

Take a Pair of Sparkling Eyes

Sarah tossed *Pride and Prejudice* aside, seeking relief from the five Bennett girls who were fuelling her current discontentment. “I’m beginning to despair, Martha. Are we girls destined to be reliant on our younger brothers to support us in our old age?” Her heavy sigh wavered the candle flames lighting a wintry afternoon at Melbourn Vicarage, Cambridgeshire.

Her sister, busy darning a pile of socks, looked up from her work. “It’s too late for me to find a husband, I’m well past my thirtieth birthday, but you’re five years younger. There’s still a chance for you, my dear.” She leaned across and gave Sarah’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Thank you, but I should be consoling you!” Her voice grew louder, and grumpier. “It’s simply not fair that Papa has placed all the mothering responsibilities on you since Mama died. You’ve missed your chance to mix in society.”

Martha raised her eyebrows. “You sound just like him, delivering one of his rousing sermons. Should I have neglected our five rambunctious younger brothers?”

“Of course not. You’ve saved them from all manner of scrapes.” Sarah’s face clouded over and her shoulders sagged. “Our family’s current social disgrace comes from Mary being unmarried but in the family way.”

Martha sat up straighter in her chair and pursed her lips. “Mary’s condition doesn’t seem to bother Papa, although he’s the local vicar. We must be grateful that Papa is so eccentric, so ... er, not of this world.”

“True. He seems barely aware of the matter. Poor Mary. She suffered badly when Mama died and missed her so dreadfully, for years.”

“And then happiness arrived with Joseph Jenkins, the local doctor’s latest trainee student!” A shadow chased across Martha’s face. “Approaching her thirtieth birthday, our sister was willing to risk all, with a much younger man.”

“Do you know, Martha, sometimes I think it would be heaven to be a man.” Sarah huffed and slumped back into her chair.

Her sister nodded. “Me too. Much easier. But they’re not all cads. Most fathers would hide Mary away before marrying her off to anyone who’d take her. Papa didn’t do that. Joseph will marry Mary, I’m sure, once he’s completed his medical studies and has an income. They seem fond of each other.”

Sarah snorted. “Joseph’s nearly a qualified doctor. He should have known how to stop babies coming.”

“At least the Jenkins family has put in a good word for our brother Jonathan to start *his* medical training. Dear Jonathan. So unlike Papa. Practical. Sensible. Organised. Hopefully all our brothers will follow in his footsteps.” Martha waved two sets of crossed fingers in the air.

Her gesture did not lighten the glum face opposite her. “If your wishes come true, dear sister, *they* will have a guaranteed future. *We*’re doomed to have our father and his chaotic ways stifling our futures. He may be a man of the church and an Oxford man, but he does live in worlds far removed from here, obsessed with the affairs of the Church Missionary Society.”

“Hmm! I have to agree.” Martha’s eyes lit up. “Do you remember that visit from those two Maori chiefs, just before little Frank was born?”

“How could I forget? Those tattoos! The whole village still tut-tutts over that episode.” Sarah locked merry eyes with her sister and they shared a giggle.

Martha recovered first. “Poor Mama, she always came second to Papa’s latest passion. She was very unwell that day but Papa didn’t even notice.” Her happy expression vanished.

“Do you think he pays *any* attention to his family? Especially to the matter of marrying off his daughters?” Sarah drummed impatient fingers on the arm of her chair.

“No. He’s lost without Mama. We all know she ran our family. And truly, after seeing what Mama went through, bearing fourteen children and losing four of them as babies, I’m glad to be spared that fate. As the eldest I’ve put all my mothering instincts into looking after my younger brothers and sisters. I’m in no hurry to bear children and to tolerate a man taking control of my life. My community work as Papa’s companion is enough for me.”

Sarah quirked her eyebrows. “You’ve taken after Mama. You’re a saint. You’ll think me foolish but I must be Papa’s daughter, because I dream of adventure and romance. I dream of a life beyond this small country village.”

Martha heaved a sigh. “Dearest, remember, we don’t have a private fortune.”

“I’m well aware that my only pathway to adventure is to enter the state of matrimony. But the local farmers hold no appeal. Ugh.” Sarah shuddered.

A dreamy, faraway look crept into her eyes. “A man from the City of London would be perfect. I liked it much better when we lived there, by the Thames, and the world held possibilities.”

Watching her, Martha replied: “Then we’d better busy ourselves making you a special dress to wear to the gathering at the Assembly Rooms next week. Something in sapphire blue, matching those eyes of yours. I’ve heard the locals describe them as the finest in the county.”

Sarah stared at her, startled. “Good heavens! I’ve used them mostly to glare at the unwelcome suitors abounding in this district.”

Her sister groaned. “Any one of the local gentry would willingly take you as their bride but you toss your head in disdain when a man requests a second dance. Your card is full, or your foot is hurting. You use any excuse.”

“Why not? They’re all so boorish. And they smell of sweat and barnyards.”

“In that case I’ll pray that a well-washed, well-groomed, well-mannered City man will magically appear at the Assembly and sweep you off your feet.”

Sarah responded gloomily. “The point is that I’d need to sweep him off his feet. How can a country bumpkin like me impress a City gentleman?”

“Have you looked in the mirror lately, Sarah? If you’d ever had the chance to mix in the upper ranks of society you’d now be hosting soirees and dinner parties, with several children in your nursery.”

“Yes, I’d be a plump matron. Mrs Someone.” Sarah bit her lip as that thought struck home. “It must be hard to change your name. I rather like being Miss Flockton. It’s distinctive.”

Martha laughed. “It suits me well enough. Come on, Mrs Someone-to-be, we have just enough time this afternoon to call at the village haberdashery. We need to select the material for your new dress. With Christmas approaching Mrs Brownlow is sure to have some warm fabric in stock. No need to freeze in pursuit of your dream. My day is free tomorrow and we can get started on the cutting-out and seam-sewing.”

Stephen re-united his teacup with its saucer with far too much vigour, earning a glare from his sister, sitting beside him on her settee. “Never fear, Annie. Both pieces are still intact.” Taking more care, he replaced his china on her tea table. “Must I come with you and Moritz to Cambridgeshire?”

“You know Moritz still needs your help with his business partner. In English rural heartland our name is too foreign-sounding.”

Stephen scoffed: “As if mine will be much better.”

Ann retorted: “Fatt is easier to pronounce than my married name, Schmaeck.”

Her brother grumbled. “Did I ever mention that I don’t like being Stephen Fatt?”

“More than once or twice.” She patted his knee.

Her understanding gesture encouraged him. “I had such a hard time at school. I confess, I’ve even thought about changing my surname, back to Le Gros. That’s what it would be if our Huguenot forebears hadn’t come to England via Amsterdam and adopted the name Fatt.” He sighed. “But I can’t revert to Le Gros.”

“Why ever not?”

“It’s only eleven years since the Battle of Waterloo. Feeling between the English and the French is still bitter. I see it every day in business.”

“What fun you’d have if you were Stephen Le Gros. Our countrymen would be forever stumbling over that name. With a space in it, or all one word? With a capital L or a capital G, or not?” She grinned at him.

Stephen gave her a playful jab on the arm. “Moritz was lucky you were willing to spend a lifetime spelling out your name. I’ve never understood why my sister had to marry a German.”

“Because I love him, that’s why. Besides, he grew up in London. His accent is as English as yours and mine.”

“Love!” Stephen pooh-poohed her romantic ideals. “You’ve read too many of those new-fangled novels for your own good.”

“Just you wait, little brother. Your turn will come. An exotic Russian girl might bewitch you on your next trip to the Baltic.”

“Father won’t be too impressed if that happens.” He suppressed a rueful grin.

“I concur. He encouraged you to become a Russia broker ... but did he consider all the likely consequences? I think not. He wouldn’t want his precious elder son to go off and live on the Continent.”

Her brother paused and wrinkled his brow. “Maybe he did think of the consequences. Freddie escaped my fate. He was steered into becoming an ordinary insurance broker. No trips across the North Sea for him.”

She brushed a hand across his cheek. “Father is very proud of you both. It gives him something to brag about among all those top hats at the Bank of England. Deep down he has a taste for adventure but he’s stuck in a rather boring life, having to turn up at Threadneedle St every day.”

Stephen’s chest puffed with pride. Praise from his father meant something. He hid his pleasure behind a sardonic reply: “Perhaps it’s just the money we’re making as brokers that he likes. He did give us good advice, that we should become men of business. You benefited too.”

“In what way, might I ask?”

“He saw Moritz’s outstanding potential as a merchant, offering you a comfortable financial future. The opportunities for residents of the City of London come in many guises, even for women. Yours came through Moritz.”

Ann smiled. “I was lucky. Father was brought up to be European in outlook and never objected to Moritz. He does concede that a distinctively English name would be much easier for Moritz in business circles.”

Stephen’s eyes widened. “Does he? I’ve come to the same conclusion. For myself, I mean.”

“Hence your dismissal of Le Gros as an alternate name? It would have been hard to explain the change. With all of us children being born in Boney’s time, Father has had to keep quiet about our connection to an ancient French family.”

Stephen grinned. “Given those long wars against the French, I think he’s rather relieved to be a Fatt. The Germanic peoples were our allies, not our adversaries. I’ve even heard at the club that Moritz’s family was well-involved, helping the British government behind the scenes.”

She frowned. “Let us forget the past. The present concerns me now.”

“But of course.” The clock chimed five. “By Jove, is that the time?” He stood to take his leave.

Ann rang for the footman to bring his coat. “Before I forget, you’ll need your evening finery while we’re away. Moritz has accepted an invitation for us all to attend the local Assembly Rooms.”

He rolled his eyes. “Now you tell me. Only if Freddie comes too will I go.”

“Then I’ll make sure Freddie accompanies us this week. The neighbouring gentry will be delighted to welcome you both.”

“Two additional young men in town, both eligible bachelors. The dream of every hostess.” His words dripped with irony.

“Exactly. What could be better for the scheming mamas of marriageable daughters. Make sure you dance with every one of them.” Ann wagged a school-ma’am-ish finger at him.

“With the scheming mamas?” he teased.

“No, silly brother, the marriageable daughters.”

“Then to keep you happy, Annie, I’ll do my duty as a gentleman. One dance with each of them.”

Stephen loosened the fastenings of his swirling black evening cape as he and Freddie strode into the foyer of the Assembly Rooms.

“I see you’ve worn your most flamboyant gentleman’s attire,” his brother joshed him.

“Might as well put on a show for the local yokels, Freddie.”

”Careful, the ladies may think you’re trying to impress.”

Stephen shrugged his broad shoulders. “A futile objective. No young lady in their right mind dreams of becoming Mrs Fatt. Aren’t you discovering that for yourself?”

“A little, perhaps, but thankfully I’m not at the marrying age.”

“Because we are the main attraction for this evening, I decided to give the womenfolk something else to talk about. The fashionable colour of my waistcoat. The superb cut of my jacket. The soft leather of my boots.” Balancing on his heel, Stephen spun in a circle, an arm outstretched, before sweeping into an exaggerated bow towards his younger brother.

“I say, steady on. If our name bothers you so much, you could always change it, using our country’s inheritance traditions.”

“What a good idea, Freddie. You’ve reminded me that tonight I need to be on the lookout for an eldest daughter with no brothers and a rich bachelor uncle, an uncle willing to bequeath his fortune provided I change my name to perpetuate his. What are my chances, do you think?” His voice dripped with irony. “It must be a very English-sounding name, of course. Father might accept those circumstances as good enough reasons for me to abandon his surname.”

Freddie stared at his brother. “You’re behaving very oddly tonight. Come on, we’d better catch up with our sister and brother-in-law.”

They entered the ballroom and Stephen surveyed a scene even more depressing than he'd expected. His heart sank at the display of simpering smiles and the coy fluttering of fans. In the far corner, he spotted a rebel, shaking her head at a would-be dance partner. Salvation?

“I say, Moritz, can you arrange for me to be introduced to that disagreeable-looking girl over there? The one who's scowling.” He tilted his head towards the corner.

“You mean the one in the blue dress? The prettiest girl in the room?”

“Precisely. At least *she* looks as if she doesn't want to be here. She's not exactly a girl either. She must be ten years older than most of these would-be contenders for my hand.” He took a second, surreptitious look. “Around my age. No doting mother in sight. Interesting. With her I might escape the marriage-mart questions.”

Moritz chuckled. “I happen to know who she is. Once met, never forgotten. Her father's the local vicar. I met the family on my first visit to this district. Come on.” He led Stephen around the figures crowding the dance floor.

“Miss Flockton, may I introduce my brother-in-law, Stephen Fatt? Stephen, this is Sarah Flockton.”

A pair of sparkling blue eyes beguiled him. One look was all it took.

Stephen took his bride into his arms and murmured “I've organised a special surprise for you tomorrow, Mrs Fatt.”

Sarah winced. “Will I ever get used to that name? Because of it I almost said *No* to your proposal.” She smiled and kissed him anyhow.

He ignored her jibe. “Just be in the City at eleven o'clock, at All Hallows, Lombard Street. Make sure you wear your finest outfit. What you wore to our wedding two weeks ago would be perfect.”

“Won’t you be coming with me? It’s Good Friday. Did you forget I’m the daughter of a curate? We should both be attending church.”

A playful glint flashed in his eyes as he tweaked her nose. “I have an appointment first. I’ll meet you there. Whatever you do, don’t be late.”

Next day she obeyed her husband, as a dutiful wife should. Alighting from her carriage she spied Stephen’s father and sister Louisa, standing together outside the church. “Where’s Stephen?”

Louisa responded with a smile. “He’s inside, talking to someone.” Louisa slipped into the church, ahead of them. Sarah linked arms with her new father-in-law and they stepped through the door.

The organ boomed with Handel’s ‘Arrival of the Queen of Sheba’. Sarah faltered and stared in confusion at the beaming faces turned her way. Family and friends. At the end of the aisle, beside the minister, stood her husband, wearing *his* wedding suit and a broad grin on his face.

Her father-in-law propelled her along the carpeted aisle and handed her over to his son.

“What *is* all this, Stephen?” she whispered.

“Your surprise.”

He took her hand and turned them both to face the minister, who began: “Dearly beloved, ... “

In a daze, Sarah took her vows with Stephen for the second time in two weeks. Again he slipped a narrow gold band onto her ring finger, beside the ring still shiny from the first ceremony.

