Lady Ambleforth’s Afternoon Adventure

A Regency Novella

By

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Lady Araminta Ambleforth had been looking forward to her outing to Maidstone from the moment she’d thought of the idea yesterday. Sadly, it looked as if her journey would end almost before it began. The phaeton she had ordered from London, with a mint green body and wheels picked out in red, looked rather forlorn on the side of the lane with one wheel at a very odd angle, while Cloud, a pretty gray gelding, happily munched on the grassy verge.

Groom Jack, a young man with a shock of black hair and startling blue eyes, got up from inspecting the wheel and shook his head.

“Can it be fixed?” she asked with a hopeful smile and a twirl of her blue silk fringed parasol designed to ensure not a ray of sunshine touched her face. It was too late for that, unfortunately, because she’d been pruning rose bushes in the formal gardens behind Ambleforth House and had forgotten to wear a hat. Not only freckles bloomed across the bridge of her nose, but a telltale pink tinged her cheekbones. The perils of being the typical English blonde with blue eyes.

“No fixing that on the fly, my lady. The wheel has a definite wobble. I’ll not trust it to carry you another yard. Haslops in Midbury will need to take a look. If he can’t fix it, we’ll have Mr. Wilson from Maidstone Carriage Works out.”

Bother. Her outing would have to be postponed. Or cancelled. Unless she walked home and collected the traveling carriage. Araminta glanced up at the sky. It was a lovely June day, a few fluffy clouds, a light breeze carrying the scent of spring, and fields verdant with new growth.

“You know, Jack Merton, it is almost too nice a day to go shopping. You take the phaeton to Haslops, while I walk home.”

Young Jack’s jaw dropped. “Now, my lady, if his lordship were alive, he would never have permitted—”

“But he isn’t.” His lordship hadn’t permitted all manner of things. Now she was out of mourning, it was time to enjoy the world. Meet some people. Begin life anew. And as a widow, an unexpectedly very rich and young widow, the world was waiting for her grand entrance. And if she’d only dared brave a couple of visits to Maidstone so far, it was because she had been a very young bride. But all that was over. “And I can certainly manage to walk a mere two miles.”
It was time to be a little daring. Not scandalous, mind you. But she needed to test her independence. She gave Jack a winsome smile. “Please see that Cloud is well-stabled, and then come home and report on the condition of my carriage.” Without giving him a chance to object, she strode out for Ambleforth.

Oh, and who was this coming in the other direction?

CHAPTER TWO by Barbara Monajem

Heavens, it was gorgeous Lord Torquil D. Silverthorne—or as Araminta liked to think of him, Lord Tall, Dark, and Sinister. Nobody knew what the D stood for; even in Debrett’s, the initial was all one could find. The disgraced son of a duke, he dwelt in an ivy-enshrouded mansion on a hill between here and Araminta’s home.

“Good day, Lady Ambleforth.” Lord Torquil swept off his hat with a flourish and bowed low over her hand. His lips barely brushed her glove, but nevertheless a quiver ran through her at his touch. (How appropriate if the D stood for Dangerous. Or Delicious.)

“A carriage breakdown?” murmured Lord Torquil. His eyes touched her, too—everywhere, in the most disconcerting way. “How convenient.” He replaced his hat upon his dark locks, which curled disreputably over his collar and brow. (What a pity Disconcerting and Disreputable were not proper names.)

She put up her chin. She refused to let Lord Torquil—or any man—unsettle her. “For me, certainly. I can’t imagine why I didn’t think of it before. A brisk walk is far more to my taste than shopping. Good day, my lord. “ She nodded dismissal, twirled her blue parasol and continued toward home.

Unsurprisingly, he turned to accompany her. “Convenient for me as well. What greater pleasure than to stroll on a glorious June day with a lovely lady on my arm?”

Araminta rolled her eyes. She wasn’t on his arm and didn’t intend to be.

“But that’s not what I meant,” Lord Torquil said. “Wealthy, young, beautiful widows are few and far between, and a solitary walk might well be fraught with peril.”
She huffed. “In the countryside so close to home? If you dare tell me my husband would have disapproved…”

“He would have, but he doesn’t matter anymore, does he? You’re an independent woman now.”

Must he purr like a large, warm tomcat asking to be stroked? Torquil Desirable Silverthorne… His voice sidled into her thoughts, which were rapidly turning disgraceful. “Aren’t you?”

Wasn’t she what? Oh. Independent. “Of course I am.”

“And aren’t there many, many men out there who would like to change that?”

Definitely—even before she was out of mourning, she’d had offers of marriage, which she had refused. “Let them try!”

“I believe one of them already has, and in a most unscrupulous way.” He smiled at her with a flash of white teeth and a glint in his eye. “I suspect it is someone who dwells between here and your home.”

“Whatever can you possibly mean?” She quickened her steps, starting to be annoyed. While she might safely indulge a few improper thoughts about delectable Lord Torquil, he had now begun to truly disturb her.

“Such a lonely stretch of road,” he said. “Such a spirited lady, itching to be free for once in her life. Such a convenient mishap to her wheel—enough to disable the phaeton, but not to cause her any harm.”

Rapidly, Araminta reviewed all the neighbours who might aspire to her hand. None of them would hatch such a devious plan… Oh! “You sabotaged my phaeton?” She whipped her parasol shut and backed away from him, brandishing it. “How dare you!”

He put up his hands, laughing. “My dear Lady Ambleforth! If I had purposely damaged your wheel, do you think I would tell you so?”

CHAPTER THREE by Annie Burrows
She wouldn't put it past him. With all the rumours of disgrace in his past—and a disgrace so disgraceful her husband had refused to even hint at what it might have been—and the way he always looked at her, as though he knew something she didn't, and found both it and her very amusing, well...

She had not even drawn breath throughout the whole of her mental diatribe, she realized. Not that one needed to breathe, to think. Except that annoyingly, in Lord Torquil's vicinity, breathing never did seem to occur naturally.

It came as something of a relief when, just as they drew level with Mrs Hopewell's cottage, she saw the curate, Mr Hodges, emerging from the gate.

“Good day, my lady, good day!” He raised his hat and stepped out into the lane, his keen blue eyes flicking from her to Lord Torquil.

“What a surprise to see you out walking on such a hot day,” he said to Lord Torquil, producing a handkerchief with a flourish, and mopping his brow. “I would not have ventured forth myself, were it not for my duty to offer spiritual comfort to the sick and indigent,” he said, annoying Araminta intensely. She found the widow Hopewell a delightful person. A fund of interesting goss...news. It rankled to hear the young curate relegate her to the status of a duty to be got through, rather than a person with whom it was always a pleasure to sit and share a cup of tea.

“Alas,” replied Lord Tall and Dangerous-to-her-breathing, “Lady Araminta's brand new phaeton has developed a problem on its very first outing. She has been obliged to postpone her trip and return home on foot. Naturally, seeing her predicament, I offered to escort her.”

He had done no such thing! He had simply strolled over, and informed her that he would do so. And was doing so, without so much as a by-your-leave.

Mr Hodges took on that rather pompous look which usually preceded the more uncomfortable points during his sermons.

“There is no need for that, my lord,” he said firmly. “Now that I am here, you may continue upon your way. I shall escort Lady Araminta home.”

Lord Torquil raised one eyebrow. “Indeed?” He looked the perspiring curate up and down.

“You do not look as though you should be out in this weather yourself. In fact, did I not know better, I would venture to say you look as though you have already been exerting yourself overmuch. Though I am sure you would deny you have been running.”
“Running? Why ever should I do such a thing? In this heat!” His face turned an even deeper shade of red. “I did not wish to put it so bluntly,” he said, swelling with the kind of indignation Lord Torquil had just provoked in her, “but Lady Araminta really should not be seen walking alone with a man of your...reputation. Much better for me to see her home.”

“Better for whom,” said Lord Torquil dryly. Then he shrugged. “I do not suppose I can stop you from joining us,” he said as the curate took his place on Araminta's other side. “But it makes no difference to my plans.”

“Very well,” said Mr Hodges with unmistakeable hostility, over the top of her head. “If you persist in your obstinacy, at least my presence will preserve the lady from the sort of unpleasant gossip that being seen alone with you would provoke.”

Lady Araminta pouted. They were like two dogs fighting over a bone. A bone, what was more, that would much rather be left alone. But was this not typical male behaviour? They had taken it upon themselves to decide what was best for her. Not once had either of them asked whether she wished to be escorted home by a sweaty curate and a Totally Disreputable Son-of-a-Duke.

Oh, if only there was some way she could bring them both down a peg or two!

CHAPTER FOUR by Elaine Golden

With a little sniff of annoyance they were sure to ignore as well, Araminta set off again at a brisk pace. Sadly, it took only a few strides for them to catch up. Mr. Hodges continued to make a show of dabbing his brow while Lord Torquil talked and talked, about nothing so much as himself. Maybe the D stood for Discourse.

“I say, perhaps we should pause at the mill so Lady Ambleforth may take a bit of shade,” said Mr. Hodges with feigned concern. He was beginning to huff and turn the alarming shade of boiled lobster.

“I assure you, I’m quite content to continue on. However, should you desire the opportunity to rest...”
“Yes, do rest, Mr. Hodges. We shouldn’t want you to take ill and miss the service this Sunday.” Lord Torquil’s smirk suggested the opposite.

But Araminta was distracted and no longer paying them much attention. As they drew near the large stone edifice of the flour mill, she realized that something was amiss. Normally, this was a site of much industry. Today, it stood eerily quiet (her companions’ bickering aside), and it took a moment to realize why: the massive waterwheel wasn’t turning. The door of the miller’s cottage was open, and a saddled horse grazed idly in the yard beside.

How strange. Araminta paused in the lane in indecision. Should they investigate further? What if someone was hurt and needed assistance?

A shout drew their attention to the waterline where the miller, Mr. Probey, stood waist deep in the river, gesticulating wildly and pointing to a large wooden pole that appeared to be wedged in the base of the wheel. Then he leaned forward, straining for leverage.

“Looks like there’s something lodged in the wheel,” said Lord Torquil. “I don’t envy him the task of freeing it, at all.” Clearly, he hadn’t even considered offering assistance.

The faint creak of wood precipitated more shouting and straining. Then, with a long, violent shudder and a metallic shriek, the wheel began to move with all of the speed of a bed-bound octogenarian suddenly determined to walk. The once placid gelding took exception to the noise, reared, and thundered away.

The miller sloshed out of the way, laughing, and a moment later the water broke as another man surfaced beside him. A naked man. Or, at least partially naked, because all that Araminta could see at the moment was his chest, but—oh, my! Wasn’t that a sight to see? Lord Ambleforth had never displayed muscles quite like that.

She wasn’t sure how long she stood there ogling that fine specimen. She was certain, though, that the only reason she stopped doing so was because someone slapped their hands over her eyes to block the sight. She’d have wagered beforehand such action would be from Mr. Hodges, but she’d have been wrong. The D likely stood for Disappointing, then.

“What, ho!” called the curate some distance ahead while she tried unsuccessfully to remove Lord Torquil’s hands. “Sir Ed, is that you?”

Araminta paused. Sir Edgar Deppity? As the new owner of the mill (and many other businesses in town), it made sense that Sir Ed should be involved in restoring operations, but she
hadn’t recognized him. Of course, she’d only met him that one time and, admittedly, she hadn’t been precisely looking at his face a moment ago…

“Aye, Mr. Hodges. How do you do, sir?”

“Kindly put something on, sir! Lady Ambleforth is in our company. Surely you didn’t remove all of your articles of clothing… ah, but I see I was mistaken. It’s the middle of the day, sir!”

Oh, dear. He really had been naked. Was naked. Lord Torquil tightened his grip and held firm, despite Araminta’s attempts to see what the rest of Sir Ed Deppity might look like wearing nothing but water droplets in the sunshine.

“All right,” said Sir Ed in a husky voice that sent little shivers down her spine, and the restraints fell away, revealing him in his fully garbed glory. As tall as Lord Torquil, his brown eyes glinted with amusement, as if he knew precisely what she’d just been imagining. His curly brown hair was tamed when wet and clung to his skill, accentuating his high brow and cheekbones. “What brings you by this fine day, my lady?”

“Oh,” she said, with a smile and as much nonchalance as she could muster. “My carriage broke down and it seemed a fine day to walk home. The gentlemen are determined to escort me.”

“I see.” Sir Ed glanced at the now empty field beside the miller’s cottage then eyed her companions as if sizing them up. “Do you mind if I join you, then? I seem to have lost my mount in the proceedings. No doubt he’s enjoying a fine bit of feed corn while the stable lads make bets on what’s befallen me.”

Why did all of the men in the neighbourhood pick today to descend? The walk home had seemed a splendid idea when she had thought she’d be alone to enjoy the leisurely stroll.

As fascinating as the naked flesh and water display had been—and she was certain she’d spend some time recalling it this evening when she was alone—Araminta was not pleased for more company. But, as the well-bred peeress her mother had raised her to be, she smiled and inclined her head in acquiescence.

Surely, she could tolerate the three of them without losing all sense of decorum for the remainder of the journey?
CHAPTER FIVE by Julia Justiss

Just as Araminta and her uninvited companions reached the lane again, the sound of galloping hoofbeats warned them to remain on the verge. A moment later, a glossy white stallion flashed into view, a rider bent low over its head.

Apparently catching sight of the party, the rider pulled up and directed his mount, with a pretty caracoling step, to a halt beside them. The horseman, a darkly handsome man whom Araminta had never seen before, swung himself out of the saddle.

“A thousand pardons, dear lady,” he exclaimed, bowing. “I hope the impetuosity of my approach did not startle you, but I’d heard there was an accident at the mill and—ah, Deppity! Are you quite well, sir? Your hair is dripping!”

“Quite, your Grace. No accident; just an impediment with the wheel, which was speedily repaired.”

So intent was Araminta upon admiring the newcomer’s broad shoulders, strong jaw, sensual lips and the very fine fit of the buffskin breeches over his—oh, my!—she very nearly missed Deppity’s manner of addressing him.

‘His Grace!’ Imagine, a duke here, right in her little village! A duke who was young, striking, and impeccably dressed in a bottle green coat, those wonderful breeches and highly-polished Hessian boots sporting not a speck of mud, despite his recent gallop.

A duke who was gazing at her with lazy gray eyes and a seductive expression that hinted of afternoon activities she might find far more enjoyable than a stroll down a pokey little lane.

She’d wanted to try her independence, be a little daring, even, but that suggestive half-smile could tempt her to be positively wicked! She hadn’t felt so attractive, so desirable, so feminine since…well, ever. Ambleforth had married her straight from the schoolroom, without her even having the chance for a London Season.

“Deppity, you must present me at once to this enchanting creature,” the Duke said, still smiling.

Naturally, when a duke describes one as “enchanting,” one cannot help but feel flattered. Flushing, she murmured, “Too kind, Your Grace.”
“Not nearly as kind as I would like to be, once you know me better,” the Duke murmured in a provocative tone that suggested in just what manner he would like to be kind…or perhaps it was only the heat, or her overheated imagination at work.

She waited, nearly breathless with anticipation, but was finally forced to give Deppity a speaking glance before, somewhat sulkily, he said, “Lady Ambleforth, may I present to you Derek Deveril, the Duke of Dashing? He is one of my chief investors.”

If Deppity seemed disturbed, the curate was clearly disapproving, while Lord Torquil looked as if the ‘D’ in his name must stand for ‘disgruntled.’

Meanwhile, the Duke cried, “You are Lady Ambleforth? I am more than charmed, my lady, I am astonished! ‘Tis a most wondrous coincidence, for my chief purpose in coming to the county, along with checking on the progress of Deppity’s mill, was to make your acquaintance. Your grandmother’s second cousin’s niece’s sister and my mother were presented at Court together. I have heard so much of your beauty, your talent, and the wonderful entertainments you and your late husband gave at Ambleforth, both from her and from my eleven bachelor cousins. They are all Dukes, too; perhaps you are acquainted? No? Ah, no matter. You grow prize roses, too, I understand.”

Araminta felt her flush deepening, flattered but flustered that a great Peer of the Land should know so much about her. And one with so many eligible cousins! Perhaps it was time for that London Season she’d never had.

“Your Grace, you make me sound such a paragon! How can I not disappoint?”

“Never,” he said simply. “You could never disappoint.” He gave her a full smile this time, the sun gleaming off his even white teeth.

“I believe we have been standing in this heat long enough,” Mr. Hodges said tersely, once again wiping his brow.

“Your Grace,” Deppity said, “May I also present Mr. Hodges, our curate, and Lord Torquil Silverthorne, who is the son of the Duke of—”

“Hodges, always good to meet a man of the cloth,” the Duke interrupted with a genial nod to the curate, “and yes, I know Silverthorne. Or know of him. I’d heard he’d gone rusticaing in the country after…”

For a long silent moment, while Silverthorne looked increasingly uncomfortable and annoyed, the Duke’s lips twitched. Finally, he laughed out loud. “Forgive me, Silverthorne! But
you have to admit, despite the outcome being social isolation, the incident itself was vastly amusing. Although, with a lady present, I shall say no more.”

“A small mercy,” Silverthorne muttered, looking very put-upon. Perhaps it should be ‘D’ for ‘dejected,’ Araminta thought.

“Would that I had a carriage instead of my stallion, so I might offer you a lift on so sultry a day, Lady Ambleforth,” the Duke said. “I would have brought my phaeton, but for emergencies, or rescuing damsels in distress, a destrier is much faster.”

“I am sure you rescue damsels most delightfully,” Araminta replied. “Though I have no need of rescue. Although there was an accident to my carriage.” Realizing she was blathering—indeed, if breathing normally in the proximity of a dangerous duke’s son was difficult, ‘twas nearly impossible to think in the presence of an even more darkly dangerous duke—she took a deep breath and said, “That is, ‘tis so lovely a day, I chose to walk. And these gentleman,” she indicated them with an impatient wave of her hand, “took it upon themselves to accompany me.”

“What, uninvited?” the Duke exclaimed. “How unchivalrous! But surely, lovely lady, you will allow me to escort you.”

How does one say “no” to a duke? Even if one wanted to, which she did not. “It would be my pleasure.”

“I sincerely hope so,” he murmured with another of those seductive glances. “And since I am the highest-ranking gentleman present, you must allow me the honor of taking your hand.”

Her heart beating faster, Araminta lay her gloved hand on the Duke’s immaculate sleeve. The feel of perfectly tailored wool and sleek male muscle under her fingertips sent a jolt of sensation through her, intoxicating and a bit alarming. The Duke might be Dashing, but she feared he was also devilish.

Meanwhile, glancing round at the others, the Duke frowned. “Indeed, Mr. Hodges, you look disturbingly red. Perhaps you should ride Defiant, lest you collapse from the heat.”

“Kind of you, Your Grace, but I shall be perfectly fine walking,” the curate said stiffly.

“Deppity, would you be so good as to lead my stallion, so I may give my attention to Lady Ambleforth?” With a pointed smile, he added, “One shouldn’t discuss anything as vulgar as business before a lady, but I did wish to tell you I’m ready to put another 10,000 pounds into your venture.”
Looking irritated to be playing the groom, nonetheless, Sir Ed clamped his lips together and accepted the reins.

Finally, amusement lighting his face again, the Duke said, “And you, Silverthorne? Do you dwell nearby? Somewhere you can keep—” His shoulders shaking with suppressed mirth, the Duke broke off in mid-sentence.

Gracious, what had Silverthorne done to earn his disgrace? Araminta wondered, even more intrigued. Might the Duke tell her? Might he do other things to her? What was she to do with this gaggle of guardians when she reached Ambleforth?

CHAPTER SIX by Louise Allen

Three aristocrats, all in competition with each other, one highly-spirited stallion and a disapproving, red-faced clergyman jammed together in the tight confines of a rutted country lane did not make for the most comfortable of walks, Araminta discovered. An excess of masculinity might be exciting but one gentleman at a time—with the exception of poor Mr Hodges, of course—would be preferable.

Behind her she could almost feel the touch of Sir Ed’s smouldering regard fixed on her back. Or possibly lower. Araminta told herself it was impossible to walk over this rough ground without swaying her hips. Mr Hodges was sulkily trampling through the drifts of cow parsley that edged the lane like clouds of lace and covering himself in tiny white blossoms while he was at it.

Silverthorne, doggedly sticking to her right side, was far tenser than his indolent drawl suggested. His hand under her elbow was rigid, and whenever the duke said anything his grip became almost painful.

“Ouch!” She shook his hand off and rather obviously curled her left into Dashing’s crooked elbow. “You should not tease, Your Grace,” she murmured. “If Lord Torquil has some dreadful, devious, dastardly or disgraceful secret, you must share it with us.”

“He will do no such thing,” Silverthorne rapped out. “I’ll see to that.”
“You and whose army?” the duke enquired belligerently, promptly reducing the entire confrontation to schoolboy level. “You cannot expect to descend on some sleepy, unsophisticated country area—”

“We are not unsophisticated,” Araminta protested and was ignored. Derek and Torquil were standing toe to toe in front of her, glowering at each other. Her indignation was overcome by a positively shameful excitement. These two magnificent specimens of manhood were about to fight, and, if not over her, then surely the stimulus of jealousy was contributing to their antagonism.

“—and establish your ladybird, the most notorious actress in London, in a love nest and expect it to go unnoticed,” the duke continued, unintimidated. “It is the talk of the Town that—”

He got no further. Magnificent shoulders rippling, fists clenched, indolent elegance cast aside, Torquil bunched his right fist and hit him squarely on his rather too-pronounced chin. Derek Deveril landed on his ducal backside in a patch of thistles and let out a roar of pain and fury.

“Hold the horse.” Sir Ed pushed between Araminta and the curate and shoved the reins of the duke’s stallion into Mr Hodges’s pudgy hands. “Dashing! Silverthorne! There is a lady present!”

But it was too late for intervention, Araminta realised. The two men were rolling on the ground trading punches. She tried screaming in the faint hope that this would stop them, but she might as well have recited the works of the Poet Laureate for all the notice they took of her.

Sir Ed reached down, took hold of the duke’s collar and tried to drag him up. His reward was to receive Sir Torquil’s punch in the eye. With a bellow of rage he pitched into the fight, although quite who was attacking who now in the three-cornered conflict, Araminta had no idea.

“Mr Hodges, you must intervene,” she cried, but the stallion was rearing with the curate, no more effective than the skinniest stable boy despite his chubbiness, hanging onto the reins and shrieking in terror. “Men!” Araminta muttered, casting around fruitlessly for assistance. Mr. Probey the miller would be helpful. With his bulging muscles he could throw the lot of them into the mill stream and that would cool their ardor. But, of course, there was no help to be had.

“Let go!” she yelled at Mr Hodges, completely abandoning ladylike deportment. If the idiotic man did not release the reins he would be trampled. Thankfully he either heard her or was
shaken loose, for he let go, tumbled into the ditch with a splash and the stallion raced off back the way they had come.

Water—just what she needed. Araminta dropped her parasol, tore off her bonnet and pushed through the wild flowers to the ditch.

“Lady Araminta, help me, please.” Mr Hodges splashed feebly on his back like a stranded porpoise.

“In a moment, sir. If you will only stop thrashing you will find you are in no danger of drowning, but those idiotic men must be stopped before they maim each other.” Nobly sacrificing a magnificent (and expensive) example of Madame Mirabelle’s Modish Millinery (as advertised in *La Belle Assemblée*) Araminta scooped up brackish water in the deep-crowned straw bonnet, ran back and threw it over the heads of the combatants.

It worked magnificently. They fell apart gasping, then collapsed onto their backs, shaking their heads like so many wet water spaniels.

“Let that be a lesson to you,” she began. But the response came not from the men at her feet but from a masked rider on a fine gelding that looked remarkably like Sir Ed’s missing mount.

“Stand and deliver,” he said and pointed a large pistol right at the group on the road. “Your money is safe—all I want is the lady.”

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**CHAPTER SEVEN** by Louise Allen

“Never!” Araminta cried. A highwayman, here in their quiet country parish? She glared up defiantly at the tall but slender figure on the big horse. His face was covered by a mask, his hair by a slouch hat pulled low. His long legs…

She pulled herself together. She had seen rather too many pairs of magnificent legs today and she had no intention of coming any closer to these. “Begone before the magistrates hear of this!” she said, hoping that she did not sound as alarmed as she felt. “And let that horse go—stealing such an animal will get you transported, if not hanged.”

“I merely borrow it, my lady.”
The man’s voice was light, yet masculine. He was disguising it, she could tell. And he knows who I am, or at least, that I am titled, she realised with a shock.

“Come here, my lady, and give me your hand.” He controlled the edgy gelding one-handed with ease.

“Certainly not.” She stayed firmly where she was. Behind her Mr Hodges’s gasps and cries had died away into silence, broken only by an occasional pathetic splash. At her feet the three gentlemen lay sprawled in the dust watching the highwaymen with lethal alertness for one mistake.

“Which of these would you like me to shoot, then?” the rogue enquired. “You don’t want Silverthorne. The man’s a rake and he’s far too engrossed with his buxom mistress to be serious in his attentions to any other woman just now. His Grace, the Duke of Dashing? Do you want to play second fiddle to your husband all your life? He’s a smug, manipulative type, if you ask me.”

“I did not ask you,” Araminta interjected indignantly. At her feet Derek was choking in indignation, and all Torquil could manage was a hiss of fury.

“Then there’s Ed Deppity. Damn silly name—do you want to be Lady Deppity?”

‘I’ll have you know it is an ancient name of great—’

“Idiocy,” the highwayman interrupted the affronted baronet. “So which shall I shoot, my lady? Rake, pompous smug duke or baronet with a name from a stage farce?”

“None of them.” To her horror Araminta discovered that she was finding this rather stimulating. She very much doubted that this scoundrel really meant murder, however much he was provoked. And the contemplation of his lithe body mastering that restless horse sent little shivers up and down her spine.

“Then come here.” He reached out again and she walked forward, skirting the prone, spluttering gentlemen to put her hand in his. Araminta found herself lifted up until her foot found his, then she was sitting on the saddle in front of him.

His thighs, hard with muscle, supported her in the most delightful manner although the pommel of the saddle was rather obtrusive. If it was the pommel…

“Unhand her!” With a sound like a hundred boots being wrenched from thick mud, Mr Hodges rose to his feet. Dripping with stagnant water, his hat gone, his hair full of brambles and cow parsley, he looked like an indignant rural god wakened from his slumbers and ready to smite
whoever had disturbed him with something unpleasant. Cow pats, perhaps, Araminta mused, caught up in her own fantasy.

“Set down that lady immediately!” The curate had found the voice usually reserved for hell-fire sermons when the villagers had been particularly active at the ale house.

“Or?” the highwayman enquired politely.

The gelding sidled, and Araminta found herself clutching his coat to keep her balance. He smelled nice, she realised. Not like a sweaty, unwashed criminal. She breathed deeply: hay, plain soap, horse and warm man. *Yum.*

“Or… or…” Mr Hodges stuttered to a halt.

“Good day to you, gentlemen.” The highwayman inclined his head with mocking courtesy, turned the horse and cantered off down the lane with Araminta clinging to the lapels of his coat, her face pressed against his chest and her heart thudding with mingled excitement and alarm.

It could not have been more than five minutes before her captor turned off the lane into a little copse. In the centre was a glade, open to the blue sky and spangled with wild flowers. He slid her gently to the ground, dismounted and threw the reins over a branch.

“And now, Lady Araminta…”

He *did* know her name - it was not just a guess at her title. “What do you want of me?” she asked. Standing in front of her, he was tall, lightly built with a muscled grace and, she guessed, a little younger than the gentlemen who had been enlivening her walk home.

“Just something I have been aching for these past two years,” he murmured as he took her by the shoulders and drew her close. “Just one kiss.”

Her hands closed on his forearms. He was so close now his breath was warm on her lips. She could see the vivid blue of his eyes, the arch of dark brows beneath the sweep of his hat brim. Those eyes! Did she recognise them? And then he bent his head and she had to decide. Stay or run…?

**CHAPTER EIGHT** by Barbara Monajem
As if she had a choice! If she tried to run, the masked man would catch her in a trice, and besides that, what woman would flee a man with such a glint in his eye?

Glints must be a characteristic of dangerous, handsome men. Not that she knew whether the masked man was handsome. She would have to take that on faith. With those eyes, eyebrows, lips and manly chin, this wasn’t difficult. Thrills chased themselves up and down her spine. Desire rampaged through her. She closed her eyes and parted her lips for his kiss…

What was the dratted man waiting for?

At last his lips touched hers. A wave of nostalgia swept over her as he deepened the kiss. Ah, passionate kisses like this had been the best thing about marriage. How she missed them!

The sound of galloping hooves penetrated the haze of desire. The highwayman broke the kiss, and regretfully, she opened her eyes. Oh! It was Lord Torquil D for Domineering, riding the Duke’s stallion.

“How did you get a hold of that horse?” Araminta demanded crossly. “It galloped the other direction a while ago.”

Lord Torquil sprang from the saddle. “I whistled for him. He was mine before the Duke of Dashing won him from me by cheating at piquet.” He glared at the masked man. “Kissing the lady was not part of your mission. Unhand her, you rogue!” This order was entirely unnecessary, seeing as the masked man had already stepped away from her with a muffled curse.

Araminta stamped her foot. “What business is it of yours if he kisses me?”

Lord Torquil gave her a supercilious stare. “My dear Lady Ambleforth, this is Cheat-gallows Jim. I cannot permit such a man to kiss you.”

A blush of excitement swooped up her cheeks. “The Terror of Penenden Heath? How thrilling!”

The highwayman grinned and blew her a kiss. Which was all very well, but she wanted another real kiss! She pouted.

Lord Torquil huffed. “He’s also Brandywine Bob, leader of the notorious Medway River and Estuary Smuggling Consortium.”

Araminta clasped her hands to her breast. “A smuggler, too? You are a very busy man, sir!” How dare Lord Torquil Dictatorial order her about? She would never get a chance to be kissed by a smuggler dash highwayman again.
“I’m never too busy to kiss a lovely lady,” the masked man murmured. “And those are only
two of my aliases.”

More aliases? This man became more fascinating by the minute! “Tell me all about them,”
she purred.

“Definitely not!” Lord Torquil said. “That would be, er, unsuitable for a lady’s ears.”

“Come now,” said Jim, or should she think of him as Bob? “Surely we can trust Lady
Ambleforth. You’re a patriotic Englishwoman, aren’t you, sweetheart?”

Sweetheart? Now that was going too far. “Just because I allowed you to k—” Belatedly, it
dawned on her what he had just said. “What has patriotism got to do with it?”

Lord Torquil drew himself up to his full height. His hair was disheveled from the fistfight,
his breeches were muddy, and a sprig of cow parsley clung to his collar, all of which made him
far less impressive than before. “This is for your ears only, Lady Ambleforth. I am in the service
of England, and this fellow is my assistant. We are in pursuit of a dastardly French spy.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “The one who purposely damaged my phaeton, I suppose?”

“Precisely. He seeks to use you for his own diabolical ends.”

Araminta crossed her arms. “And why would I believe the word of a disgraced man?”

Lord Torquil stiffened. “It’s the word of an Englishman, dash it all.”

She tapped her foot and glowered at the highwayman. “Or that of a criminal?”

The masked man grinned. “Some of my aliases are respectable, but they are all in the service
of the Crown, as are Lord Torquil’s layers upon layers of disgrace.”

Lord Torquil grunted. “Believe me, it’s not easy for a duke’s son to get himself cut off from
family, banned by society, forced into seclusion in a godforsaken backwater—”

“Seclusion?” Araminta blushed at the thought of Lord Torquil and his voluptuous mistress
ensconced in the ivy-covered mansion on the hill.

“Dear lady, if you knew how much it cost me—or rather, the Crown—to persuade my
mistress to rusticate in Kent… Where was I?”

“At your layers of disgrace.” The highwayman winked at Araminta.

“Ah, yes,” Lord Torquil said. “After a number of increasingly worse scandals, my family
finally cast me off for setting up as a fishmonger. But in the service of one’s country, one must
make sacrifices, even if it means smelling of the shop.”

“Literally.” Jim-Bob wrinkled his nose.
“As you well know from hiding kegs of brandy under rotting fish!” Lord Torquil retorted. “But that’s neither here nor there. We must whisk you to safety, Lady Ambleforth. Any moment now the spy may catch up with us and charm you into believing he is another loyal Englishman.”

A shot rang out!

CHAPTER NINE by Annie Burrows

The highwayman's horse proved that it was indeed Ed Deppity's nervous gelding, by rearing, tearing its reins free from their loose tethers, and galloping off again.

Straight towards where they were standing.

“Look out!” The highwayman shoved Araminta out of the way as the gelding went galloping past. She caught her heel on a tree root, tripped, grabbed at his coat to save herself from falling, and brought him down on top of her.

There was another shot, and the sound of a bullet thunking into the tree trunk above their heads.

And then a voice that sounded familiar, roared, “Get off her!”

Lord Torquil loomed over them then, grabbed his associate by the coat collar, and yanked him to his hands and knees.

But it was not his voice she'd heard.

“You too! Step away from her!”

All three of them turned their heads in the direction the shots and the voice had come from.

It was Jack! Her groom held a smoking pistol in each hand, his face grim.

“You let my Lady up,” he snarled.

The highwayman glanced up at Lord Torquil, who still had his fingers curled into his coat collar.

“He's fired both of those pistols,” he murmured softly without moving his lips.

“Just what I was thinking,” replied Lord Torquil.
Lord Torquil raised his hands in the air. The highwayman scrambled to his feet. They exchanged a look, which boded ill for her groom.

She opened her mouth to shout a warning, but the fall to the ground, or the landing on top of her of a large and muscular rogue, had combined to knock the breath out of her. All she managed was an agonized wheeze as the pair of reprobates launched themselves at her hapless groom.

Though Jack was outnumbered and outranked, he stood his ground. Dropping his pistols, he just had time to raise his fists before the others reached him.

Araminta groaned. Not another mill! Why must men always be fighting?

She had to get to her feet unaided. And as she did so, she discovered that her skirt was torn. Her bottom lip quivered. She'd lost a shoe when the highwayman had forced her onto his horse, she'd sacrificed her expensive bonnet to the cause of peace in the lane, and now this!

She'd had enough of adventures.

And of men.

With a little sob, she made her way across the clearing, entirely unobserved since the three combatants were dancing round each other in the bracken, arms whirling like windmill sails.

She paused to remove her one shoe before setting out on a path she thought she recognized, for her husband had often brought her on walks or rides out this way. She flung it angrily towards the men—not that they took a blind bit of notice of her.

But at least the sound of grunts crashes and thumps swiftly faded as she made her way, barefoot, deeper into the woods.

Why they had all pretended to be so interested in her? It was obvious they were all far more keen on besting each other.

There was something havey-cavey going on around these parts. In which some, or all of them, were involved up to their necks.

Not that she believed in Lord Torquil's tales of smugglers and French spies. She tossed her head and laughed rather wildly. She might have believed him, had he not claimed to have opened a fishmonger’s. He was more or less admitting his story was fishy. And after that, she wondered how on earth his accomplice, Jim or Bob or whatever he called himself, could possibly claim he was serving the crown by robbing innocent people travelling the King's highway. When he wasn't running brandy, that was. She might never have travelled beyond the borders of Kent, but that did not make her an idiot.
There was something decidedly smoky about that Duke, too. He could not stop talking about money, which her mama had taught her was vulgar. Could a Duke really be that vulgar?

And come to think of it, what was Jack doing lurking about the woods with those pistols? He should have been half way to Midbury by now, seeing to the repair of her phaeton.

As for Ed Deppity...an image of that naked torso rising from the water flashed into her mind, slowing her steps. Her lips curved into a pensive smile. For the moment, she would acquit him of being anything except too attractive for his own good.

Besides, she'd cheered up now that she'd escaped from the Dastardly Torquil and his accomplice with many names.

And escape them she had. Just down the next dip in the path lay a cleverly concealed entrance to a secret tunnel. A secret tunnel which would take her right back to Ambleforth House.

Oh, but they would be mad as fire when they came searching for her, she thought gleefully, as she ducked behind the trunk of a gnarled old oak tree, and brushed aside a curtain of ivy.

CHAPTER TEN by Elaine Golden

Araminta had made it some considerable distance into the tunnel before she realized that it was already occupied. What should have been a darkened cavern was aglow in rushlight, and the sound of unintelligible male voices rumbled from around the bend ahead.

What was this? The tunnel shouldn’t be in use, shouldn’t be known by anyone in the vicinity so far as she knew. Years ago, when her husband had shown her the hidden entryway, it had been filled with nothing more than cobwebs and stagnant, musty air. It had been merely the curious remnant of a bygone era and ancestor, crafted to ensure the owners of Ambleforth House (or some hapless Catholic priest) had an escape route should the need arise.

Had that Jim-Bob highwayman set up a smuggler’s den in her secret passageway? Well, that wouldn’t do at all!
With grim determination, she started forward and then abruptly halted as she recalled Lord Torquil’s intimation that there was a French spy operating in the area. Somehow, that seemed ever much more sinister than a mere brandy-runner’s operation. Because everyone knew that brandy was *l’eau de vie*—the water of life—and there wasn’t a drawing room in England that didn’t continue to serve it, trade embargo against Napoleon notwithstanding. So, really, smugglers were serving the common good, at least to Araminta’s way of thinking.

Should she at least try to determine what nefarious activity was taking place, or should she trust that Lord Torquil’s fishmonger tale wasn’t the mad fiction it seemed and seize the chance to slip away and alert the others? Oh, and where had she lost her pretty parasol? Even as filthy and tattered as her dress now was, it would at least have served as some sort of weapon to defend herself should the need arise…again.

As was always the case, curiosity got the better of Araminta, and she tiptoed further until she could peer around the sharp bend. Then nearly gasped aloud and revealed herself.

Nearly a dozen men were sprawled about, some playing cards or chatting, some eating, and some apparently trying to sleep atop the wooden crates that lined the corridor. And, now that she could make out that they spoke to each other in French (and there were no telltale barrels of brandy lying about) it seemed she’d found the spy. Or spies, as the case may be.

“Oh, dear me. Now, what’s to be done about this?”

Araminta spun around, heart racing and eyes wide. How could he move so quietly?

“Mr. Hodges! How did you—? There’s a—” She vocalized her jumbled thoughts even as the truth dawned. It was inconceivable that the curate could have simply stumbled upon the tunnel. He had to have known it was here, had to have a reason to be here now, which meant…

He snorted as if it were all so very obvious and mopped his brow, the well-used handkerchief now as muddy as his coat from his tumble in the ditch.

“So, you’re the French spy?” Really, it didn’t seem at all possible. Why, Mr. Hodges seemed as British as Yorkshire pudding. Was the ineptitude merely an act?

“Oh, no, indeed.” He moved closer, filling the tunnel with his portentous self, and Araminta began to fear that she would be unable to slip by. She was well and truly trapped. “I’m just along for the coin, shall we say. I’m done with coddling helpless souls and living a threadbare existence.”
Araminta gasped, outrage overtaking the feeling of alarm. What a selfish, hateful man. He didn’t deserve his loving, devoted congregation. She would take up the task to see him dismissed as curate the very moment she arrived home!

“Qu’est-ce que c’est?” murmured a deep voice behind her and she turned to find that the occupants of the tunnel had noticed their presence and drawn close. Thankfully, they merely peered at her in curiosity, not as if they’d skewer her for stumbling upon their nest of intrigue.

And, it would seem she was a veritable lech today. For, in truth, they were all very young and virile and…oh, my! She blinked then blinked again. They all looked alike, as if they were brothers, and most considerably like—

“Your Grace! There you are!” Hodges said as he stepped aside to reveal the Duke of Dashing in all of his now dusty finery, hair a mess and brow furrowed in annoyance as he looked from Araminta to the cluster of men behind her and back to Araminta. He sighed heavily.

“Well, my dear Lady Ambleforth, it appears you’ve stumbled onto something you oughtn’t. Something that Hodges was tasked with keeping you from. It grieves me to find you here; I had another use planned for you.” He reached past her for something, and then he stepped back, a pistol gleaming dully in his hand. “It would appear you have met my cousins.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN by Julia Justiss

It took a moment before Araminta recognized the only reason that could account for the Duke’s presence in the tunnel. “You are the French spy?” she gasped. “Or…spies?” she added, looking around at the cousins.

“We are Dashings; what could we be but French?” the Duke replied. “A land that has always been the epitome of culture, fashion and a certain je ne sais quoi elegance. Though I am not at all happy about the depredations the job plays upon one’s wardrobe.”

“Pays well enough to purchase new, though,” one of the cousins remarked.
At that, fury at their comments and the fact of having had, for the second time in the same day, a pistol drawn upon her, overcame Araminta’s better judgement. Heedless of her safety, she turned on them in rage.

“Mr. Hodges, have you no shame? A vicar, abandoning the succor of innocent souls for lure of filthy lucre? And you, your Grace, a peer of the realm! How could you—all of you”—she gestured toward the cousins, “repay your country so? I wouldn’t allow you to rescue me, even if you had your white destrier here!”

“I think you’ve said quite enough,” the Duke retorted. “So, what am I to do with our lovely, albeit tattered, prize, gentlemen? I’d thought to charm her into agreeing to allow us the continued use of this tunnel.”

“You thought to charm me into treason?” Araminta exclaimed. “How could you believe such a thing possible?”

“Well, I am a Duke, which means I can charm any female. Indeed, usually they fall at my feet, or onto their backs, at the mere mention of my title. Don’t you find it so?” he asked, turning to address his cousins.


“Aside from the possession of vast estates, numerous manors, countless hounds and horses, armies of servants to do our bidding, and immense wealth,” Dashing observed.

“How could you play the spy against a country that provides all that for you?” Araminta demanded.

“Country didn’t provide it,” the Duke objected. “We got it by being Dashing. And dukely. ‘Tis the same, after all, but that’s neither here nor there. Now that you’ve stumbled upon us before I had the chance to seduce you into acquiescence, I fear I shall have to remove you, as we do any impediment that gets in our way. Do we not, gentlemen?” he asked, waving the pistol negligently toward his cousins.

Fear belatedly chilled Araminta, and she regretted her bold talk. Should she attempt to fall at the Duke’s feet—she no longer felt inclined to fall on her back—and try to charm him into letting her go with some false protestations about a sudden conversion to their cause?

Before she could decide, she heard—once again—the unmistakable click of pistols being cocked.
From out of the gloomy rushlight, a stranger walked forward with a pistol in each hand, one trained upon the Duke, the other upon Hodges.

“Free the lady, your Grace, and neither you nor Hodges move, or this breath will be your last.”

Hodges cowered, but the Duke merely laughed. “Have you forgotten I am still armed? Shall I shoot you now, or let my cousins disarm you? Thirteen—or rather twelve now—against one are odds that favor me, sir.”

“You’ll get no help from them; I drugged their brandy,” the intrepid stranger replied. Indeed, as Araminta peered into the gloom, she discovered the assorted Duke-of-Dashing look-alikes had all dozed off.

“At this range, I can blow a hole through you before you can get that pistol back into firing position,” he warned as the Duke made a motion to raise his weapon.

Upon closer inspection, though well-built, dark-haired and ruggedly handsome, the Duke’s challenger did not resemble him as much as she’d initially thought. As he stood there, stoutly defending her, his aura of powerful masculinity nearly palpable, Araminta felt faint, while heat rushed to her nether regions.

Instinctively she knew a lady who fell on her back for him would end up very satisfied indeed. Lusty images of the two of them, their limbs entangled in the gloom, invaded her mind. Trembling, she tried to shut them out. Oh, what had come over her today?

To divert herself, she cried, “Who are you, then, sir?”

“Andrew Dubois Eugene Deepwater, corsair by trade,” he replied. “Though my ship and Caribbean crew are now signed on to serve the Crown.”

She gasped again as the meaning of his words penetrated. “You are a…pirate, you mean?”

The Duke grunted. “Thought you didn’t look that familiar. Shouldn’t have believed that story of your being the by-blow of Great Aunt Thelma’s cousin’s sister’s runaway youngest son, but how was I to know? You speak French so beautifully! And with so many cousins and all of them Dukes, how can I be expected to keep track of them?”

Ignoring Dashing’s complaining, Deepwater replied, “Though some have called me ‘pirate,’ I prefer to think of myself as a sea-going adventure capitalist. In any event, I do my sailing at the bidding of England now, and I’ve been tracking this bunch of ne’er-do-wells for some time.”

“You are in league with Lord Torquil and Jim, er Bob, the highwayman, then?”
Deepwater gave a disgusted huff. “Torquil’s been too distracted by his voluptuous mistress to be of much help, and Bob too attracted by profits from smuggling and fish. But the work is finished now. You two,” he inclined his weapons toward Dashing and Hodges, “back into the corner with the rest. And I’ll have that pistol, Dashing.”

“Never!” the Duke roared.

Unflinching, Deepwater merely replied softly, “Loath as I am to distress a lady, move that hand another inch upward, Dashing, and I’ll shoot you where you stand. And don’t think to flee,” he warned Hodges. “I’m perfectly capable of shooting with deadly accuracy from both pistols at once. How do you think I captured the many prize ships that have made me so fabulously wealthy?”

While Hodges whimpered, Deepwater and Dashing glared at each other. After a moment, the Duke, apparently realizing neither his rank nor his wealth nor his charm would allow him to prevail against the privateer, carefully laid down his weapon.

“Never dreamt a duke could be bested by a pirate,” he said sulkily. “And one not even truly related!”

Advancing slowly, Deepwater backed the two men into the alcove containing the Duke’s gently-snoring cousins.

Tossing her a quick glance over his shoulder, he said, “Won’t you come with me and give testimony about the sabotage of your carriage, the plot you’ve uncovered, the men you’ve discovered to be involved, and the wreckage of your parasol?”

“If we leave, won’t they simply flee?” she asked.

“I’ve contrived a way to seal off the tunnel; it’s already barred at the Ambleforth House end. There’s food and water here, enough for them to rest snugly until we return with the authorities.”

“Rush him!” the Duke snarled to Hodges.

“Impossible!” Hodges wailed. “I’m much too overheated already to run!”

In the next instant, Deepwater tossed down one of his pistols, which fired in the direction of the Duke, halting him in mid-stride. Grabbing her arm, the corsair raced with her toward the tunnel’s secret entrance.

Just before they reached it, he halted abruptly and kicked at a bracing timber. With a creaking groan, the tunnel ceiling buckled, then fell in a rush of dirt, debris and crashing beams. As the dust settled behind them, Deepwater led her out into the daylight.
“So, my lovely lady, will you come with me? Make for the ship I’ve stationed in the river, sail to London and present this vital evidence before the Crown? The courageous Lady Ambleforth, who thwarted a clever secret ring of British aristocrats spying for the French, would be the toast of the capitol. And Queen of my heart,” he added in a murmur.

Araminta stood irresolute, a hand to her throat where the pulse beat wildly. What should she do?

Abandon caution and go to London with this dashing pirate-turned-King’s-agent?
Find Sir Ed and beg the devilishly attractive local entrepreneur—she had another vision of him rising, naked, from the pond—to escort her safely back to Ambleforth, where she could write out an account of what she’d learned for Deepwater to present to the authorities, while she recuperated from the excitement of today’s adventure?
Claim one last kiss from Jim-Bob before she became respectable Lady Ambleforth again, and returned home to discover whether Groom Jack should be rewarded for rushing to her aid—or sacked for aiding the Duke’s sabotage scheme?

As she debated, Deepwater kept his smouldering gaze fixed upon her.

CHAPTER TWELVE by Ann Lethbridge

Thoughts racing, Araminta stepped out of the tunnel into bright daylight. A broad shouldered fellow blocked her path. Dazzled after the dimness in the tunnel, she blinked. Her mouth dried. Her head spun. While the strong physique resembled that of the highwayman she’d kissed minutes before, the unmasked features slowly taking shape were those of...

“Gabriel?” Her knees gave way. Darkness swallowed her up.

Seconds later she came to her senses cradled in a pair of strong arms and sitting once more on those delectably strong thighs. But looking down at her anxiously was the face of her... her dead husband. “No,” she whispered, shaking her head. “Who are you? Some long lost relative come to claim the title?”
He groaned. “Minna. Oh dearest Minna, forgive me, I did not wish to alarm you. I felt sure you would guess it was me when we kissed.”

Well yes, the kiss had felt achingly familiar, and no one else ever called her Minna, but... “You died. I went to your funeral. I wept.” She struggled in his arms. “What is this? Some sort of horrid jest?”

“Please, darling, let me explain.” He took a deep shuddering breath. “And then if you cannot forgive me, you will never have to see me again.”

Never had she seen her stern husband so anxious. He who had been as cold as granite and twice as strong. She stilled in his arms. “Very well, explain.” She folded her arms across her chest.

“Remember our last conversation. When you railed against my wrapping you in cotton wool, keeping you from having any fun?”

She winced. She’d been feeling very guilty about what she’d said that last time. Even if it had been the truth. “I remember,” she said far more calmly than her racing heart would suggest.

“That day, I realized how selfish I’d been. The first time I saw you, a chit barely out of the schoolroom, I knew I wanted you as my wife. You were the one. So lovely. So full of life. How could I let you loose on the town and risk losing you to some other fellow with far more address, far more charm? Look at the way these other men fell at your feet today.” He glowered, then straightened his shoulders, which seemed broader and more muscular than before. “That day, you showed me how wrong I’d been. Losing my parents at such a young age made me overprotective. Unable to bear the idea of losing you too, I locked you up in an ivory tower, guarding you from harm. I should have trusted you.”

“Yes, you should have. I am not a possession. I am a person.”

He took her hand in his and kissed the inside of her wrist. “A clever, spirited and lovely person.” He looked up at her, his eyes full of regret, and if she wasn’t mistaken, somewhat misty. Her heart gave an unsteady lurch.

“That day, I knew I had to make amends,” he said.

She stared at him, shocked. “So you faked your death?”

“I was so ashamed. I...” His voice became husky. “I loved you so much. And I had treated you so badly. I wanted you to have your heart’s desire. The freedom you craved. To choose the man of your heart.”
“Oh, Gabriel,” she whispered. “Then why all this, today?”

He closed his eyes briefly. “I’m a new man. I’ve made a life in America based on my abilities. But God, Minna darling, I can’t take much joy in it. Not without you. When Silverthorne told me you’d not danced on my grave and not found yourself a new man, I had hope. Still, I was determined you should have your choice.” His chest rose and fell. “You can choose any of these fine men. Honourable. Good friends. Or at least, any but the Dashing cousins. They are a lot of loose screws. Or you can go to London and have your pick. I won’t stand in your way, but I wanted a second chance. To be in the running. To tell you how much I loved you.”

A spurt of indignation coursed through her. “So what happened today was all staged?”

“Not entirely. Those men have adored you from afar for ages. But it was what you said you wanted. Life. Adventure. Freedom to be yourself. And very daring you were too. Kissing a highwayman.”

She raised a brow. “I notice you were the only one who offered a kiss.”

“The others knew they’d be dead if they tried anything of the sort,” he said with a rueful smile. “But whoever you chose, I would abide by the decision. I’m not coming back, Minna. Gabriel, Lord Ambleforth is gone. I’m simply Gabe Blackhawk now, trapper and hunter extraordinaire, farmer. And I am begging you to be my wife, my partner, my own true love.”

Her eyes felt hot and pricked with tears. “Oh, Gabe, I realized how much I loved you only once you were gone. It broke my heart that I never told you, not once, how I felt. You were always so distant. So self-assured. I always felt like a silly schoolgirl.”

“Not silly. Beloved. I was an idiot. Bound by the stupid rules of the ton that never let me tell you how much I truly loved you,” he whispered brokenly, his heart in his eyes. “Kiss me, darling girl, say you forgive me and will be mine henceforth.”

“I do, Gabe. I will.” She reached up and did something she would never have dared in the old days. She kissed him full on the lips, with all the passion she could muster.

When they finally came up for air she glanced around. “Where is Deepwater? Oh, and what about all those poor men, trapped in the tunnel?”

He had the grace to look shamefaced. “The other end was never closed. We couldn’t kill off all those Dukes, now, could we? They are all in the Great Hall at Ambleforth, awaiting your decision. If they haven’t killed each other.”
A laugh bubbled up and she set it free. “You have some very good friends, Mr. Blackhawk.”

“Mmm,” he murmured nibbling on her ear. “And by the way, Silverthorne’s D stands for devoted friend. As I am devoted to you, my dearest darling heart of my soul.”

Joy filled her smile. “Dear Gabe. Thank you for my splendidous afternoon. Now let us free the rest of your cast of characters and set sail for a new adventure, just you and me, together. For the rest of our lives.”

“Darling Minna, I do not deserve you, but I am far too selfish to give you up.” On that he rose, and side by side they wandered off, hand in hand, with only the occasional kiss to delay their progress as they started their lives anew.

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An army brat born in England, Ann lived all over Britain. Her first love is the Georgian era, and within that, the period known as the long Regency and has twelve full-length novels and nine short stories in print and digital. Now living in Canada, she has a husband and two lovely daughters and a Maltese Terrier called Teaser, who likes to sit on a chair beside the computer while she works. You can find details of her books at [www.annlethbridge.com](http://www.annlethbridge.com) or at her blog [www.regencyramble.blogspot.com](http://www.regencyramble.blogspot.com).

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