



FOURTH OF JULY, 1862 Patrick Gale

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do. Rhoda could sense her ennui just as she could feel the oppressive heat the child was giving off as she lolled heavily against her.

Both were breaking her concentration on a peculiarly dry chapter she had just reached on the life cycle of the lobster.

Alice had yet to shake off the last of a heavy summer cold. She breathed through her mouth as she made a show of reading the book too. Rhoda could sense the desire to speak again welling up in the child. It was like the slow, fat bubble Papa used to amuse her with by upending then righting a tin of treacle. 'Any minute now,' Rhoda told herself.

Sure enough it was only moments later when Alice broke violently away in a bid to distract her further. 'A rabbit!' she shouted, pointing to the other side of the river. 'A white rabbit with pink eyes!'

Rhoda sighed and discreetly turned back a page to begin the chapter afresh. Heat and Alice had reduced it to mental fog. 'Don't be a tease, dear,' she murmured.

'But there was! It ran along the path there and dived through that long

grass. It must have a hole there. And it had a waistcoat on and a pocket watch.'

'If only you'd brought your notebook you could have written me a story about it. I said I'd be dull company.'

'Yes but somebody had to come with you,' said Alice with an unfortunate echo of their parlourmaid, 'Or people would talk.'

The family's maintenance of respectable behaviour was painfully erratic. Mama still thought nothing of sending Rhoda about town unchaperoned. She had allowed the question of whether Rhoda was out or not to slide in a way that left Rhoda known among her more orthodox peers as 'Poor Rhoda' and which, she was quite sure, unsettled potential suitors.

At Alice's age she had assumed she would one day have a coming out dance then marry early and well. Young girls blithely assumed the inevitability of suitors as seeds did sunshine. Instead she found herself an old maid of eighteen with a mother more interested in moths than matrimony, doomed to become a governess if nobody would have her soon.

Her dreams of romantic escape to some more regular establishment had been easier to sustain while she was an only child but then she had been left at Miss Bileheart's academy while her parents made a two year trip to Patagonia in search of some wasp or other and had returned with baby Alice tucked among their less lively specimens.

The sisters had recently become fellows in suffering courtesy of a trip to Zanzibar that had produced Eustace. Rhoda felt more than ever the governess-to-be as Nanny was as taken up in the baby as Mama was in her lepidopterology, encouraging Alice to trail after her big sister for amusement.

In Rhoda's nightmares Alice was married off before her, a radiant child bride in a foam of antique lace with Rhoda her embittered matron of honour in a dark violet silk with black trimmings.

'I'm bored,' Alice said, kicking out at a lizard and sending the poor

innocent skittering into the long grass. 'Why couldn't we go to the museum to see the dodo?'

'We can't do that every Sunday, dear.'

'Or that garden? The pretty one with the fountains.'

'It's much cooler here,' Rhoda said although she agreed with her. She too loved the public gardens with their elegant benches, gravel walks and wealth of social opportunity. She had only chosen the secluded riverside walk instead in an effort to curb Alice's unseemly showing off by depriving her of a susceptible audience. 'If you keep very still, you might see a frog or a water vole.'

'I hate frogs.'

Rhoda sighed. 'I sigh,' she thought, 'More often than I laugh. No good can come of it.'

'Have another violet comfit,' she suggested.

Alice shook her head, her face like thunder. There were grass stains on her pinafore and gloves and one stocking was crumpled. She looked less than angelic. 'I'm thirsty,' she announced. A mother little older than herself staggered by under the weight of a large and especially pig like baby. Alice glared at the baby as though to blight it.

Rhoda reached guiltily into her reticule and took out a blue glass bottle. She had stolen it from the nursery cupboard that morning while Nanny was busy with Eustace's bath. She had taken to carrying a supply of her brother's gripe water the way women in the American West were said to carry pistols. It proved effective on her nerves in times of agitation and she hoped its soothing properties might still her sister. She could count on Alice's greed.

Alice snatched the bottle, unstopped it and took a long, incautious draught before Rhoda could stop her. Then she flopped back on the rug beside her and closed her eyes. Rhoda retrieved what was left of the gripe water and returned to the life cycle of the lobster. But not for long.

‘Which is that toadstool? You know, the one that gives you dreams?’
Alice asked thoughtfully, eyes still closed.

‘The Liberty Cap, Psilocybe semilanceata. There was some in the field where we rested earlier.’

‘If I ate it, would it make me sick?’

‘Alice, you didn’t!’

‘No,’ Alice said uncertainly. ‘But if I did?’

‘Possibly. You would certainly feel very strange.’

‘Oh good!’

‘But you’re never to eat anything you find without showing me first.’

‘I wish Dinah were with us.’

‘You can’t bring a cat on a picnic. It would be both eccentric and cruel.’

Alice snorted dismissively and shifted so that her head lay in Rhoda’s lap. She yawned as might the cat in question, showing small white teeth and a curling tongue and fell asleep as abruptly as a kitten. Even allowing for her occasional snores, she looked, in slumber, as sweet as she appeared to be in company.

Until Alice took her first steps outside the nursery, Rhoda had thought herself fairly attractive, not unchastely witty, an attentive listener, in short, a girl any man might wish to marry. But even before she could lisp complete sentences, Alice had eclipsed her. She was unambiguously beautiful, petulant and given to wild fancies. Men of all ages, Papa included, found her delightful.

Were Mama less vague about observing proprieties it would not have mattered but Alice rarely stayed in a room when sent to it and encroached on Rhoda’s shrinking territory at all hours. She had only to appear, clutching the dormouse she kept in a straw-lined teapot or begging to recite Tis the Voice of the Sluggard or Speak Gently, It Is Better Far for Rhoda to feel herself dull, humourless and overlooked. She lacked charm, she had discovered, and resented those who had failed to instil it in her, which only

emphasized the shortcoming.

As if to illustrate the problem, The Mathematician now came by in his rowing boat. Rhoda just had time to slide Alice's hot little head off her lap and onto a cushion before he came ashore.

Two years ago he would not have been her first choice. With his stoop and whiskers he seemed almost as old as Papa and it was hard to picture him as an object of devotion but he remained the most prominent bachelor among her parents' friends and the most regular caller at their house.

'Chaperone asleep on the job?' he asked after they had exchanged hellos.

'Yes and please don't wake her. She's been a trial because I dared to thwart her.'

They sat together a little further off in a willow's shifting shade. The air was thick with river scents and the cooing of wood pigeons. Warm from his rowing and apologetically in shirtsleeves, he was far more appealing and youthful than she had ever known him. He smelled of laundry starch and something more manly.

She fed him tarts from the picnic hamper, confessing she had made the mulberry jam herself but not the pastry and, for the first time in their acquaintance, she felt he was noticing her.

'Do you dance?' he asked her and she felt herself blush absurdly as she replied that of course she did.

'When required to,' she added then wished she hadn't because it made it sound as though she danced only under sufferance when, on the contrary, it was one of her chiefest pleasures, second only to reading.

'So do you know a dance called the Lancer's Quadrille?' he asked.

'I love it,' she told him, to correct her earlier cold impression.

'How many pairs does one need to perform it successfully, I wonder?'

Was he planning a dance? The idea was strange, almost comical, but not impossible. He could not give it in his college, of course, but it was not

unheard of for bachelor dons to entertain in the assembly rooms or under the aegis of married friends. For a wild moment she imagined him waltzing her through her father's library, her skirts raising a small tornado of disturbed papers and index cards about them.

'It's for poem,' he explained, abashed. 'However fanciful the destination, I like to embark from a rock of sound fact.'

Discovering he was a poet transformed him almost as much as finding him in shirtsleeves had done.

She answered his strange question and decided she would beg Mama to throw a dance for her, however modest, and see that he was invited. She allowed him to look with curiosity at the book she was reading. Talk of lobsters led to talk of lunch, because he had been served mock turtle soup that day and it seemed she genuinely fascinated him by being able to explain that marine turtles only appeared to be weeping when out of the water because their kidneys could not break down brine so it was constantly discharged from a gland like a tear duct beside each eye.

A puppy loitering behind its walkers threatened to wake Alice by licking her face and hands. Worried she was coming across as too drily academical, Rhoda siezed the chance to reveal her tender potential by shooing the puppy off and sliding Alice's head back onto her lap. Alice mumbled crossly but slept on and Rhoda spread her golden hair across her skirt so that some of Alice's loveliness might reflect up on her.

Of course his eye was now repeatedly drawn to the wretched child and he began to talk so warmly about the poignant brevity of youthful innocence that Rhoda was tempted to rouse her sister at once, Alice having a reliably filthy temper when woken abruptly. Instead she grew cool and formal and must have repelled him because he soon apologized for keeping her from her studies. Despite a rather unseemly, even desperate, late offer of another jam tart, he took his leave and rowed away.

She abandoned her reading and ate the last tart herself. Then, in a

sudden access of spite, she roused Alice by shaking leaves into her face from an overhanging branch. Alice woke in such a state of excitement and so full of some vivid dream she had been enjoying that Rhoda feared she had been nibbling hallucinogenic fungus after all.

As Alice finally wandered off and began to amuse herself, Rhoda felt a chill breeze across her heart and suffered an insidious fancy that her life was no more than an unimportant fiction and that any instant an impatient hand would turn the page and she and her crossness and her compendium of facts and her lack of charm would be gone.

She resolved to be a sweeter sister, at least for what remained of the summer.

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