

One

Collette Jardiniere, swaying from side to side with the rhythm of the train, pushed up her wire-framed spectacles, struck a match and tried to touch it to the wick of her candle. Professor Stiltson's invention, a candle holder with a spring-loaded clip, should have made it easy, but to clip it to the arm of the train seat would put it too low to read her book by, and so she was holding the awkward little metal holder and trying again to strike a match. Infernal inventions, both of them! To be successful seemed to require the many arms of Kali, a Hindu goddess she had read of in a fascinating book on the Indian colonies. Kali embodied destruction and rebirth, and thus the power of the feminine capacity for giving life. Collette contrarily felt the urge for destruction in that moment as she struggled with the idiotic candle.

"May I be of assistance?"

The deep voice at her elbow startled her and her match went out. "Oh, carruthers and botheration!" she cried, nursing the burnt tip of her finger.

"I beg your pardon, miss?"

Collette lit another match and glanced up, intending to send the impertinent fellow on his way and then make another attempt to light the wick. But her gaze caught and held. She found she could not look away. At her shoulder stood a gentleman of impeccable dress and dashing looks. In her mind she was scribbling madly—

He had the powerful good looks of any man about town, but there was something more elemental in the deep charcoal gray of his eyes and the intensity of his gaze. He was a man one could not overlook, a man of such masculine vigor and subtle—

"Miss?"

She snapped back to attention as the match burned down and touched her fingers with blistering heat yet again. "Carruthers and botheration!" she exclaimed, tossing the match down hastily and touching her burnt finger to her tongue to soothe it.

"Allow me."

The handsome stranger reached for her other hand and Collette experienced a tingle of anticipation as he touched her. She went perfectly still in the dim light. Well, how fascinating! It was true after all, what all the other women writers wrote! There were some men who exuded a powerful aura of magnetism, and this was one of them. He took the candle from her, lit a match and touched it to the wick. Light flared between them. He extinguished the match. Every movement was elegant and controlled, exquisitely composed, perfectly planned.

As she gazed at him in the flickering candlelight, Collette could see she had not been mistaken. Not only was he good-looking, there was something in the set of his broad shoulders and incredible eyes that made a woman want to reach out and touch his face, caress his hand, perhaps even... Yes, well, some things were better left unthought. Her heart thumped an erratic beat. What an opportunity! Never had she been this close to a man of such charisma and commanding force. She had only ever imagined him and she was beginning to feel that the creation of her imagination might be just a pallid shadow of the real thing.

"Thank you, sir," she said, with all the composure she could muster. "Such a long trip becomes boring and one needs a distraction." She spoke quietly, as the others seated nearby in the train carriage were asleep or at least resting.

There was no one in the seats directly across from her, but behind her was a worn-looking matron with two little boys in short pants who, after plaguing their black-veiled mother for the last several hours, were finally dozing. The poor woman, now deeply asleep at long last, must be a widow, Collette had thought earlier, judging from her black bombazine gown and jet jewelry, and left with two little boys both under the age of six! In front of her was an elderly couple, the woman, who was not well, Collette thought, resting her head on the man's shoulder, both their eyes closed, snuffling softly in their rest. At the last stop the husband had gallantly rushed from the train and purchased fruit for his wife.

There were not many more people around her, really, as most people crowded onto the "parliamentaries", one train on each route in each direction that was required by Parliament to charge no more than a penny a mile. This trip was such a monumental undertaking to Collette that she had gladly paid for a first class ticket.

The stranger smiled and indicated the empty seat beside her with a sweep of a strong hand and an uplifted eyebrow. He was being terribly forward. She should tell him to leave her alone or she would tell the attendant he was bothering her.

"Please, have a seat," she said. A little trill of excitement made her heart beat faster.

He sat down and said, "I could not agree more, you know, that such a long trip becomes monotonous. I was just thinking that, in fact, when I saw you trying to bring light to the darkness. Yes, certainly one needs a...distraction. You are a delightful one."

His slow teasing smile riveted her attention on well-shaped lips beneath a neat mustache. Unlike most men he did not sport bushy sidewhiskers; it was as if he disdained the artifice seemed designed to hide a weak jawline or receding chin. And since he had no need of them for that reason, being blessed with a strong jaw and a chin with a devilish cleft—

A blush of mortification rose to her cheeks when she realized the import of his words. "Oh, no, sir, I didn't mean that kind of—that is, I meant to read! *That* is my distraction."

"What exactly did you think I was implying?"

Collette, confused by his tantalizingly wicked smile, ignored his question and merely lifted her book from her lap.

He glanced at the title. His fine gray eyes widened and his eyebrows went up. "My, my, aren't you a naughty young lady! *The Last Days of a Rake*, hmm? I had not thought a young unmarried lady would be interested in a novel some in London society have condemned as wicked and lewd."

"Wicked? Lewd?" Collette felt her ire rise and she bridled. "If that is what they say then it has been defamed. And I'm not naughty. Good heavens, you make me sound like a child. I merely think for myself, sir! It is time women were not bound by the patriarchal ties that strangle free thought. Are we chattel, then, in truth as well as in law? I think..."

She trailed off when she saw the patent amusement on his face. Vexed that this man, with whom she had felt some instant kinship, was just like other men, she determined not to amuse him with her "prattle". Men! The minute a woman began to talk, they assumed that indulgent air, that patronizing, condescending—

"Why did you stop, miss?" he said, raising one thick eyebrow. "I would be fascinated to hear your thoughts on the women's suffrage movement."

She glanced over at him in the flickering candlelight with suspicion. "I do not believe I caught your name, sir."

He hesitated, glanced at her eyes, then down at the book in her lap. "I am called Jamie by friends. I think that is informal enough for the manner of our meeting. Formal introductions are for the salon or ballroom. Do you not agree, Miss...?"

Collette's thoughts raced in time to the *clack-clack-clack* of the rail car. This was the genuine article; for once she had met a real rake, she was sure of it. Everything from his impeccable tailoring to his audacious manners shouted it to her. What did he think? How did he act? What would he talk about? Did he have a mistress in keeping? Or two, or even *three*? Did he drink until dawn, moving from one den of iniquity to another, or was his life more prosaic? She would never have another opportunity to find out, perhaps, what inspired a rake, and so she would take this chance, this gift of opportunity. As a woman traveling alone she should certainly have discouraged his attentions.

But she wouldn't. "I think Collette is informal enough for this manner of meeting, do you not agree?" She smiled up at him.

What on earth had driven him to use his childhood nickname instead of his real name, he wondered. Perhaps it was the book on her lap and the recent article in *Wilson's Gazette*. He did not want to talk about his authorship of *The Last Days of a Rake*, and certainly not with this intriguing, spinsterish country-woman, who gazed at him so seriously from behind spectacles that glinted in the candlelight, occasionally obscuring her eyes from his vision.

Who was she that she read scandalous novels openly on the train to London? Even those few women he knew who did read serious books read them in secret. Who was she going to meet? She surely did not live in London. The English countryside was bred into her bones and she carried with her the scent of hedgerow and meadow, primrose and night-scented stocks. He had not even noticed her at first, having spent hours reading while it was light. But when darkness fell, he looked up and saw her trying to light her candle against the swaying motion of the train, and had thought she looked...interesting. And now, having spoken to her, he thought she was delightfully absurd, but winsome in an unexpected way. The remaining miles to the city could be entertaining.

"And so you are going to London," he said, gazing down at her with more curiosity than he could reasonably explain.

"I am. I need to straighten out a little error on the part of gentlemen with whom I do business."

"Business?" What business could this young woman have? He looked her over with a critical gaze. She was thin, one might even say frail, without the deep bosom and luscious curves that adorned his usual flirts. And yet her slenderness had an interesting quality, as though constant thought and unstoppable activity had worn her to a wraith. She was quick of movement, and perhaps even of mind, too. That was one attribute his lady friends did not possess. An intelligent mind in a woman's body was a waste, in his thinking. One did not want one's mistress to be constantly talking. There were far better things for a man and woman to do than talk politics or literature.

"Yes, business. You speak, sir, as if you had never heard the word."

He chuckled, amused by her forthright manner. She spoke as if possessed of an original mind, though if pressed he would say that not only was intelligence not to be desired in a woman, he had rarely found it there. In his considerable experience, though some women exhibited an apparent quickness of thought—this young lady belonged to that group—most were

merely parroting the opinions of the men in their lives with no more originality than a mynah bird saying “hello.”

Yet for a half hour on a dark train, perhaps this little country bird would do for an unusual flirtation, as refreshing to the jaded palate as a long draught of water from a well in the woods. He looked her over with more interest, intrigued by the thought of what her plain dress might conceal. The delicacy of her slenderness might be a piquant contrast to the overblown beauty of his usual London roses. Her body was confined by a corset, certainly, but her waist would have been tiny even without it. She was willowy, of average height, mousy at first glance, with steel-framed spectacles that glinted in the candlelight.

Ah, but behind those spectacles were eyes of a deliciously cool pale green, like moss, and her hair glinted in the wavering candlelight, a rich wavy auburn with gold lights that danced. She wore a drab brown dress of outdated style, and at her neatly booted feet was a black valise, enormous and bulging. Jamie doubted he had ever spent so much time examining a woman of her type in his life. Staring so long was impolite, though she had made no demur, nor had she so much as colored, as she should have under such frank scrutiny. She was examining him just as he was taking in her figure, and her gaze was bolder than most of the covert examinations women conducted. Did she like what she saw? He smiled down at her and crossed one leg over the other. “Business,” he said, again. “What business, may I ask?”

“You may ask, but I need not answer.” Her tart reply was not hesitant and seemed practiced, almost.

He was amused. This was much better than sitting in idleness in the dark rail car that rocked from side to side in dreary rhythm. “True. Let us talk of other things, then, such as...of what would a young lady like yourself enjoy speaking? Perhaps the women’s suffrage movement?”

She gave him a surprised look, her green eyes wide in the flickering light of her candle. “What discussion would we have on that subject, sir?”

Yes, he had thought that topic would engage her interest. “First, do you agree with the tenets of the movement?”

Her swift glance was as incisive as a surgeon’s scalpel. “I do. It seems to me mere logic that women should have the same rights as men when our minds are just as strong and our reason somewhat better.”

“Better? Your reason is better?” Oh, this was delicious. There was nothing more stimulating than finding a woman who thought herself the equal of a man. “Do you mean to imply that men are illogical?”

“I do not imply it, sir, I state it outright. Only *men* could entertain the notion that fighting would solve anything, as in the current conflict in the Crimea. You can force people to give you land or acquiesce to your demands, but it doesn’t solve anything at all. It only creates a whole new set of difficulties, which following male generations will attempt to solve with more violence. Men create war, and women must solve the problems left by it.”

“That is surely an over-simplification of the worst kind!” he exclaimed, stung by her absurd air of contempt. It was one thing for women to spout such nonsense, but when they truly believed it—

“Perhaps, sir, but I have learned through experience that gentlemen sometimes need things stated simply for them to grasp a concept.”

He gasped in outrage and was ready to demolish her absurd statement with a well-reasoned argument but then caught a wicked little grin on her narrow, bespectacled face. Was

she having him on, or was she serious? She had said almost the exact thing that men often claimed about women.

“I shall disregard that blatant attempt to bait me,” he said, intrigued now as he had not been before, “and merely ask how you can say what I think you are saying, that it is left to women to clean up the problems created by men?”

“That is an adequate interpretation of my statement,” she said with an air of contemplation, “given your probable inexperience at listening with attention to a woman’s views.”

“And how would you know that? Perhaps I am a veritable John Stuart Mill.” He leaned closer and gazed deeply into her eyes.

She raised her eyebrows, thought for a moment and then said, “You’re right, sir, that was unworthy of me.” Her long lashes swept downward behind her glinting glasses, and then she looked up again. “In answer, though, to our original discussion point, my assertion that women are left to tidy up the messes made by men, and that the conflict in the Crimea was an example, I should think it was self-evident. Men created this war, is that not true?”

“Yes, in the sense that men are responsible for governing all people and must occasionally make such grave decisions as to declare war.”

She gave him an inscrutable side glance, her spectacles glinting again in the candlelight. “Yes, *men* govern all people, and *men* declare war upon one another. Such a good job men have done of governing our own nation so far! That is why there is no poverty in England, no hunger or want, and why all little children receive an education, making them fit members of a loving, caring society.”

He was surprised at the bitterness in her words and could not respond. This had swiftly devolved from a lighthearted flirtation to a lecture on parliamentary reform. He opened his mouth, unwilling to remain speechless in the face of such absurdity, but then closed it again. He truly, for once in his life, had no answer.

“And then,” she said with satisfaction, lifting her chin and gazing off into the distance, “there are women like Miss Florence Nightingale, who pick up the shattered pieces of lives destroyed by the ravages of that war.”

He shook his head. This was something he could tackle, an argument he could dissect. “You see, that is just the kind of leap in logic that defies the rational man to understand. It is so typically female and so very specious. You move from a broad concept like war, blaming it on men, and then move to a specific person, a woman, as if she were proof that women, given the reins of power, would do better at avoiding armed conflict. Women are not formed for deep thought. Your absurd statements just confirm that.”

Behind her spectacles her eyes glittered emerald with sparks of gold, he noted, fascinated by the deepening color. How could such an unfeminine woman, such a maddening, shrewish, plain bluestocking, intrigue him so?

“Women are every bit as capable as men of deep thought, sir, but they are not educated, and that failure to provide a comprehensive education is responsible for every difference in understanding. Women in England suffer the same plight as the slave in the United States. Did you know it is illegal to educate a man or woman of African descent there?”

He wanted to clutch at his hair and tear it out by the roots. “Surely,” he said, turning almost completely around in his seat to stare at her in the wavering light, “you are not equating your lot in life with the abomination of slavery?” He was incredulous that this woman, probably

pampered and protected her whole life by her father or uncle or brothers, would dare to put forth such a false argument.

“You see? You have the same lamentable tendency as all men, it seems, of leaping to conclusions, the very thing of which you accuse women. I mention that women’s plight is similar—”

“You did not say similar, you said the same.”

“And it is clear that I am talking about the failure to educate women in any useful subjects, and the similarity of that lamentable fate to that of the slave in America. The lack of education in both cases is the crux of the argument. How can you have missed that?” she said, her voice rising in volume. “Instead you accuse me of equating women’s role in English society to slavery. I did not do that at all.”

How could she misunderstand him and mislead him like this? He felt like he was wandering down a garden path, her arguments were so circuitous and confusing, and then for her to accuse *him* of illogic? It was outrageous! It was infuriating! And perversely, he was enjoying himself more than he had in any conversation in the past twelve-month or more. He stared, entranced, into her eyes, forgetting entirely that he did not find her the slightest bit attractive.

Collette suppressed the smile that teased at her lips. The gentleman was quite ready to scream with frustration, she thought, and that in itself was highly entertaining. No, she did not have experience in Oxford debating rules, and perhaps she was as guilty as he of leaping to conclusions.

But—and this was the main problem—how could she think rationally with him so close, his male heat warming her? Her thinking was being muddled by the very real and tangible attraction she was feeling toward him. His hand brushed her arm and he leaned into her, his slate eyes dark and mysterious in the wavering pale light from the single candle. She felt like they were alone in that weak pool of light. Even the snuffling and snoring of passengers around them sounded just like the sighing of the wind to her addled brain.

I will feel foolish later, she thought, when I recall my words, but I don’t care. Despite the serious subject matter, she allowed a smile to turn her lips up, hoping it did not look like she simpered. Yes, she was enjoying herself immensely. He had not said another word, and his expression had changed as his eyes wandered over her hair, her eyes and finally her lips. He settled back in his chair, but still was turned toward her. He cast a quick glance around at their sleeping traveling companions.

“I think, Collette,” he said, quietly, “that you mean to deflect me with your absurd arguments. Let us not talk about the suffrage movement, then. Let’s talk about a far more intriguing subject—you.”

“Me?” She blurted the single word, caught off guard by his abrupt change. “Th-there is nothing intriguing about me, sir.”

“Hush... Keep your voice down. And remember, you are to call me Jamie.”

She looked him over in turn, deliberately taking her time, from his dark, almost black hair, sparkling gray eyes, nicely trimmed mustache, cleft chin, down to his broad shoulders under a well-cut coat, trim frame and immaculate boots. Never had she allowed her eyes to linger in such an unladylike way upon a man’s body, and it left her breathless, even as she acknowledged that viewing, say, Professor Stiltson’s frame would never affect her this way. “I don’t think you suit that name, ‘Jamie’, at all. It is too slight and jocular a name. A bootblack may be named Jamie. An urchin in the street may be named Jamie. But not you, sir.”

He moved closer again. "What would you call me then?" he asked, his voice silky and deep.

She gazed at his lips, the bottom one full, the top one thinner but well-shaped. She would call him—

Dangerous man, mystery man, man of every foolish woman's dreams. He exuded waves of some potent virility that made women think forbidden thoughts and created needs that could never be satisfied without his own powerful ardor. He had the devastating ability to make the most chaste woman dream of nighttime fantasies and unsated lust. He was hazardous to feminine virtue, and she could not help but fall, just as every other foolish woman must in his presence. Was he wise in wielding this dangerous power, or did he use it recklessly and with abandon to scale the walls of maidenly virtue?

"I asked what you would call me."

Devil man, sweet enticement, harbor of hopeless dreams—

She shook herself. She really must curb her tendency to daydream in others' presence. "I don't know," she murmured, looking away. "But not Jamie."

"Then you shall call me whatever pleases you," he said, still in that low tone, leaning toward her.

He reached out to her and turned her face back toward him. For one brief moment she thought he meant to lay his hands upon her and kiss her. She swallowed past a lump in her throat and tensed, waiting for the first touch of his lips, the tickle of his mustache, the inevitable melting sensations she foresaw from the intimate touch of a man such as she had never met before.

Instead he simply took her spectacles off and gazed into her eyes. She felt the most abject disappointment and took a deep breath. *Buck up, you silly girl*, she scolded herself. She met his gaze, allowing her eyes to linger on the tiny lines under his and the sooty color of his lashes, luxuriantly thick and long. His eyes, she thought, were not just gray. They were slate, with coal inclusions that radiated from large black pupils. Deep-set and shadowed by thick brows, they were the most attractive feature on a devastatingly handsome man.

"You, on the other hand, are well-named, my dear," he whispered, taking one of her hands in his. "Collette. Did your mother know what an unusual young woman you would become, I wonder? Did she foresee that you would never be merely Jane, or Fanny, or Anne?" He folded her spectacles with his free hand and laid them on the book on her lap.

"I have never thought of myself as especially unusual, sir. I am a rather plain young woman, a spinster with little money and no prospects, and the only thing I possess of value to myself is my mind."

His gaze sharpened. Were her words meant to draw a contradiction from him, meant to provoke a compliment on her person? He thought not. Her gaze was level, her eyes wide and sincere. Plain? Well, yes, he had thought so himself when first he laid eyes on her. But her great attraction lay not in the arrangement of nose and mouth and eye, but in her mind, which flashed and glittered intelligence, and her heart, which radiated courage and a sweet sensibility.

He must be losing his own mind to think that of this absurd bundle of contradictions. She was argumentative, but that did not mean intelligent, and she was daring, but that did not equate with courage. What was a young lady like this doing on her way to London, anyway? He began to feel agitated at the strange way his mind was working as he stared into her eyes. He would have given much to know her "business", but must respect her privacy, of course, as he expected

her to respect his own. It would be dangerous waters to demand an explanation from her when he was unwilling to tell her his own secrets. And he was enjoying thoroughly this interlude, this brief respite from his London life and the boredom that often plagued him.

They were a ways from London still. Once he and this fascinating little creature arrived in the city he doubted if they would ever meet again, and so he must hasten his flirtation, deriving every second of enjoyment from it. She was probably headed for an employment agency. Likely her business with some London gentlemen consisted of berating them for her current post as...hmm, nanny? No; she did not have the cloying air or the harried look of a woman who dealt with infants all day. Governess? Perhaps, though what the children would learn from such an unexpected lady might not be what their parents would prefer.

He abruptly released her captured hand and sat back. "Where are you from, Collette?"

She fingered her spectacles and touched the book, her fingers stroking the leather binding like it was a familiar friend. He watched those ink-stained fingers, noting the blunt, square nails and smooth pale skin.

"I live in a very small village, Listerwood-on-Sea. It is on the north shore of the Kent promontory, midway between Margate and Herne Bay." All her directions were delivered in the same matter-of-fact manner, with no excess verbiage, no female intrusions or meandering down wordy lanes.

She was a Kentish spinster, then, used to seaside walks and such ladylike pursuits as bird-watching or sketching. Some part of him wanted to find that she was dull and prosaic. It would make forgetting her much easier once they had reached London. That thought startled him—forgetting any particular woman had never been a problem—but he forced himself to continue the conversation rather than ponder on what he thought would make her difficult to forget.

"I am returning from there myself. I was near Margate looking...er...looking to buy from a dealer a rare Henry Fielding manuscript for my collection," he said, hastily making up an innocuous reason for his Kent sojourn. "I was disappointed though. There was no... It was, uh, a mere copy, a rather bad forgery." This was impossible, constantly editing his words, continually remembering his story. He rushed to deflect any possible inquisition, for she looked as though she had questions for him and he did not want to speak of his disappointing excursion. "And what do you do to pass the time in Listerwood-on-Sea?"

Her eyes shadowed and she glanced down at her spectacles. "I live in very quiet circumstances."

She sounded evasive. Was she perhaps not employed then, being a young lady of independent means? He gazed at her steadily as she busied herself spilling wax into the little saucer in her odd candle-holder. She rotated the hinged clip until it was vertical from the candle and clipped it on the back of her own seat. The flickering light danced across her pale skin.

"You're not married. Do you live with your parents?" How old was she anyway? One must not ask a lady her age, but perhaps this odd packet of contradictions would offer it.

"I live with my Aunt Nettie."

Paid companion? Pug-walker to a smelly old trout?

"And you are traveling to London for some unnamed business with some unnamed men." He inched closer until his arm was almost brushing against one small breast. His breath became oddly constricted and he damned his high collar.

He noted with amusement that she moved away, just a tiny bit, perhaps a few inches. There wasn't much room on the black leather upholstered seats of the train, even though she was so slim, but she took advantage of the swaying movement to move away from him as much as

she could manage. Was she afraid of him? He wouldn't have thought she was afraid of much. Or was she just now realizing how unorthodox was this conversation, in the gloom of night, on a train bound for London with a stranger who would not give her his full name? She must know she was physically safe, but was she perhaps as affected by his nearness as he was by hers? He certainly hoped so.

Since his last comment was not a question, he could not complain that she did not answer. She fidgeted with her book, opening and closing it, tracing the gold lettering on the binding with a delicate finger.

"Have you read this book yet?" He asked, indicating the slim volume in her hands. "Or have you only just started?" He watched her eyes.

They widened and he noted, too, the smile that lingered on her delicate rose lips. "Oh, I have read it, sir, several times over."

Had she really? "What think you of it? It set London on its ear with its publication. It is considered racy in the extreme, and considerable vituperative reviews have been published in the more religious of journals. Queen Victoria herself condemned it as immoral in tone and unsafe for women and young people, though she admitted she had not read it."

"Racy? I think it merely honest, sir. Do you not consider that the author's treatment of the reformation of a rake, and then his eventual decline in the face of his denial of his true nature to be honest?"

How happy he was that he had not given his real name! It would have complicated this straightforward assessment of the novel.

"I think it is honest to some degree. Rather gloomy in tone at times, but not out of keeping with its subject. How else does one treat death, after all?" He watched her eyes, wondering whether she had considered who the author really was of this scandalous novel. "I could not decide though, on the viewpoint of the author, this...uh...Colin Jenkins," he continued carefully. "I have heard that is supposed to be a *nom de plume*, though I am not convinced of that. Does he condemn the rake's lifestyle, or rather his reformation? That is ambiguous."

"I think the author would have the character be true to himself," Collette said softly, so softly that he had to lean forward even more to catch her words. "Do you not think the world would be a better place if we were all true to ourselves?"

His gaze narrowed. What did this little country wren know about the true nature of a rake? Surely Listerwood-on-Sea was not prime stalking ground for the species. He was considerably more equipped to comment on both the nature of a rake and the truth that lay behind this book. "So we should be true to ourselves, our desire and needs, our wants and impulses?"

She looked up at him and nodded.

And so he took her face in his hands and kissed her.