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Opening Extract from...

The New Countess

Written by Fay Weldon

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the NEW COUNTESS

Fay Weldon



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A Visit to Stonehenge

Midsummer's Day, 22nd June 1905

'Right on time,' said Anthony.

'One should hope so,' said his sister.

They took it as a good omen, though no more than they deserved. At ten to five the rising sun's first rays caught the Friar's Heel monolith: just as they were meant to. The famous stone glowed like a beacon while all around was still undefined, and misty grey. Then all of a sudden there was glorious light, you could see everything bright and clear, and the longest day of the year was upon them.

Then it was time to take the train back to an overcast London. They'd travelled down the night before, snatched a few hours' sleep at the Rose and Crown in Salisbury, travelled the nine miles by cab to Stonehenge, and each paid a shilling's entry. Anthony was not particularly superstitious, but he was now Editor of *The Modern Idler,* a literary magazine, and needed to keep up with contemporary trends. He had observed an increasing preoccupation with all things occult and semi-occult in both readers and writers. Golden Dawns, the sacred fires of the Druids, the leaping and dancing of the cloven-hoofed Great God Pan and so forth

now seemed to interest the progressive world almost as much as the wilder shores of experimental sex. If a man was obliged to earn a living, and Anthony now had no other option, he should at least enter into the spirit of things and do it thoroughly. A chilly Stonehenge dawn and a cavorting assembly of chanting white-gowned Druids – male and female and no telling which was which – would make a good editorial and was no real hardship.

Anthony didn't particularly like going anywhere alone without an audience, so he'd asked his sister to come with him. It happened to be Diana's birthday – she was twenty-eight, surely a rather terrible milestone for an unmarried woman – and no one else he knew was prepared to get up so early. More importantly, he had a proposition to make to her. He put it off until they were on the train back to Waterloo, during the course of a late Pullman-car breakfast. He had porridge and cream, kippers, and eggs, bacon, and sausages; she had grapefruit segments and scrambled egg on toast. Even the coffee was good.

'Diana,' he said, 'I must talk to you seriously.'

'I feared that was the case,' she said. She was a lively, clever, cheerful girl of the kind men made best friends of rather than wives – or so her brother feared. She was bold, direct, noisy, had too pronounced a chin for beauty, and seemed to him to be without any of the erotic principle that men looked for in a woman. Worse, she was penniless, as he was. Their father, Eric, Lord Ashenwold, had died three months earlier having made only the most meagre provisions for Anthony and Diana – the peerage, the estates and the

money going to his eldest son and heir Bevis. Yet Diana's unmarried state did not seem to disconcert her at all.

'The fact must be faced,' said Anthony, after the customary clearing of the throat that went before one of his serious announcements (such as '*We have decided after much deliberation, Mr Kipling* – or Haggard, or Benson, or Wells, or Hardy, or whichever wildly successful writer it was – *'that we will publish your next story*'). 'You are twenty-eight today, Diana, and as an older woman have reduced marital prospects.'

'Don't be such an old crotchet, Redbreast,' said Diana. 'I daresay someone will come along. Not someone from the peerage, to suit Bevis, not some famous writer, to suit you, but somebody who suits me. Besides, I never want to marry. I don't like children any more than you do.'

'A man is not required to like children,' he said, 'only to do what he can for them. But a woman most properly is.'

'Then perhaps I am not a proper woman,' she said.

'What can you mean?' he said. 'What a pair we are!'

His voice was somehow strangulated, but then many men of his social background spoke in the same manner – as though all statements had to go through some kind of filter before they were released. The Honourable Anthony Robin, a second son, was a tall man with an overhung brow and startlingly blue eyes. He had the commanding and kindly stoop of an old Etonian of the non-sporting kind, but was not, Diana had concluded long ago, necessarily kindly. She suspected he had invited her on this excursion – much as she was enjoying it – not out of altruism, but to forward some devious scheme of his own. She was right.

'Your prospects being as they are,' he went on, 'you have no choice but to earn a living. You can work for me as my housekeeper.'

He waxed lyrical. He had just leased new premises from which to run *The Modern Idler*. From now on it was to be published monthly. He had found a charming little house in Fleet Street, looking straight into the Law Courts with Chancery Lane beyond. It was an area where journalists came and went and writers had their clubs. It had crooked walls and leaning floors and at night you could hear the death-watch beetle tapping away, though the old oak beams had such hard heartwood he'd been assured all their gnashings were in vain. An eccentric place for a dwelling, perhaps, but a fine one for the editor of a political and literary magazine.

'Oh Anthony, I see,' she said. 'You want me to move in and do all the work? Distemper walls, sand floors, fix lights, buy furniture, I daresay even create a garden where you can drink your coffee while you read your manuscripts and turn down aspiring hopefuls?'

'It sounds divine,' he said.

When the building work was done, he said, she could be his secretary.

'You can type, you can do the layouts, and the pasting up, and you can help with the editing, the subscription lists and so on.'

'Oh thank you, Redbreast,' she said. 'What if you got married and she hated me and threw me out?'

'I am not the marrying sort,' he said. 'You know that. I am a man of letters. I am the philandering kind. I believe in

the Life Force and the odd whiff of opium, draught of cocaine. But you know that too. All is legal, all will come from the Fleet Street pharmacy down the road. But I do have my little ways. You will have to put up with them.'

'I might overlook them,' she said, 'if I have half a page of my own in your *Modern Idler* once a month. Not about fashion, or recipes, or how to polish a kettle, but about politics.'

'Not under your own name,' he said. 'I don't want to be a figure of fun.'

'Mrs Humphrey Ward publishes under her own name,' Diana protested.

'But she is married. You would be a Miss with no brain or experience. Perhaps you should make a marriage of convenience.'

Diana raised her eyebrows and Anthony Robin said she had until Waterloo Station to think about the advantages of living under his wing. Otherwise he would make alternative plans. They were at Basingstoke, so she had about an hour.

They fell silent. She took honey with her toast. Anthony took marmalade. He opened *The Times* while she stared out the window at green fields and growing wheat. There was a sudden bark of annoyance from Anthony which quite made her jump.

'Engineering genius, my foot,' he said. 'Bumbling young puppy. Used to be my fag at Eton. How he yelped if I beat him, the crawling little ninny. Couldn't find his way round a tin of boot polish.'

Arthur Hedleigh had entered his new touring model, the Jehu III, for the Isle of Man race in September, and according

to *The Times*, was considered the new white hope of the British automobile industry. The piece seemed to have quite upset Anthony. Asked why, he said that Dilberne was a sleazy rotter, a jumped-up bounder, a silver spooner, a mother's darling, an effete cissy, a rogue, and no gentleman – who with his father the Earl's connivance had once cheated him, Anthony, out of fifty pounds and tried to get him into trouble with the law. A swinish family.

'Oh Anthony, I know his sister Rosina rather well,' said Diana, mildly. 'She went to Australia and I really miss her still.'

'You can keep the sister,' said Anthony. 'At least, having a brain in her head, she took off for the other side of the world. But the brother – I execrate. He married a thin little Roman Papist heiress from Chicago: no virgin she. I say let him tumble into a vat of his own engine oil and choke to death, and drag her with him.'

'Oh Anthony,' she protested, 'people can love each other.' His vehemence took her aback. She poured him another cup from the tall silver coffee pot, without using a napkin, forgetting how hot E.P.N.S. handles could get. Something to do with the specific heat of nickel, she imagined, rather than that of the copper of silver plate. Real silver, of course, the proper stuff, was slow to heat. Diana had studied chemistry at Oxford, along with ethnography. She had not been able to take her degree, women couldn't. It didn't worry her; when was the world anything other than unfair? Anthony, on the other hand, chafed against injustice. Arthur Hedleigh rankled him because he had his picture in the paper, was going to end up an Earl and he, Anthony, would never inherit a title, let alone catch an heiress.

'I speak metaphorically,' said Anthony, 'but it won't last. She's not his type.'

'Oh?' asked Diana, interested. 'What type's that?'

'Round, blonde, fair and stupid.'

Diana was wise enough not to ask how he knew – the sooner he calmed down the better.

They were pulling out of Woking in a great cloud of steam and melancholy hooting. Before long they would be at Waterloo. He was right – her choices were limited. She could live as a spinster sister with her rich boring brother Bevis, or as a housekeeper with her less boring brother Anthony. She was not good at making up her mind.

'Though of course the wife might be the one to stray,' Anthony said, speculatively. 'She has quite a past.'

'Oh Anthony,' said Diana. 'Don't be like that.'

'I hope she's unfaithful and gives him hell,' he said, but she thought he said it as much to punish her, Diana, for not supporting him in his wrath as because he really meant it. Or so she hoped.

'Oh for Heaven's sake, Redbreast,' said his sister.

He wished she would not call him Redbreast: it was a name attached to him in his schooldays when he was young and silly and had edited the *Eton Chronicle*. And the 'Ohs' with which she peppered her conversation annoyed him, she seemed to be always reproaching him. But then, he supposed, that's what women did. And he was fond of her, and she needed him.

'Will you?' asked Anthony.

'Oh Anthony, of course I will,' she replied.

Minnie Gives a Birthday Party

25th June 1905, Belgrave Square

'My life is perfect,' murmured Melinda, otherwise Minnie, the Viscountess, Lady Hedleigh. But even as she spoke, if to no one in particular, she looked down from the wide windows of No. 17 Belgrave Square and saw a lad, distinctive in the peaked cap and gaiters of the new-style telegraph boy, leaping up the front steps. He had the jaunty air – or so Minnie thought – of someone delivering good, not bad news.

Minnie listened but couldn't hear the bell over the noise of infant revelry. No doubt bells jangled appropriately in the servants' quarters. The party had turned noisy, in spite of the subduing presence of nannies and nursemaids. Little children swarmed recklessly from table to floor, shrieked and threw jelly and cake. Isobel, Countess of Dilberne, who had invited her daughter-in-law Minnie plus her two small children to London for the week, winced slightly as greasy hands endangered the pale-yellow chintz of the new upholstery of the morning room, but said nothing. Today was to do with celebration.

'Ah,' said Isobel generously, 'let them have fun. Birthdays are only once a year.' So the nannies held back and the six

little guests and Edgar and his little brother Connor rolled about on the floor and laughed and giggled and kicked one another.

Minnie's eldest son Edgar was three years old today, and could do no wrong. Connor Hedleigh, born a year to the day after Edgar, could do quite a lot of wrong, at least in the eyes of his English grandparents, not having the saving grace of being the first-born. Minnie had tried to explain to her parents, the O'Briens of Chicago, the necessary complexity of names and titles in the English aristocracy but without success.

'Mother of God!' Tessa had protested, when her daughter brought the children over to the stockyards of God's Own Country for inspection. 'Why is Edgar a Dilberne and Connor only a Hedleigh? They're full brothers, aren't they?'

'You have to be English to understand,' Minnie had replied.

'At least neither one of them's a bloody Turlock,' their grandfather Billy O'Brien, the pork baron, had said – fortunately not in Arthur's hearing. The last thing Minnie wanted was her past raked up; and least of all her doubtful liaison with the deranged American artist Stanton Turlock. Her father liked to speak plainly, but it could be an embarrassment.

Both her sons were fine, brawny, straight-backed lads, of whom their father Arthur was pleasingly proud. Minnie loved them both equally, but perhaps Connor a little bit more, since he was always in trouble and second in line.

Edgar the heir would inherit the title. Connor was the 'spare'. Even Arthur sometimes called him that – 'the spare' – as in 'Tell the spare to stop that noise and be a man' – although she wished he wouldn't. She was sensible enough not to say so. Life with her father had taught her that if you asked a man not to do something he was the more likely to do it again.

Now, as the noise level rose, Arthur spoke. He had been sitting at a distance and silent, though smiling indulgently, if perhaps a little fixedly, in his effort not to mind the mayhem. He had a deep voice: it was very male, cutting through the squeaks and squeals of women and children. Minnie loved him.

'*Risus abundat in ore puerorum*,' Arthur said.

'Oh, Arthur,' said her mother-in-law, 'another Latin tag. Just like your father. You are so clever. What does it mean?'

'Laughter is plentiful in the mouths of small boys,' said Arthur. 'But enough is surely enough. The nursery world can be very noisy and annoying. No wonder Father's found a pressing engagement.'

'Very well,' said Isobel. 'Let there be an end to misrule,' and she nodded to the bank of nannies who swooped into action as they had been longing to do, and quick as a flash the little ones were back on their chairs again, too startled to object, hands and mouths wiped clean, neat and sweet like the little lambs they were on a good day, little lions no more.

Arthur smiled and caught Minnie's hand. He had his father's long straight nose, square jaw and thick blond hair and seemed to gain in gravitas by the year – no longer the boy but very much the man. He had come up to London

with Minnie and the boys to spend the day with their grandparents, for once delegating the care of his motor-car workshops to others. Four years and more into the marriage and she found she still thrilled to the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand. She was very lucky.

A pity that the Earl, Grandfather Robert, couldn't be with them after all. He had been called away as ever by affairs of State – the occasion was genuine enough – some kind of insurrection in Russia that demanded the Privy Council's attention even though it was a Sunday. With the modern world proceeding at the pace it did, politics was becoming a full-time job, not the diversion of a wealthy and patriotic man. Robert was not one to shirk his duties.

Minnie still found her father-in-law intimidating; but she liked the feeling of being at the centre of things, and sometimes he would regale the assembled company with what was going on abroad or at the Colonial Office, which was one of the reasons she so enjoyed coming up to Belgrave Square. Arthur's interests were increasingly confined, she was beginning to find, to the insides of automobiles, the beauty of the Arnold Jehu III, the virtues of air-cooled engines as compared to water-cooled. She did her best to stay enthusiastic, but sometimes late at night she would fall asleep on the pillow while Arthur talked.

She'd said something of the sort to Tessa when her parents were over. 'Better that he's besotted by an automobile,' Tessa had retorted briskly, 'than by some chorus girl.' And Minnie could see that it was true.

*

Tomorrow Minnie would go with Isobel to Heal's to inspect their newly arrived range of bamboo furniture to see if any was suitable for the Belgrave Square back bedrooms – out of the question of course for Dilberne Court, with its massive four-posters, settles and cedar linen chests: the staff would just have to go on heaving and straining and polishing ancient oak – and then perhaps the ladies would go on to Bond Street to look at the new circular skirts from Paris, tiered and braided but two inches shorter than of late, so they cleared the ground and did not require the endless brushing that took up so much of the parlourmaids' time. There was a great deal in modern life to be thankful for. The form and shape of furniture interested her. Once, she vaguely remembered, she had had dreams of becoming a sculptress. Stanton Turlock had even spoken of her as being a Camille Claudel to his Rodin – not that he had ever got beyond paint on canvas. She liked the touch, feel and colour of fabric, but Isobel's obsession with fashion eluded her. All the same, for Isobel's sake she would pretend a deep interest. You opened your eyes wide, looked intent and thought of other things.

Minnie had forgotten all about the telegram, when Reginald the head footman arrived with it on a silver tray. He had taken his time, having no doubt steamed open the thin brown envelope, read its contents, then hastily resealed it. He was a villain, if an amiable one. Isobel opened the telegram, read it, and nodded to Reginald to leave the room.

She had the same stunned and unbelieving expression on her face as little Edgar had when suddenly snatched up from the floor and sat in his chair.

Reginald backed but did not leave the room. He would not be reprimanded, Minnie knew. He never was.

'A good-looking feller, quite the swank,' Billy had said of him the previous year when the in-laws were over for Wimbledon. 'Gets away with anything. You bet he knows more than he should.' Which Minnie thought was probably the case. It was one of the problems with living with servants. Not that the others seemed to notice, let alone worry about that.

Isobel let the envelope drop from her hand as if it was of little account.

'It's your sister Rosina,' she said to Arthur, in what was almost a tone of accusation. 'The steam ship *Ortona* docks at Tilbury tomorrow afternoon. Rosina will be on it. No explanation, no information, nothing. She just announces her arrival. How very rude, how very Rosina.'

'Rosina! But how wonderful!' cried Minnie into a silence which fell on the whole party. Even the little children stopped their clatter. Minnie hesitated. Rosina was disapproved of. But why? Rosina was difficult, and moody, true, and had left peremptorily for Australia, married suddenly under some kind of cloud, but she was family, only daughter of the house. Some show of enthusiasm was surely allowed? Back home in Chicago there'd have been shrieks of joy and everyone embracing, and tears shed, and a rushing out to tell everybody the good news. The prodigal sister returned. But

this was Belgrave Square and spontaneity was not the way of things.

'Dear Rosina,' said Arthur, casually and calmly. 'The mischief maker!' And then, with a glance at Minnie, 'Though naturally one's jolly glad to hear from her after so long. How long, eh? Three years?'

'Your sister embraces silence,' said Isobel. 'Only ever the briefest of letters and there's been nothing for a good six months.'

'No news of the husband or a child?'

'Nothing. Not even that courtesy.'

'How about her parrot?'

His mother ignored him and turned to Reginald.

'The *Ortona* docks at Tilbury. Is it the Orient Pacific line?'

'I'm afraid it is, my lady. An immigrant ship, returning half empty.' He seemed rather amused.

'How very uncomfortable for her,' said her Ladyship. 'Why always this perverse *nostalgie de la boue* – this desire to play the bedraggled?'

'Even so, it's our Rosina!' protested Minnie. 'It's such good news! Someone to talk to!' This sounded a little ungracious. Isobel looked at her rather strangely. So did Arthur. Minnie always tried very hard not to blurt things out and for the most part she succeeded, but today she had failed.

'I have you to talk to, my dear, of course I do,' she said to Arthur, to make amends, 'at least I do when you are at home but you are so often in your workshop.' She had made matters worse. Why did life have to be so difficult?

'And I am sure you are busy enough with our children,' he said, sensing an accusation. 'You hardly have time these days to give me a second look.'

'Well, well,' said Isobel, fearing there was the making of a squabble in the air. 'We will send Reginald to meet the *Ortona* tomorrow. Rest assured, Minnie, Rosina shall have a prodigal daughter's welcome home. Though she could at least have given one proper notice.'

'You could hardly expect that. A parrot doesn't change its feathers, eh?' said Arthur.

Minnie giggled, as she should not have.

Rosina had departed to Western Australia, with almost no warning, some three years before, in the company of a new husband, a Mr Frank Overshaw, theosophist and landowner. He was no catch for an Earl's daughter, but Rosina was unmarried, past thirty, tall and ungainly, too clever for her own good and hardly in a position to be particular. Even so, the speed of the engagement and her departure had been unseemly, even scandalous, especially since Rosina had sailed on a ticket reserved for her own cousin Adela, Frank's first choice of bride. It had been assumed there'd been the normal reason for haste but it had proved not to be the case. At any rate there had been no mention of a baby in the few brief letters Rosina had sent home: just descriptions of a land hot and dangerous beyond belief where the mail was bad and servants non-existent, and some requests for reference books: Emile Durkheim's *Rules of the Sociological Method,* his treatise on suicide in aboriginal culture, and any of Max Weber's early publications.

'But Mama,' said Minnie now – it was at Isobel's request that Minnie called her 'Mama' – 'someone from the family must be there to meet her. She has been away for three whole years – for all we know she may be ill.'

'But the *Ortona*!' said Isobel. 'Tilbury, not even Liverpool,' as if that settled the matter. But she put no difficulty in Minnie's way, and even said their shopping trip to Heal's could be delayed until Tuesday well enough: Minnie must certainly go and meet Rosina if she'd like to. One could only hope the boat got in reasonably on time, and poor Minnie didn't have to wait around all day. Meeting boats was better left to the servants – but if it was what Minnie wanted . . . Isobel for one would spend the day with Robert at the House.

Then Arthur said that alas, he couldn't go with Minnie: the Jehu III was at a critical stage: he had decided air cooling was a mistake, he must get back by the morning but Minnie was to wish Rosina very well and he would see her before long. He assumed she would be staying at least for a while at Belgrave Square.

So all was well, but Minnie wished she hadn't thought, 'My life is perfect,' so loud and clear in her head. She had a niggling feeling the Gods had overheard and the ring of the front door bell, so close upon the thought, had been a sign of their displeasure. But how could Rosina coming home be bad?

An Alarming Proposition

26th June 1905, Newmarket

Robert took Isobel to Newmarket for the last of the flat racing. His wife did not care for horses but at least in an enclosure she was far enough from the animals to be safe. He had been insistent.

'Westminster's far too dull at the moment,' he said, when Isobel suggested she meet him for lunch at the House of Lords, having spent the morning in the Visitors' Gallery. He would take her instead to Newmarket, and show her off. 'Cherry Lass is tipped to win the 1,000 Guineas and you shall wear a straw hat with flowers, a white mink stole, a skirt with a train and any amount of lace and frills.'

'But I so like listening to a good Lords debate,' she said, 'and then lunching with you. The Thames sparkles and the river boats go by: it is a great treat.'

'It will be a grand day at Newmarket,' he said. She could see he was determined to go. 'There's nothing on in the House but the military stores reports, which means yet another post-mortem on the war in South Africa, and more nonsense from the Liberals about the poor enslaved Chinamen working in our mines there.' He added that in case rumours had unsettled her, so far as their own Modder

Kloof was concerned, all their particular miners, whether white or Chinese, enjoyed excellent conditions, had freedom of movement, very reasonable wages and lived as well as his own estate workers in Sussex. 'Not a rock fall or a death has been reported for months,' he said.

'As any mine owner says before the rocks fall,' said Isobel. Her father had started life as a miner and ended up as a coal magnate, and she knew well enough how the view from the worker's end differed from that of the owner.

'Oh my dear,' said his Lordship. 'Leave all that to Rosina when she returns. She was born to be the conscience of the family.'

Isobel was happy enough to do so, resigning herself to a day at the races, while murmuring that she hoped three years in the Antipodes had taught their daughter a few of the realities of life.

'At least she is alive and presumably well,' said his Lordship. 'And there is no objection, I suppose, to her having her old rooms back at the house in Sussex now Adela is gone.'

Adela was Rosina's cousin, who had lately married and gone to live in Switzerland where the progressive Ascona movement had its headquarters and naked sun worship was earnestly practised.

'She will be company for Minnie,' said Isobel. 'I have no doubt Rosina will say she must stay in Belgrave Square, not be stuck away at Dilberne Court, but for once she must do as she's told. It would be plainly foolish to have her living round the corner from the House. The last thing we want is her turning up in the middle of a debate waving flags and complaining that Chinese coolies are oppressed. She is quite capable of it.'

Robert agreed that would be unfortunate but added rather sadly, 'Most people can be relied upon to tailor their beliefs to suit their interests, just not Rosina. Funnily enough, I rather admire her for it. Now, shall we just go off to the races and leave Minnie to meet the *Ortona*.'

Isobel felt suddenly cheerful: whatever had taken place before, her only daughter was coming home from over the seas after a three-year absence and she was glad. If a divorce had to be faced, so be it. An unfortunate marriage was better than no marriage at all: it could be seen as the way of the world rather than the fault of a neglectful mother. Now Adela had gone Rosina's arrival was even something of a blessing. Arthur was so very much caught up with his business and his automobiles that Minnie must often feel alone. Perhaps Isobel should have gone with Minnie to Tilbury – but Robert needed her and one's duty was surely more to one's husband than one's children. There were lots of children but only one spouse. And a day at the races was not so dreadful a fate.

Isobel chose a nautical theme for her day in Newmarket – a jaunty sailor-suit skirt and blouse in matching navy *moiré*, with a square white lace bib that fell over the head back and front – a wide white leather belt with an anchor buckle, and a cheerful little straw boater with an ostrich feather which one wore on the side of one's head – Lily her lady's maid fixed the hat with an extra-long turquoise and diamond hat pin which quite lifted the severity of the outfit. One did not want to look like some business woman on her way to an

office, which was always the danger these days. She and Lily toyed with the idea of adding a bunch of velvet cherries to the brim, in honour of Cherry Lass, the season's favourite, but decided against it. It would have amused Robert, but seemed dishonourable – she really could not tell one racehorse from another, nor did she care.

Newmarket scarcely offered the sartorial splendour one found at Ascot, but then they came across His Majesty walking amongst the crowds. Isobel thought Bertie was looking remarkably jovial and very much the man of the people, if not quite so flamboyant as once he had been – rather thinner, and his chest less gleaming with medals than it had been in the past. Indeed, he and Lord Rosebery, who walked beside him, could have been just another couple of portly gentlemen of means and status strolling by. As for Rosebery, he was looking decidedly less dissolute than usual, some remnant of his former good looks firming his jaw and brightening his eye.

'It's because his Cicero won the Derby at Ascot,' said Robert. Isobel refrained from remarking that racing men seemed to be as invigorated by 'winning a race' as if they themselves had run the course and not left it to the horse.

A mixed group of familiar faces, hats gleaming and beards wagging, followed close behind: Isobel recognized young Ponsonby the King's private secretary, and his pretty wife Victoria Lily, walking next to Sidney Greville, the Queen's secretary, his notebook as ever clasped to his bosom. But no Queen. Instead Mrs Keppel the King's mistress walked with

the little cluster of grandees. Alice Keppel was on Rosebery's arm rather than the King's: so much presumably being owed to tact. Rather unnecessarily, Isobel thought, since a few years earlier Alice Keppel had been on show at the Coronation with all the other royal mistresses – in what the Queen had referred to a little bitterly as 'The Loose Box'.

Keppel was looking most attractive, light and bright and cool in a pale-blue and white fine cotton plaid, its leg-of-mutton sleeves in voile, and a flat straw skimmer which might have been a man's hat, other than for its broad satin ribbon and bow. Isobel at once felt far too hot and stuffy in her navy *moiré*, and that she was wearing quite the wrong outfit. But as Robert and she moved closer, Isobel could see what looked like goose bumps on the arms beneath the voile sleeves – there was quite a chilly easterly wind for such a bright summer's day – and a small bunch of velvet cherries on the bow of her skimmer, and felt no, if anyone had chosen unwisely it was Alice. Alice was over thirty and only young girls could get away with cotton plaid, voile sleeves, and cheap red velvet cherries.

When His Majesty greeted Robert and Isobel it was with enthusiasm, but requiring of their sympathy. Had he not had remarkably little luck at the races lately? Was not Rosebery the man of the moment, what with his third Derby winner at Ascot, and everyone so admiring the Party of the Decade, the great staff celebration at Durbans down the road – five thousand people and beer and cakes for everyone?

'It is my great misfortune,' lamented the King, 'that no one these days allows me to be lavish. What is permitted to Archibald Rosebery, a mere former leader of the House, is not allowed to a monarch. My partying is sadly restrained. If I served beer the Temperance League would be at my throat. If I served cake they'd remember Marie Antoinette. There'd be questions in the House. Keir Hardie would thunder at my extravagance. It seems we must all be socialists now. More, Dilberne, you find me a prisoner. I must not go about alone any more. I am protected. There are policemen everywhere.'

It was true that a discreet scattering of tall young men, none of whom Isobel recognized, surrounded and mixed with the royal party. They were well set up, but though they dressed like gentlemen they did not carry themselves like gentlemen. They were too watchful, too quick and easy in their movements: Bertie's security party, of course – Robert had talked of them.

'The King doesn't want them,' he'd said. 'Bertie is blind to danger, quite unlike the Kaiser, who jumps at the squeak of a mouse and has protectors everywhere. But then the Kaiser isn't loved by all, and Bertie is – or so he profoundly imagines. When Balfour suggests that perhaps he is not, the King takes offence. But Balfour's insisted and won.'

Isobel now saw at first hand how this victory seemed to have rankled the King.

'Balfour instructs Akers-Douglas, who instructs the Metropolitan Police,' the King thundered to all and sundry, and Mrs Keppel stroked his arm to calm him, 'who instruct Inspector Strachan here, who tells me where I can and

cannot go for fear of anarchists and communards. Isn't that so, Strachan?' He addressed the most senior of his protectors.

'Indeed, Your Majesty,' said Inspector Strachan who looked rather like a bright-eyed eagle, spoke in educated tones but had very big boots and a paper collar, and whose social origins were hard to determine. Certainly not gentry, Isobel thought, nor professional, but not quite working-man either. But well enough versed in the ways of the courtier, it seemed. There was certainly something sensible and reassuring about him.

'Danger tends to come from foreigners, Sir, from anarchists and nihilists, not from your own people – who would gladly die to keep you safe,' he was saying. 'But since ease of travel now fills our prisons with aliens, a threefold burgeoning in the last five years, it is only reasonable to take precautions.'

'Against foreigners and madmen,' said the King, 'may the Good Lord, and brave Strachan, protect us,' and for a moment the little group was sombre.

But then someone in the crowd recognized the King and a shout went up, '*Bertie! Bertie!*' At a slight nod from the Inspector, the tall young men moved to form a defensive circle around the royal party, but when there was the sound of applause and someone even struck up with 'God Save the King', a slight move of Strachan's head and they melted away again. It was tactfully, and quite elegantly, done, thought Isobel, and she would have liked to have complimented Inspector Strachan, but circumstances did not allow it. Mrs Keppel was complaining to her of a chilly wind.

'You are so wise to be wearing that charming *moiré*, I am hopelessly exposed in cotton. The weather is not what it was: one cannot expect to be warm any more just because it is high Summer.'

Alice Keppel spoke casually and easily as one equal to another and Isobel, while making some normal response or other about the sudden inclemency of the day, was somewhat taken aback. They had been introduced once or twice before, it was true: Alice Keppel was charm itself, known to be an accomplished hostess and accepted in Society – if at its more rackety end; known to be the King's official mistress, and though both her own husband and Queen Alexandra accepted the situation, Isobel thought – well, what *did* she think? That there should be some extra deference paid to her own virtue, to her position as a proper wife, a respectable woman, one superior in rank? No, not quite that, but perhaps one did expect some hesitancy, some deference, in Mrs Keppel's approach? Well, there was not. The world changed as the weather changed and one must accept it.

At the remark upon the weather Robert had started to take off his own black cashmere coat to place it round Mrs Keppel's elegant shoulders, but Frederick Ponsonby got in first with his camel jacket. It was the turn of Ponsonby's wife, Victoria Lily, to look put out. Without female influence, Isobel decided, the world would simply descend into a swamp of untrammelled male passion in all respects – war without honour, rank without duty, and passion without love.

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