Helens watching."

Noah Goodwin reluctantly allowed himself to be led on to the dance floor. As soon as he had his arms about his wife he could feel the calm of her relaxing him. He did not like to be bested, especially by an insolent young dog like Thornley. The bloody gentry thought they owned the town and everybody in it and once upon a time they had but not any more and Captain

bloody Thornley should have been made aware of it. And Milly hadn't helped! Just wait until he had her home: he'd give her what for. She'd be the talk of the town the way she carried on, the little devil, but then wasn't she a female version of himself with a wicked need, since she had been a toddler, to have her own way.

"I don't like it, Abby, and I don't like him. His father was a bad lot and came to a bad end. You remember him, don't you? He came to some function here years ago with his toadies. He asked you to dance but you refused him which didn't please him and now his bloody son's doing the same with our daughter."

"Noah, there's no harm in it. He is dancing with her in a ballroom full of our friends and no harm can come to her."

The future is hidden and it was a mercy that Abby and Noah Goodwin could not see into it!