

Mr. Felcher's Grand Emporium

Eric Alan Westfall



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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

MR. FELCHER'S GRAND EMPORIUM

By Eric Alan Westfall

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Mr. Felcher's Grand Emporium

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MR. FELCHER'S GRAND EMPORIUM

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Photo Description

Ah. Hmmm. Let's put it this way. The photo is a composite of six actual nineteenth-century photos, each showing two men enjoying themselves in most deliciously flagrante delicto manner: a supporting chair, a numbered pair, a doggy's pride, a horseman's ride, a side slide so fair, a leg in the air. More specific? Well, then: fucking over a chair, 69, dog-style fucking, straddle fucking, side fucking, leg in the air fucking. Specific enough?

Story Letter

Dear Author,

When I received the following letter from my dearest friend, Lord Fotherby, I was rather intrigued:

Dear Lord Smythe

I would be most honoured to receive the pleasure of your company at Mr. Felcher's Photographic Emporium on the 5th day of this month, 1882. This grand fellow specialises in 'Gentlemanly portraiture' in the relaxed surroundings of his London studio and has come highly recommended by my intrepid manservant, who has most diligently assessed Mr. Felcher's credentials at my request.

He reports that the gentleman is extremely thorough in his attention to detail and in the pursuit of a most pleasurable outcome for all of his photographic clients. Using only the most up-to-date technology, he captures images of gentlemen engaging in the most gentlemanly of gentlemanly pursuits.

Yours sincerely,

Lord Fotherby

I would love for Lord Smythe and Lord Fotherby to be deeply and passionately in love with each other, but oblivious to their feelings due to their total sexual repression. A couple of clueless virgins awakened to the pleasures of man-on-man action would be great. And lots of explicit sex, using old-

fashioned language i.e. members, seed etc. Oh, and no need for great attention to detail with regards to historical accuracy as long as it has a Victorian feel to it. But straight up historical please (not steampunk, fantasy, paranormal etc.)

Feel free to change names etc.

Regards,

Danni

Story Info

Genre: historical, Another England

Tags: first time, clueless noblemen, sex in a carriage without marriage, humorous, masturbation, the wanton wetness of one-time watersports, public activity with others, friends to lovers, slow burn, the fascination of fine and fervent felching, a clock of armchair cocks, SMMSLT

Warnings: A *long* novel, nearly always, but not entirely, in alternating first person points of view. A style intended to give the flavor of Victorian England in 1882. Some wit, some wisdom, some flowery language, too.

Word Count: 201,655

Acknowledgements

A Hearty Round of Cyber-Applause to:

Un agradecimiento especial a Roberto Quintero y S.J. Eller

La mayoría de las veces, cuando usted está dando las gracias a un artista para crear una pintura original de su libro, usted está dándole las gracias o ella tomar su descripción de tu personaje (s) y hacer que él / ellos “cobran vida” en la pintura.

Roberto hizo por Emporium con estilo y brillo.

Lo hizo otra cosa que creo que es mucho más importante.

Puso Reggie (bigote) y Harry (pelo rojo) en una pose yo nunca habría pensado, pero que capturó su espíritu perfectamente. Y al hacerlo, él me inspiró a escribir una de las escenas cruciales en su camino hacia felices para siempre. Tal vez, incluso, la escena más importante del libro.

Es un momento que yo no podría haber llegado con mi cuenta, gracias a Roberto, este libro es mucho, mucho mejor de lo que debería haber sido.

Estoy extraordinariamente afortunado de haber encontrado un artista increíble para ayudarme.

Yo era igual de afortunado de haber encontrado font-finder extraordinario: S.J. Eller. Su elección no era demasiado grande, ni demasiado pequeño, pero justo en todos los sentidos.

A Special Thanks to Roberto Quintero and S.J. Eller

Most of the time, when you are thanking an artist for creating an original painting for your book, you are thanking him or her taking your description of your character(s) and making him/them “come alive” in the painting.

Roberto did that for *Emporium* with style and brilliance.

He did something else that I think is far more important.

He put Reggie (mustache) and Harry (red hair) in a pose I never would have thought of, but which captured their spirits perfectly. And in doing so, he inspired me to write one of the pivotal scenes in their journey to happily ever after. Perhaps, even, the most important scene in the book.

It's a moment that I couldn't possibly have come up with on my own, and thanks to Roberto, this book is far, far better than it would otherwise have been.

I am extraordinarily lucky to have found such an amazing artist to help me.

I was equally lucky to have found font-finder extraordinaire: S.J. Eller. Her choice was not too big, not too small, but just right in every way.

An Equally Special and Profoundly Grateful Thanks To Danni

The composite photo she provided is made up of six actual vintage photographs that I'd seen before. Several times. <ahem!>

Yet I'm absolutely certain this novel would never have existed without the brilliance of Danni's prompt. She gave me the book title almost instantly; she gave me the concept shortly after (six photos, six visits), she gave me remarkable heroes who named themselves, just as she gave me the letter that started everything off between Harry and Reggie. Without that combination, I could never have put it together.

Thank you, dear lady.

Beta Readers (Without Whom Nothing Good Would Ever Get Done):

In alphabetical order: Anna, Kezia and Rebecca.

But please remember, if I did not adopt their suggestions, as with other authors, "The fault, dear readers, is not in our betas, but in ourselves..."

The Penultimate Thanks! to:

Raevyn, one of the moderators who doesn't really care all that much for historicals, but who took on the daunting task of editing all those words. Commas in, commas out, em dashes here, ellipses there, why did you say this when a hundred pages earlier you said thus-and-so, and most important of all, the dreaded: CMOS doesn't permit *that*!

Thanks for your patience with my delays, your understanding, and the brilliance of your help.

And though they're used to being last on the list, perhaps, they're far, *far* from least:

The moderators, editors, formatters, proofreaders, and all those whose functions I don't know, without whose superb volunteer efforts "Don't Read in the Closet" would never have been born, and never have lasted so long and so well. Thanks for helping to inflict me on the MM romance world (though the world may never forgive you). Mercy buckets!

MR. FELCHER'S GRAND EMPORIUM

or

The Adventures of a Pair of Spares in the Fine Art
of Gentlemanly Portraiture

By Eric Alan Westfall

ANOTHER ENGLAND

For want of a nail...

But... what if the nail had not been lost?

What if...

On a fog-fading beach on the English side of the Channel, three men stood apart from the baker's dozen who waited impatiently for the three to be done. Four kept the oars of the not-quite-beached jolly boat ready for a rapid departure, a fifth stood knee-deep in the surf, a thick, muscular arm keeping the bow steady. The sixth, the fugitive's loyal companion, was already in the boat. Numbers seven through thirteen formed a ragged arc around the landing site, two watching the boat and the trio, the rest with their backs to the water, weapons raised, watching and listening for any who might have followed.

Two of the trio spoke quietly a few feet away from the third. The third was a fox harrowed by the hounds after the disaster at Worcester, hunted across England, but now escape was imminent. At least once he took the requisite steps into the water, then clambered into the stern as elegantly as an exhausted, wounded man might climb, so he could be rowed quickly to the ship that would spirit him away to France and safety. The other two would stay behind, waiting to serve again at need. Of all there, only these three were certain there *would* be a need, though not soon.

But before that wait could begin with a departure, there was a question that had been asked, but not answered. The fugitive became impatient, demanding a response with an insistence borne of entitlement. The taller of the pair turned to face the third, bent slightly forward, spread his hands in a smaller, tighter version of a formal bow to higher rank. Straightened.

Major Charles Alexander Beaumont, eldest son of Baron Weston, looked once more to his left at Captain Edward Matthews, second son of a London innkeeper, paused, and found something in the other's expression that brought a glimmer of a smile to the edge of his lips. The captain nodded so briefly it

might have been missed, but the third man, the fugitive who watched and waited, did not miss either the smile or the nod.

The major, who had faced each moment of that battle, and every moment of the escape, without hesitation, hesitated then. He inhaled slowly, and then let the breath flow out. He looked once more to the man beside him and answered the question. "I am a friend of Edward's... a *special* friend of Edward's, and I should prefer not to die because of whom I love."

That was *not* the answer the fugitive expected... not when the usual response to that offer was a request for honors, title, wealth, land, a boon for some future need. Unusual, indeed, but in his eyes, not unreasonable at all. He nodded.

The pair swept him another bow, formal, deep, with all the requisite flourishes protocol required, expressing appreciation of a promise made, but without the slightest hint of obsequiousness. To the watchers, however, it was merely the major and the captain bending their upper bodies forward a degree or two, perhaps a little farther than before, their heads briefly down, their eyes perhaps contemplating sand, salt water, perhaps a trio of ruined boots, before becoming upright again.

As the oars pulled deep and swift to get the jolly boat to the ship, the shore component of the baker's dozen scattered to the winds. The major and the captain mounted, rode, but stopped their horses at the top of the slope leading down to the beach, watching and waiting to be certain the sails bellied out and the wind carried him away. When the ship began to move, so did they.

And then there were none.

But what if... in the glorious days not long after 29 May 1660, Charles II kept his promise?

What if... in the heady days of the Restoration, when the King could do no wrong, he persuaded Parliament to end the death penalty for sodomy, and repeal the laws themselves?

What if... 222 years later, in the 45th year of the reign of Her Majesty, By the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland Queen, Defender of the Faith, and Empress of India, there was still... another England?

PRELUDE

*4 June 1882, 4:30 p.m.
37 Preston Street
London*

The manacles and chain which had connected his right wrist to his right ankle, and the other set for left to left, were, of course, quite easily removed. He stretched his lean, muscular arms above his head, then lowered them in a sweeping motion to the height of his definitely impressive, wide shoulders. Elbows out, fingers entwined, joined hands not quite touching the center of his chest, he twisted from side to side as if he might turn all the way around, then another upward stretch, back arched so his hips thrust forward. His far-from-soft cock swayed and jutted with his movements.

The swaying and the jutting were the point of the movements, of course. The positions he had been in this last little while had not been so onerous as to require stretching to alleviate any strain. But he knew the other men in the room would enjoy the sight. As they did.

But there was business to finish.

He glanced over and saw the first of three guineas dropped into a waiting palm, heard the slight *clink!* when the second two landed. The somewhat soft pale fingers curled around them. At the door there was a pause, a look back over a shoulder, though with his length and girth it was inevitable that the look was to prick first, masked face second.

Then the mask, as if it was something separate from him. In a literal sense, of course, it was. It was thin, soft, soft leather—more of a hood, really—molded to his face down to a line from his nose across his cheeks, and back to his ears, molded to his head, entirely covering his hair. The color was so close to that of his flesh not everyone realized there *was* a mask, the first time they saw the images.

Even those who were *in* the images with him sometimes didn't notice immediately. You have other things on your mind when a cock that size is making its way up your arse or down your throat. And they all wanted a look, "just a peek, I won't tell anyone," but for reasons quite obvious to himself and perhaps to the man handing out the coins, he never agreed.

Only one man had tried to pull the mask off. He'd begged to be fucked on his back, instead of on all fours as they had usually done, and while they were holding a pose for a close-up he'd reached up to try to tug it off. "It was only a game," "It was just for fun," he had whined while the bruise on the right side of his face—left forearm knocking the grabbing arm and hand away, left hand continuing the swing out and then back to land a hard, flat-palmed blow—was being treated. Point made. No one ever tried again, except with words.

His ruminations had been rapid. There was no discernible delay in acknowledging that look from the doorway with a smile. He was given a hesitant one in return. Really, Archibald had a most delicious, plump arse, and he would have enjoyed a more lingering, sumptuous feast between those cheeks. Ah, had they but world enough... and so forth.

He changed the look slightly, hinting at that very possibility, if one wanted to interpret the look in that fashion. Archibald did. With a brightened smile, and a not-quite-effective swirl of robes, the white monk left the room.

More money changed hands, this time into his. Notes, not coin. Carefully counted... no offense offered, none taken. In these endeavors, trust was a required commodity, but trust only went so far when currency was involved. Mathematics done, he walked over to the table where he had carefully laid out his clothes, and tucked the money in a jacket pocket.

He carefully removed the mask, folded it, slid it into the small case he used for carrying it. He stepped to one side, poured water from the ewer into a shallow bowl, leaned forward and used both hands to splash water on his face. Upright, he let the water drip from cheeks and chin as he ran his fingers through his thick, curly hair, getting it back into its customary shape after having been crushed under the hood.

There was no need, really, for him to put his back to the table as he used the towel to dry his face. Other than the knowledge that the man with the coins was watching, enjoying, *appreciating*. There was no need, really, as he toweled the light sheen of sweat—he did not perspire all that much to begin with—for him to raise his left arm, tilt his head, and sniff loudly enough in the direction of his

armpit to be heard by anyone interested enough to listen. No reason, other than the man watching was an *aficionado* of smells, one who loved exploring the smells of a man there... and elsewhere. One might even describe him as obsessed, if one was stupid enough to express that thought aloud and deal with the consequences.

Given the heat he and the monk had generated in a series of poses, the money man was erect and leaking. Visibly so. An almost inevitable aftermath when *he* was being photographed. But there would be no slaking of lusts between them. Theirs was a strictly financial arrangement, though there was nothing in that agreement which prevented the money man from being *inspired* by what he directed to happen.

His staff knew what he was like after a photography session, so perhaps he had already selected the one he would use. Or perhaps he would just grab the nearest one, take him to a reading room, bend him over the chair and fuck him roughly.

He grinned at the other man as he finished his drying with a sweep and a squeeze to his cock and balls that plumped him up just a little.

Turning yet again, he began putting his clothes on. As with the stretching, and the sniffing, and the drying, and the plumping, it was not necessary at all that he turn around after his trousers were up around his waist, so that the placement of cock beneath the cloth, unburdened by smalls, could be observed and appreciated, just as the rest of him had been.

Shirt buttoned, he walked over to the mirror and watched himself tie a scarf neatly about his neck. It was, after all, technically his half-day off, so he did not bother with the formality of a cravat. He shrugged himself into his jacket, checked the adjustment of his cock, and then turned to his... what?

His other employer? In a sense, but they were something more than merely employer-employee, though something less than full partners. But precise definitions were really rather unimportant so long as the relationship worked well. This one was working well so far, and presently had the potential for going far beyond the level of merely "well." He waited for the expected question.

"And are matters proceeding?"

"Of course."

"How soon?"

"You know there is no precise timeline possible."

"Bloody hell! Not even a hint?"

He held back the smile that might have been perceived as possibly disdainful. Let out a different one that was both amused and commiserative. "Not even a hint."

There was a tiny pause as he waited for the expected rejoinder. And got it.

"This could be quite profitable, you know. For both of us."

"Why else would I be doing it?" Why, indeed. Though there *was* another reason he was not about to divulge. He saw no reason not to mix pleasure with profit, or *vice versa*. There was most assuredly a fair amount of vice involved. And with luck aided by proper planning, perhaps even more pleasure.

The tone of the response held slightly more than a ha'penny's worth of exasperation. "Well, you could be a bit less of the turtle and more of the hare, you know."

"I will do my best, sir." He gave a slight bow, only a bit mocking, and used the final word to adjust his thoughts to the necessities of his destination.

"Hold your copies until you call for them?"

"Of course. I rather doubt the Crown would approve of them traveling by post."

And then, with none of the usual parting amenities, he turned and left by the same door as the monk.

He maneuvered with experienced accuracy through the near labyrinth of doors and corridors to the exit he'd chosen, and once outside in the alley, he paused and looked up at the dark grey clouds beginning to cover the sun. The weather forecast called for an unusually wet June, though less so in London. The accuracy of the prediction—or not, indeed, far too often *not*—remained to be seen. Personally, he rather thought *these* clouds were because God was expressing His displeasure at the decided unholy—though only in a religious sense, as multiple holes were in fact involved—work being done on His day.

There was, of course, only one possible response to *that*.

He tilted his head back, looked up, and with a grin, lifted his arm and fisted hand towards the sky, followed by one long, well-groomed finger raised in salute.

THE FIRST VISIT

Harry

6 October 1882, 2:45 p.m.

No. 18 Bramwell Road

London

I perused the letter I had just written to my best friend. Well, perhaps not *actually* written, as it was in neat script no one could ever mistake for my own, simply because it was so eminently legible. So it was with advice from Bentley on some of the particulars, plus his impeccable penmanship, that the letter was created. I was of course suitably appreciative, though being appreciative did not require more fulsomeness than a noble nod indicating approval of his assistance.

But the greater question, it occurred to me, especially as I was on the eve, as it were, of dispatching the letter, was how I came to write it at all. After a moment's pondering, though, I could only come to the conclusion that the idea had been entirely my own, because when all is said and done, it is not the job of one's servants, even one's manservant, to suggest what one should do or not do in a social setting. Or do or not do with, or rather in the company of, another nobleman. Is it?

No, no. I was certain it was not.

However, having once made the decision to write, one could certainly seek counsel on the content from one's manservant, as I had already done. And needed to do again.

I looked at Bentley. "Are you quite sure the salutation isn't, well, too intimate?"

"No, my lord."

"No, you're not sure, or no, it's not too intimate?"

I paused, but did not apologize. It *was* a bit of a lashing-out, but damn it all, one's manservant should be more precise when parsing out advice.

"The latter, my lord."

"But still... I don't call him that, you know."

As I looked down at the letter again, starting to consider whether to require Bentley to rewrite the letter, this time to *my* specifications, he murmured, "Not when you're awake."

It was said so softly, I almost didn't hear. Occasionally, Bentley forgets I have quite extraordinary hearing, and manage to hear all manner of things I am not supposed to have heard, which is sometimes quite detrimental to one's mental, moral and social equilibrium. Other times, one hears things that are so marvelously... delicious... that one must share it with someone, or risk an explosion of one's self, much like that Mount... Tambourine or something volcano, back in the days of the Regent.

Reggie—and yes, that *is* how I think of him in the silence of my own thoughts, though publicly he is Smythe, with or without the “Lord” attached—was, for me, that singular person with whom one could share... if not quite *everything*, then virtually so. And always has been. I can only assume—or, were I a praying man, I would ask for one of those consummation things the devout wish for—I am the same for him. I suspect I am right in that.

He is most trustworthy. None of the things I have ever told him have become general knowledge among the ton by any means, or any at time, attributable to him. Even when it was inevitable that eventually the particular thing would. And did.

But... what... calling out his name in my sleep? His *first* name? Absurd. Yes. Definitely. *Utterly* absurd.

I would never do that.

Would I?

“Have I?”

One of the numerous excellent qualities possessed by Bentley is the fact he only occasionally succumbs to the temptation to be perverse and pretends he has no idea why I have asked a question or made a statement when, in reality, he bloody well knows. Today was one of those non-perverse occasions.

“You have, my lord.”

The temptation was now on my part. A great one. Whether to inquire further. I have always firmly believed if one never inquires, one never acquires. But sometimes, *sometimes*, it is better not to acquire. At that moment I had no desire to acquire information about the *way* in which I might have said his name. In my sleep. Perhaps while dreaming.

An unsettling concern, and certainly an odd one. But... things, matters, issues, had been both unsettling and odd since the matter of Mr. Felcher, and his Grand Emporium... arose. Or rather, shot up in an astonishingly vigorous, one might almost say hard, manner.

I mentally shook my head, as if the shaking would dislodge the images firmly planted there on Sunday last. I was still far from certain whether I regretted my discovery, particularly since it was so unlike Bentley to be so untidy. And so apparently forgetful. But there the photographs were, sitting in a neat stack on the small table by his bedside. Right where anyone, including his noble employer, might see the stack. Might, quite logically, pause to peruse.

I was even more uncertain about the subsequent discovery, which had, it seemed to me, led to this letter with remarkable inevitability.

I took a breath and released it, careful not to make it a sigh. Bentley believes excessive sighing, especially of the variety which is merely air let out slowly from one's lungs, without conveying any concept, to be a waste of both time and air. So I did not sigh and simply let inevitability take its course, without my struggling to divert it.

I looked at the letter once more. No one reading it, no matter how unlikely such a reading might be for anyone other than me, Bentley, and, of course, Reggi... Lord Smythe, could discern anything about the actual nature of Mr. Felcher's... highly *artistic* photographs. Unless, of course, they already knew.

Still, there was one more thing of concern. "The closing, Bentley? I could, perhaps, just pen in a 'most respectfully,' or simply a 'sincerely' to finish it off?"

"*Respectfully*, my lord, have we not already had this discussion?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"And have you changed your belief—"

"Ah, I would not go so far as to call it a *belief*, but rather more of—"

"A hope, my lord?"

"No! Why... no! Of course not."

"Ah, then. Perhaps an... impression?"

"Yes. Quite right. An impression. Only that, and nothing more." Quoth Poe-like Fotherby, *Never more*.

"Very well, then. An *impression*." He paused and stared at me.

Those large black eyes, bright and so very intelligent, staring at me from that black, smooth face, were the color of ebony, the color of teak, the color of a moonless, starless night. Ah, yes, I could wax poetic on occasion, though

most certainly never on a par with Tennyson. So long as I was allowed sufficient time to think before waxing.

“An impression, then, my lord, that Mr. Felcher’s artistic endeavors, might be, shall we say, of interest to Lord Smythe?”

“Yes.” My tone was reluctant.

“Of a more than passing interest, perhaps?”

My “yes” this time was quite firm, commanding, even. A clear indication there should be an immediate cessation of that line of enquiry, particularly if accompanied by a “Why?” Sometimes one must be firm with one’s servants, put the noble foot down, as it were. Stop the start of an imitation of that Torkeymudder chappie before it gets, ah, started. I am, unfortunately, not always successful in that endeavor. I was, then.

Bentley sighed. Bentley’s sighs were, of course, never excessive. And always of import. This was a *particular* Bentley sigh, one I had experienced far more than I would have preferred in his years of service. It was a sigh indicating a quite crushing disappointment that one did not trust one’s manservant, valet, and to be quite honest (an astonishingly *un-ton-like* thing to be) general dogsbody, with the truth of one’s most innermost thoughts. Not that Bentley did not already know, of course.

He always does, though I have no idea how.

On one occasion even, some while back, I thought rather wildly—indeed, nearly frantically—that Bentley must have drugged me with laudanum, drilled into my head, and scooped out all my thoughts for careful review before placing them all back where they belonged. How else could he possibly have known... well, *that*?

I wrenched my thoughts back to the here and now.

Thus, having carefully and tonally reminded Bentley of his place in the scheme of all things British, and having managed to avoid looking at him after I did so, it was incumbent upon me to subtly assure myself I had not gone too far.

It is sometimes a strain on the nobility of one’s... ah... noble character to walk the fine line between commanding the reverence and obedience which is a nobleman’s due from his social inferiors, and so thoroughly annoying them with something you say or do, even when you have no earthly idea what it is you have said or done, that they are ready to walk out on you without concern over a letter of reference. Or even do so. Though none have done so to me. Yet.

There are three in my household who must ever be in the forefront of my mind on this subject of line-walking, though admittedly, occasionally they lapse into the back front, or even the back, when my attention is led astray by thoughts of important things such as the cut of my new frock coat, or that ripping bay poor old Huntsworth is having to put up for auction at Tattersalls Thursday next.

The three:

Merriman, who has... is buttled the proper term? ...for me since my eighteenth birthday. A more devoted servant one could hardly find. Although, if one were to be objective, the amount of his wages might have something to do with that devotional longevity. And possibly family loyalty, considering his father buttles for my father.

My current chef, Boiardi, an Italian maestro of the meal, who only last week threatened to leave over a matter of mutton I never quite fully understood, but who was persuaded to stay by the machinations of Merriman and Bentley, and the serving up of a fine British dinner of plump pounds.

And, of course, Bentley. Early on in our career together I quite naturally had an immense—tactical? strategic?—advantage in the often-times war between employers and employees.

The color of his skin.

Black as pitch, as the saying goes. Though the saying does not go far enough, I think. Pitch does not have the smooth shininess, indeed, one might almost say the luster, of Bentley's skin. My earlier poetical waxings are vastly more descriptive of all of him. Well... those portions of him I have actually seen, as I most assuredly have not seen *all* of him in any literal sense. That would be inconceivably outside of the bounds of all decency and propriety.

All those years back, I had boldly gone where no man had ever gone before, or no white man at least, by hiring Bentley. Father was outraged, and what with the wind roaring almost as loud as his voice in a northerly direction, I was certain anyone on or in the vicinity of the Orkney Islands could have heard him. He demanded I terminate "that nigra" lest the family image be... he was going to say "tarred" but changed it to "tainted."

Whether following in my father's footsteps or not, and in those of my older brother, as well, most of my friends derided me or avoided me, or looked at me with pitying expressions before turning away, not quite giving me the cut direct. Only Reggie stayed staunchly at my side through all the uproar. I was

even the target of some of the gossip rags, one of which mocked me as the young “baron of blackamoors.” Not, however, that they were foolish enough to use my actual name.

Though Father was as furious with me as I had ever seen him, had any of those rags impugned the family name, his influence is great enough to have crushed the one which did so. And they knew it. The entire journalistic community, even those publications on the very periphery of that phrase, well remembered a newspaper called *The London Daily Journal*. It published a very short paragraph offensively critical of Matilda Alford, a relative so remote on our family tree I was never able to determine how we were possibly connected. But Father knew. And the *Daily Journal* no longer exists.

Eventually the furor died down. But in those early years, where could Bentley have gone had he left me? Even *with* a letter of reference, no one of my rank or higher would have hired him. Looking back, I devoutly hope that in those early years I was not overly smug about my employment advantages, as Lady Payback is most assuredly a bitch of the first water. So far, it appears I am safe.

By the end of the first year, those advantages were eroding, as word spread of the quality of his work. I gradually became a showcase for his sartorial artistry. By the end of the second year it was as if some flood had washed away the bloody dam, and I learned my first line-walking lesson. And now, while the likelihood of his leaving after all these years is far less than ever before, nevertheless that subtle pressure, that awareness that any misstep on my part could pitch me off a cliff and into an abyss of social disaster if he departed, is always present in my mind.

Mostly present. Sometimes present. There is still that forefront, back front, back thing.

I had remained silent to reinforce the, ah, firmness of my tone. To be sure he understood the subject was closed, though in the course of the silence I rather lost my way and was no longer quite sure what the subject had been.

Ah.

The closing of the letter. I lifted the sheet and sort of waved it about. “The closing, Bentley, the closing. I think it is... unnecessarily intimate, even more so than the opening. I shall pen a ‘respectfully,’ no, no, a ‘*most* respectfully,’ after the ‘yours.’”

I set the letter down on the desk, leaned forward, braced myself on my left hand, and reached for the quill with my right, to do as I had decided. *Firmly* decided. One might almost describe me as resolute.

Bentley sighed.

Damn.

Bentley has a sigh which, when deployed properly—and when does he ever *not* deploy it properly?—is capable of stopping a pair of madly running dray horses careering down a crowded London street dragging a wagon overloaded with barrels of ale in imminent danger of bouncing hither, thither and yon, merrily mangling and maiming the multitudes. A complete stop. With not a single barrel falling off.

I perforce paused.

It *was* a pause, I assured myself. *Not* a stoppage.

Myself silently mocked me with a snort and laughter, knowing better.

“My lord.”

I was quick on the uptake. “Yes?”

“Does some particular person bowl first in a cricket match?”

“Uh, what?”

I love cricket. Not a good player at all, but love to watch. I was at a loss to understand the relationship between cricket and epistolary closings.

“Does some particular person bowl first in a cricket match?” he repeated without a hint of that overly patient voice that howls the enormous degree of impatience being restrained.

“But of course.”

“And how does that happen?”

“There is the coin toss. The winning captain decides.”

“Precisely.” He waited only somewhat patiently, as it rapidly became clear I was still not following along.

The sigh this time was of the long-suffering variety. I had earned that one. I am not the most astute of persons, even at the best of times.

“My lord, someone *always* goes first. Even if it is only by an interval imperceptible to the naked eye. That closing represents *you* going first.”

"But..."

"My lord, will Lord Smythe go first in this matter?"

"Ah, no."

"Is it likely Lord Smythe is even aware there is a matter in which he might make the choice to go first?"

That required no thought. "No."

"And you, yourself, have only recently acquired knowledge that there was something about which you might enjoy going first? At least in terms of sharing that knowledge?"

I flushed at that. Curly red hair, fair skin, lightly freckled, makes a blush so very vivid. Bentley knew quite well how I had acquired that knowledge.

I have become quite adept at catching all my seed when I pleasure myself, but on that particular, *special* day, a spurt... a quite large spurt I am most inordinately proud to say... landed upon and stained one of the six samples of Mr. Felcher's art that were spread out before me on my bed, as I furiously stroked myself and my eyes flickered insanely fast between them, trying in vain to decide which one I would look on when I let go. Instead, I simply let go.

Enjoyably let go. Letting go in a manner that, well, for just a moment I felt that were I a volcano I would be erupting as the Mount Tambourine of seed eruptions.

Bentley was most generous in allowing me to keep the one I had stained. He even declined my offer to purchase him another.

One cannot grow up in the ton, cannot attend public schools at a very early age, without being at least *aware* that boys may do... *things*... with other boys, and eventually men may do those things with other men, as well. But, except for that one moment so very long ago now, a moment best forgotten, but, truthfully, never quite *entirely* so, my awareness had been vague and, at best, academic in nature. It was not anything I pondered, or consciously considered even when using my hand on myself.

I had, after all, as the Bible admonished, put away both childish things, and memories of childhood events, when I grew up. So I had never done any of those... acts... with anyone. And even though I have, of course, rubbed when the necessity, ah, arose, I had no images in my head as I used my hand. Physical motion was all it was, intended to achieve a simple goal: a release of pressure. Only that and nothing more.

Except...

Now there *was* an image. The one I stained. A man alone, naked, forever frozen, caught in mid-stroke, head slightly thrown back as if his hand was in the final stroke, halfway between knob-stem and curly-haired stern. Heading sternward and then up again for a final, quick voyage to stem, and a violent launch of seed, up and far beyond the bowsprit? Or already on that final voyage? The cock he grabbed was not even clear. Only that it was a cock long enough that his hand, when wrapped around it, still left length... a bit of length? a lot of length? ...to be seen.

Nothing unusual, I tried to tell myself, even with the flash of that image now inside my head, now accompanying my own final stern to stem voyages. All men do it. Wanking. They must or they will go quite mad. Even Reggie must, I am sure. Though we have of course never delved into such details of our lives.

Stroking was done, and seed was spilled, in the dark, in private. Occasionally, if one was daring, the seed might land on a palm to be lewdly licked up, even... savored. But mostly it landed on tissue secretly absconded from the brilliant wiping invention of the British Perforated Paper Company: a roll of soft... somewhat soft... paper, easily... somewhat easily... separated into individual sheets. Or a group of them before separation.

Yet surely it was not ordinary, not customary, for a man to sprawl that way on his bed, naked, in the full light of day, streaming through the open windows. A man in sweaty disarray, looking so flushed and lewd and wanton. Though perhaps the flush was due to the colorist and not real life. And was there something... truly? ...up his arse?

I was breathing rather more heavily when I... returned... to the conversation. I glanced at Bentley, still standing so patiently and with only the slightest glint of—humor? awareness?—in his eyes. I sighed inwardly. Bentley probably heard it anyway. The nature of our relationship had inevitably and, I was certain, irrevocably changed, by those two events.

First, there was Bentley inadvertently leaving Mr. Felcher's photographs—though of course I had no idea who he was until well after the second event—out where I might come across them. Ah... so to speak. Although looking back, how could I not have found them, since it was Bentley's note to advise me my repaired spectacles were on his desk, which led to my presence in his room, which led to... all else.

And second, there was Bentley walking into my room without knocking. Though when has he *ever* knocked? He had no reason to knock, however, as I normally had nothing to hide, given any self-pleasuring was done late at night, when he would have no reason to enter.

I believed, indeed, I was certain that prior to his departure he had expressly said how long he would be gone. I had carefully calculated—well, at least with as much care as one can muster when one's member is aching and one is involved in a steadily escalating stroking—that I had at least a half hour before his return. More than ample time.

Yet he walked in at the precise moment I was so violently, no, no, so *explosively* finishing my inspection of his photographic collection.

“Back, my lord?”

“Back?” I bloody well knew what he meant, but I'd be bloody well damned to hell if I let him know I knew.

He knew where I had been in my little jaunt down the pastoral byways of rigid recall.

Rigid, *indeed!*

I needed some privacy to handle a matter which had rather urgently arisen.

“Yes, yes, damn it all, I will go first.” I leaned forward, surreptitiously moving the chair forward as well, the better to obscure any sighting of my groin, grabbed the pen, dipped, scrawled. Used an excessive amount of sand, and was quite surprised I had not shaken out enough to set up a sandstorm whirling throughout the room.

Making sure the ink was dry, he carefully folded it and placed it in the envelope he had already addressed. He lit the brilliant red candle, waited a moment, then dropped wax on the joinder of flap and back, and pressed my seal into it.

He paused in the doorway. “I shall have Jonathan deliver this straight away. Will you come to the dining room for your luncheon?”

He knew. The bastard knew why I was staying behind the desk. I would definitely not be embarrassing myself and my housekeeper, or any other servants I happened upon, and I would without doubt happen upon many, most, nearly all of them, if I were so foolish as to put my rampant... rampantness on display throughout the corridors of my home.

“No.”

“Shall I advise Mrs. Pryce you will be eating here?”

I somehow managed to merely nod, rather than blurt out something incredibly stupid such as asserting I had work to do while I ate luncheon. I *never* worked through luncheon, even on those rare occasions when there was work I might have done.

“I shall have young Robert build up the fire, then, my lord. The temperature has dropped considerably with the storm.”

With no smirk, nor a knowing glance, nor a look at all, Bentley left. The door closed quietly behind him.

I leaned back enough to look down at my still aroused condition and came up with a most clever plan.

First, I imagined myself taking myself in hand as it were, to lash out a quick memory-based expulsion of carefully caught seed. Then I imagined plump, plain, straitlaced, stonily efficient Mrs. Pryce walking in with my meal. Precisely at the expulsion point. The dented silver tray when she flung it over her head in horror and it hit the wall. The shattered glasses and porcelain dishes. The probable permanent stain on the exquisite Aubusson carpet as in this fantasy the chef would certainly have created his finest carpet-staining dish for just this occasion.

Stiffness gone.

Disaster averted.

I relaxed this time. And wondered what I had done by choosing to bowl first.

Reggie

6 October 1882, 3:15 p.m.

No. 24 Bramwell Road

London

The letter from Harry—well, to be truthful, I only addressed him as Fotherby aloud, whether alone or in the presence of others, though in my mind he would always be Harry—was most unusual. Most. I read it again.

6 October 1882

My dear Reggie,

I would be most honored to have your company on Wednesday next, at 9:00 p.m., at Mr. Felcher's Grand Emporium, 37 Preston Street, to attend a private showing of his most recent endeavors in the fine art of Gentlemanly Portraiture.

I have had the opportunity to most carefully peruse and evaluate some of his earlier works. They are vivid examples of the photographic art, and I quite hope you will enjoy them as much as I.

To be sure of his credentials, I requested Bentley to undertake a most thorough investigation of his reputation, standards and the quality of his work. After all, if what I viewed was merely a fluke, I could not in good conscience permit my dearest friend to waste his time.

I am therefore most pleased to inform you that he reports the gentleman is extremely assiduous in his attention to the most intimate of details, as well as in the eager pursuit of the most pleasurable outcome for all his photographic clients. Using only the most advanced photographic techniques, he carefully captures striking images of gentlemen engaging in the most gentlemanly of gentlemanly pursuits. And he achieves this degree of excellence in the relaxed and private surroundings of his London studio.

Do not, however, be put off by the self-encomium of the name "Grand Emporium." Again, I have the assurance of

Bentley, upon whom, as you know, I quite rely, that this is no gaudy raree-show, but is rather a sophisticated celebration of all that makes an English gentleman precisely that.

May I count on your company?

Yours,

Fotherby

I really had no idea why... *Oh, do stop it, Reginald*, my inner self commanded. *You know precisely why your innards are all a-quiver. Harry never addresses you as Reggie.*

Oh, very well. That's it. Notes, invitations, were not uncommon between us. But the salutation was customarily, "Dear Lord Smythe" or "Dear Smythe," and the closing was always respectful or sincere, with the occasional "most" as a preface.

After all these years of friendship, why was he now saluting me as "My dear" and calling me by my first name? He hadn't done that since... well, a very long time ago, and an incident that should be expunged from a gentleman's memory, though I had never quite been able to do so.

And that closing. "Yours." Whatever could he mean by that?

You might just go along to this emporium, grand or otherwise, though the address does not suggest much in the way of grandiosity at all, and find out. Even be so daring as to simply ask what he meant.

I hushed myself. One doesn't cross-question one's very best friend, like some bloody barrister in a trial at the Old Bailey.

No, I should simply beg off with only a faintly dingy lie about another engagement. And then find one so one wasn't *entirely* a liar.

Yes. That was the best course of action.

No.

Yes!

No!

It was so very embarrassing to be vigorously arguing with one's self. But at least the embarrassment was not public, since no one else could hear. Though, to be honest, I had always suspected Bartlett, my man, somehow knew of these inner monologues and dialogues, and even understood them.

Oh, very well.

And then I realized. I had been so concerned over salutations and closings and the unexpected intimacies thereof I overlooked the most salient point.

Wednesday next.

Wednesday? Really?

Har... Fotherby *knew* that every Wednesday night I was with Marie. Just as every Wednesday night he was with, well, how had Farnsworth so eloquently put it?

Smythe, here, is your solid British gentleman. Sturdy. Reliable. Regular as clockwork. He finds a quim in which to stick his prick, arranges to do so each Wednesday night—though the bugger won't share the details—and quietly goes on about his business the rest of the week. Fotherby here, the randy fucker, needs must spend an inordinate amount of time—though the bugger won't share the details—hunting down his cunt du jour for Wednesdays. I rather suspect that given a choice, I'd prefer the well-planned life of our friend Smythe. The lucky bugger.

And then the backslap that nearly knocked me on the floor.

Fotherby knew about the near sacredness of my Wednesday time with Marie. Though he had, of course, no knowledge that I quietly spent a few hours by myself in an obscure flat, reading, mostly, and, oh very well, wanking from time to time, before returning, refreshed and revitalized by my time with Marie. One must keep up appearances.

So, why would he select Wednesday?

Utterly impossible.

And yet, he had asked something of me, to join him in what, the tone of his letter so clearly proclaimed, he perceived to be something of an adventure. Albeit a fairly decorous adventure. Indeed, how *indecorous* could standing around looking at photographs possibly be? So I could not entirely dissuade him. If I did, I might never know why he wrote as he wrote.

I sat down, retrieved a piece of note paper, and dipped my quill in the ink. *How shall I put this?*

I endorsed the date and then penned the salutation in my very best penmanship, though my friends often said the word “best” was quite inaccurate. “Impossible” being the more accurate.

My dear Harry,

Should I underline the middle word? No, too obvious, though I was not quite certain about what the underlining would be obvious.

Then the text:

I should be most delighted to join you, were it not for one thing. My dearest Marie. She is quite expecting my presence, you know, and would be most down-hearted should I absent myself.

I paused, considered. Dipped the pen, and wrote again.

I confess, I have not heard of the fine art of gentlemanly portraiture, and so, would be a most eager student, open and willing to learn. On another occasion. Is there, perhaps, another private showing we might attend without undue inconvenience or exertion upon your part? Or shall we simply wait until the official first public exhibition?

Another pause. Should I or shouldn't I?

Should.

Yours,

Quite right. That closing was, under the circumstances, a foregone conclusion... so to speak. But my signature was an advance into almost, if not wholly, unknown territory.

Someone had to bowl first in a cricket match, after all. So I gambled it was my dear friend who had decided to make this first move, and now it was my turn.

I signed the bloody thing with a bold "Reggie" before I could change my mind. Sanded it, stuffed it, sealed it, sent it off with equal celerity for the same reason.

Once on its way, I leaned back in my chair.

And wondered who would win this "cricket match" of ours. Or if it would end in a tie.

A tie we might both be pleased with.

Harry

6 October 1882, 3:50 p.m.

No. 18 Bramwell Road

London

"Bentley!" I bellowed, my hands gripping the polished mahogany railing as I leaned over and looked down on the entrance hall. I could, of course, have simply rung the bell for him, but bellowing was better. I turned and went back down the hall and into my bedroom.

Naturally, the length of time it took him to arrive was prolonged by his ire over the nature of his summoning. I would undoubtedly be treated to his gentle reminder... gentle in the sense of a stiletto in one's eye, despite the soft tone... of "*Courtoisie*, my lord, *toujours courtoisie*."

Good old William was certainly not speaking of the speed with which my manservant walked from the door over to me, when he wrote of petty paces creeping from day to bloody day. But he might as well have been.

I cut off Bentley's probable, "You bellowed, my lord?" by shoving the partially crumpled note at him. "Here. Read this."

It bloody well did *not* take him *that* long to read such a short note. But he made sure that more of those bloody petty paces crept in.

He was smiling at me. I *know* he was bloody well smiling, but I could not call him on it as he was not showing it. He exacerbated matters with a careful shrug, intended to convey his helplessness over the situation. And plastered a blatantly obsequious look on his face to say, "What would you have of me, my lord?"

I yanked the letter back. Bentley wasn't going to be the keeper of *this* correspondence. This was *mine*. After all, he had signed it "Reggie" in a very bold version of his usual scrawl. Although I am uncertain I could have translated the word had I not known it could only be that.

"He turned us down!"

"*Us*, my lord?"

"You made the arrangements."

"I told you there were two private showings this week. Wednesday and Friday. *You* insisted on the date."

Ah. *That*.

"What did you expect him to do, my lord?"

"I expected him *not* to turn us, bloody hell, very well, turn *me* down because of that slut."

"What slut?"

"You damned well know which slut. Marie."

"But there is no Marie."

I threw my hands in the air, resisting the urge to disorder my hair like some distraught Bohemian *artiste*. "Bloody hell, Bentley. *I* know that. *You* know that."

"But Lord Smythe doesn't know that you know, does he?"

Ah, that. I began to deflate, just a little.

"And Lord Smythe does not know *how* you know, does he?"

Ah, that. More deflation.

I wasn't so much *spying* on him those two Wednesdays when I followed him after he left his lodgings. Merely, ah, how had I phrased it to myself when justifying the decision? Yes. I was merely observing from a distance, sufficiently far to remain unseen myself, close enough to see what could be seen, all in the interests of protecting my best friend from the harpy who had gotten her claws into him.

Except there was no Marie. No woman at all. Just a slightly drab little flat—a coin had persuaded the porter to let me look in on another day—into which no woman had ever gone, at least not on Wednesdays, the only day the gentleman was there.

I tried to reinflate. "Yes, yes. But by extending the invitation, I was giving up my own Wednesday, as Farnsworth said, cunt of the day."

"But you no more have a Wednesday cunt of the day, or any other day, than Lord Smythe has a Marie."

Ah, ha! I had him. "But he doesn't know that. So Smythe could have reciprocated, and given up *his* nonexistent slut for just one day, just as I was doing. But he didn't think enough of our friendship to do so."

But still... But still... He *had* signed it "Reggie." There was some comfort in that. Perhaps even a great deal.

I was considering that very point when Bentley sighed. Bugger! "Yes, Bentley?"

"Perhaps, my lord, you might have considered a simple solution?" *Before bellowing about and becoming all testy*, was the unsaid, but clear completion of the sentence.

I refused to repeat his words as a question and sound like a simpleton. Though merely asking "What?" as I did was more than enough to achieve that.

"Changing the invitation to Friday."

Utter deflation. Like Colonel Burnaby's balloon after crossing the Channel and landing in Normandy, all sagging about everywhere.

"You can do that?"

"Simplicity, my lord, is, I find, often the best. You have but to ask."

It took me no time at all to realize he was going to force me to ask. So I did.

He agreed.

He refrained from looking offended when I asked if he was sure. Naturally, he could not just say yes. "Would I have made the suggestion were I not certain, my lord?"

That being rhetorical, I just gave him that little nobleman's wave which indicates, "Go on about your business, now. I'm perfectly capable of carrying on from here without your presence or assistance."

The waves of noblemen are so often lies.

As he was departing to make the arrangements, I dashed off a note in reply.

6 October 1882

My dear Reggie,

To be quite clear, I had hoped that my dearest friend might, for once, forego his indulgences on a Wednesday, as I was so willing to forego mine, in the interest of an adventure into the arts. With his best friend.

It appears that modest hope was far too much to hope for. That being said, Bentley has assured me that, despite the

difficulties occasioned by your refusal, he will arrange admission for us to a private showing on Friday next. Lest there be any misunderstanding between us, the time and location will remain the same, and only the date will change.

If that date, at the time aforesaid, does not inconvenience your fraught social schedule, do let me know.

Harry

I paused. Considered whether there should be a closing, as I had left enough space for it. Decided, no, damn it. If I could offer to give up my nonexistent cunt *du jour* in favor of an outing... a bloody goddamned *adventure* I *knew* he would enjoy... with my best bloody friend, then the bloody least he could bloody do was give up his bloody nonexistent Marie for one bloody night.

So be damned to putting “yours” at the end.

I carefully blotted it with the delicately carved teak blotter Reggie had given me Christmas last, stuffed it, sealed it, sent it off with Jonathan again. What with our leased townhouses so near to each other, neither of us needed to wait on the postal service.

I wanted to scream “*Fuck!*” loud and long, but I remained silent.

Reggie

6 October 1882, 4:20 p.m.

No. 24 Bramwell Road

London

I looked at the envelope.

I of course recognized Fotherby's hand.

His footman had insisted that he was required to deliver it to me personally, and stood quietly, managing, for the most part, to control his shivering. A sudden gust of wind had inside-outed the rather less-than-sturdy umbrella Harry had provided, and even in the short walk he had become thoroughly soaked.

True, the weather outside was frightful, but our fires were so delightful, I could not in good conscience let him quiver there while waiting for a reply. I directed Bartlett to escort him to the kitchen, which was quite warm, where he could more comfortably wait until I decided what to say.

Of course, first I would have to actually open the envelope and read its contents.

I did so.

The arrogant bastard!

One may say that about one's dearest friend, of course.

I read it again, just to be sure I fully understood. He was chastising me for not giving up my dear Marie, when at most he was offering me a far from *quid pro quo* of giving up a slut he'd fuck just once and then never again?

The bloody fucking bastard!

I had pen in hand to write a quick reply of the "fuck you very much" variety, when it occurred to me that Fotherby was, in reality, giving up far more than he had requested of me. For years, now, he had found a woman to fuck on Wednesday nights, regular as the clockwork attributed to me, and he had graciously, kindly, offered to forego his fuck pleasures in favor of a convivial, *mild*, artistic endeavor, an evening's entertainment with me.

And there was, after all, no Marie waiting patiently for my prickly ministrations. So I was "sacrificing," at most, an evening of reading volumes

about which I was in truth not all that interested, or wanking to relieve hurting ballocks, all to preserve my image with the ton. Harry, on the other hand, was voluntarily giving up the pleasures of seeding his cunt *du jour*.

I realized I was, indeed, an absolute shit by any rational standard for evaluating friendship.

6 October 1882

My dear Fotherby,

I could not bring myself to say "Harry" again. If the previous note been a giant step forward, even though towards some uncertain destination, this was in all likelihood an equally large one backwards. I told myself, though myself snorted in patent disbelief, that the return to formality was to indicate displeasure at having been chastised by him, and not because I was afraid, and wanted to retreat to the certainties of normality. Fotherby. Smythe. Only that and nothing more.

I am in receipt of your most generous offer of an alternative date to engage in the educational experience of learning about gentlemanly portraiture. I am, I assure you, most delighted to accept.

I paused. Wrote again.

Perhaps we might dine beforehand? White's at 7 of the clock? I would be most honored if you would consent to be my guest.

I held the pen away from the paper, so that drips of ink would not smear it. Wrote.

Yours, most sincerely,

To write my name, or not to write my name. That is the question.

I started to write "Reggie," but stopped after the first letter. Bloody hell. I will have to rewrite the whole damned note.

I paused.

Or I could rip the note up, and write another with full customary formality, declining the "adventure" in its entirety, and putting our modest ships back on their heretofore superbly even keel.

Or...

I could just sign what I'd written and send it on. I did so, but with a twist. I drew a line through the "R" of my name, and signed "Smythe" with my usual distinctive, illegible, flourish.

I rang the bell.

When Fotherby's Jonathan came in, somewhat drier than before, holding one of the far more sturdy umbrellas I maintained for my staff, I held out the envelope. It would have been most inappropriate for him to look askance at me when he had to nearly struggle to get the envelope out of my hand, but at last I let it loose.

I told myself I had no idea why I was so reluctant to send that note.

My self snorted and laughed with great ribaldry, and told me why.

Fear.

Quite right, damn my know-it-all self.

Reggie

13 October 1882, 8:50 p.m.

37 Preston Street

London

“Are you quite sure, Fotherby? I grant you, the address appears to be correct, assuming this is Preston Street, but still...

The hansom cab had stopped in front of a four-story building that was more warehouse than what one would expect for the site of an emporium. The windows facing the street were either shuttered or curtained, so far as I could see in the light from the street lamps. There was a recessed doorway with a small light above it. And another small light above the elegant brass scrollwork that identified No. 37.

He was silent, which contributed even more to the ongoing oddity of the evening.

The food and wine at White's were, of course, excellent. For those dues they should be. The oddity began when we were seated. Most often, when dining together, we are in or near the middle of the room, greeting and chatting with friends as they arrived or departed. Occasional chatting between tables for those not entirely focused on their meals. A most convivial atmosphere.

There are, however, a few tables placed away from the rest. When used, the location serves as a subtle signal that the two or three or four at the table would prefer to dine alone and not be disturbed, that they might enjoy their dining and drinking, and the accompanying conversation, in a modicum of privacy. Oh, a hail from across the room, or a friendly wave, would not be taken amiss. But interrupting these diners was, for the most part, simply not done.

We were at one of those tables.

We were taken directly there upon our arrival, and considering there were other available tables more centrally located, Fotherby must have arranged this after agreeing to meet for dinner. I can only describe our conversation as somewhat strained. Several times he looked as though he was going to say something very particular, but then moved on to some other subject, or continued with the given subject.

I attempted to lighten the atmosphere by regaling him with the tale of a hard-fought series of rubbers of whist at our club the night before, he being

unusually absent. As avid a player as I, he responded in all the right places with all the right responses, but not with the verve he would normally have supplied automatically.

I tried the friendly teasing which, from me, generally pulls him from whatever doldrums he might be feeling, but felt quite rebuffed when it did not.

And now this. I nudged his shoulder with my own, an easy feat in the close, even, one might say, intimate confines of this cab, which, for some reason, tonight seemed even smaller and more intimate than the ordinary hansom. "Come on, chap. Is this or is this not the place? Are we, or are we not, to alight and enter? Our driver could be earning far more if we were not simply sitting here, taking up his space and his time."

There was little light, but I still saw him bite his lower lip. A habit of his when he is unsettled. Without looking at me, he said, "You know, this isn't a good idea."

Before I could reply, he twisted, raised his arm and rapped his knuckles on the roof. The hatch lifted, and the driver looked down at us with the type of impassive face that does not, to the discerning noble, hide an opinion of more than a little disgust at the antics of the useless upper classes.

Fotherby looked up and said, "We've changed our minds. Take us to—"

I clamped my hand on his forearm. He stopped speaking and became so very still, almost unusually so for what was not at all an unusual gesture between us. I quickly lifted it away. It was my turn to look up. "If you will give us a moment, sir, it will be worth your while."

The hatch was only slightly slammed as it was shut.

"Why this sudden change of heart, Fotherby? And since when do *you* change *our* minds about anything?"

He sighed, and spoke softly, patently hoping the driver could not hear. "This was a mistake. Is a mistake."

"What? Going to see a display of photographs of men engaging in gentlemanly pursuits?" I tilted my head towards the somber building and the shadowed entrance. "Not exactly the British Museum, of course, but I'm game."

"No, no. A mistake. A definite mistake. I don't believe, after all, that these photographs represent the type of, uh, art, that you would truly enjoy. Indeed, you might even actively dislike—"

“Stop.”

Fotherby did. Sometimes he needs to be taken in charge, given direction, usually to prevent the onset of a dither, or stop one before it gets well started. This was clearly such an occasion, and I would have to provide him with what he needed, as I always have.

And as he has similarly done for me, turn and turn about over the years, though I, of course, have never required his assistance because of a dither.

It was my turn to rap on the hatch. Had there been enough light to see the driver at all well, I am certain I would have surprised a visible expression along the lines of, “Well, have you bloody damned toffs finally made up your bloody damned minds and stopped pissing away my valuable time with promises you bloody well won’t keep?”

All that from one expression? Sadly so.

“Driver, we *are* alighting. Thank you for your patience.” As we in fact alighted, I directed Fotherby to give him a fiver.

I know Fotherby’s mouth dropped open, and I suspect the driver’s did as well. Five pounds is a fortune to a hansom cab driver, particularly for a short trip worth only a few shillings, plus a modest gratuity.

I made my voice mockingly stern. “You can afford it, sir,” I said, careful not to use his name. “Yes, it will put you one step closer to debtor’s gaol, but we won’t regard that, will we?” Fotherby always regarded expenditures in that light, yet if each of the fivers he could spend until he’d spent them all was one step closer to debtor’s gaol, by my rough calculation it would take him another fifty years of such steps to reach that destination. Yet he was no pre-ghosts Scrooge, forbidding all but the most penurious of expenditures.

The “bastard” was muttered in my direction, but deliberately loud enough for the driver to hear and be amused by two brangling toffs. Fotherby drew out his wallet and then passed the bill up. The hatch-slam this time sent us a clear message: “On your way, gents, on your way. Places to go, fares to catch.”

We opened the folding doors that protected us from debris thrown up by the horse’s hooves, or more foul things had the weather been bad, and exited on our respective sides. After graciously closing the doors, the bastard indeed flicked his whip lightly over his horse’s head and drove straight off, not giving us a chance to get clear. I heard him mockingly exclaim, as he drove out of sight, something or other, and “I hopes yer have a good night.”

Of course, *I* was the one whose waistcoat was smeared with some evil substance tossed back by hoof or wheel on the departure. And it *smelled*.

I stalked over to him, past him, stood by the light over the doorway to inspect the clothing disaster I had become. Only the briefest of looks was necessary to reach the obvious conclusion.

"You're right, Fotherby. We are most certainly not going in after all." I waved my hand at my middle to clarify why there had been a change in plans.

"No."

I looked at him as if he were a loony just recently escaped from Bedlam. Or, knowing Fotherby's temperament, being *tossed out of* the asylum for being *too* insane. "*You* said this—" and I waved my hand at the building beside me and the door which was recessed even further than I expected, and then more broadly to indicate the whole damned evening thus far "—was a mistake. I disagreed before, I agree now. We shall go home, I will change and we will find something else to do with our time, since it would be rather discourteous to arrive at a private showing as late as that would make us. At worst, there's always Lady Montague's—"

"Circumstances are not *that* dire. Besides, how do you propose to secure a hansom? They are not exactly lurking about looking for fares."

I detest it when Fotherby introduces logic into an argument that would have done perfectly well without it, particularly since he so rarely does so. He was, however, right. The street was dark and long and narrow; not the kind of brightly lit, active thoroughfare that attracted cabbies like maggots to overripe meat in a bin. And then it struck me.

"It was your idea to take a cab, rather than one of our carriages. My Frank or your James could have found someplace to wait for us, as you bloody well know, or just sit out here, since that's what we pay them for. So in the absence of roving cabs, precisely how *were* we to return after this little adventure in gentlemanly portraiture?"

I could see or, perhaps, only sense from long knowledge of him, an embarrassed flush. "They have an arrangement."

"*Who* has an arrangement? And with whom and for what?"

"Providing transportation for, ah, gentlemen when they are finished with their, ah, how did you phrase it, their *adventures*?"

I stepped closer to him, widened my stance, swept back my coat so that I could place my fists on my hips as a demonstration of my determination, and said, "A photographic gallery, devoted to the fine art of gentlemanly portraiture, something which I rather suspect has a limited appeal in terms of either viewing or purchasing, located in a less than salubrious part of London, has an *arrangement* to provide transportation for its viewers and buyers? Even if they only view and do not buy?"

"Yes."

"Ridiculous!"

Fotherby swept *his* coat back, placed his fists on his hips, with rather more flare than I, I most reluctantly acknowledged to myself, leaned pugnaciously forward, breathed in deeply through his nostrils as he does when he is preparing to unleash a withering, perhaps even annihilating remark. And promptly choked.

Ha! The malodorous substance on my person just malodorized itself right up into his nose. Served him right for causing this mess.

He coughed and staggered a bit back. "Good Christ, Reg... Smythe. What *is* that stuff?"

"I haven't the foggiest, and what it is, is irrelevant to the fact that it bloody well *is*. So just go on in, have them make their arrangements, and I'll wait out here."

When he looked at me like *I* was the loony... ha! it is to laugh! ...I went ahead and laughed. "You nearly choked to death, and I continue in that state, from the odor of this whatever-it-is, out here in the open. I don't care to imagine what it would be like in an enclosed space. Now go get the bloody goddamned carriage, cart, wheelbarrow or whatever-the-bloody-hell on its way."

"I don't think it works that way," he muttered as he turned away to do as he was told.

"And how could you possibly know that? You said you had never before been here yourself. And now that I think of it, you never did explain how you came across these photographs."

I heard him gasp, and his shoulders shook a little, but he didn't turn around.

"Ah, no, Smythe, I am aware I never did explain how I came to come across those most excellent photos." His right arm moved as if he had raised it to touch the upper part of his jacket. Then he lowered it.

"There *is* an explanation, my... ah, Smythe, one I think you might understand. Might, perhaps, even enjoy. At great, ah, length. But it is a most unusual one, and I have been unable to find quite the right words. Thus my conclusion that rather than risk being wrong and offending you, it would be better to simply *not* do this."

"The good ship *Not Do This* steamed away some time ago. Now please, just get on with it."

"Very well." He headed into what was something like a hallway, or would have been had there been a door flush with the sidewalk.

As he knocked, I turned away and leaned against the wall. Rather than continue to endlessly slither upward to my face, the smell seemed to enjoy the freedom to pollute a vaster range of its surroundings, thereby *somewhat* dissipating its effect on me. Slightly. Not bloody enough. It wasn't long before Fotherby returned.

"As I said, it doesn't work that way." He sounded too damned smug about being right, as he usually did when the smugness meant I was in the wrong.

I gave him the sigh he expected, the one that admitted our respective right-wrong stances in this instance, but only in this instance. Though I did make him wait for it. Just a bit.

"The transportation service is strictly limited to guests of the Emporium. They deeply regret they cannot make their limited services available to chance passers-by, no matter how deserving their dilemma might be. But if we went in as guests, with this card..." He waved it at me, his conclusion obvious.

"So. *Now* you are agreeable to us going in, for at least an abbreviated adventure into the... *what?* ...decadent delights of gentlemanly portraits? One just long enough to have the proprietor agree to provide us with a way home?"

"Reggie..." His voice trailed off. I managed to hide my shock at hearing it aloud. Of course, given our correspondence last week, I should reasonably have expected it. But it has been decades since he used my name. In person. Directly to me. And then he used it again.

"Reggie. Please. I decided to gamble a great deal in suggesting this... as you keep damnably repeating... damned 'adventure.' More than I believe you will ever know. But, while I still believe going in at all to be a mistake, it will be a short one if we simply pay the entrance fee and then request transport."

He started to turn away again, but stopped when I spoke. "I *beg* your pardon?"

"No need to beg. I shall always forgive you. What is your offense on this occasion? Aside from the odors coming from your person?" He grinned one of his silly grins at me. "Not quite sure I can forgive you that one, though, old boy."

I gritted my teeth. I had, after all, walked directly into that. Eyes wide shut, oblivious, as it were.

"That was, as you bloody well know, simply a polite asseveration indicative of amazement that upon the occasion of accepting an *invitation* to attend a private showing of gentlemanly photographic portraiture, money is required to change hands."

He snorted. "Couldn't you have simply said, 'Why are we paying to get in when we were invited?'"

I shrugged. "You choose your words, I choose mine. You understood, did you not?"

"I did."

"And?"

"And... since Mr. Felcher is in the business of selling his portraits, the entrance fee ensures at least some earnings from the showing. If you purchase, the entrance fee is offset against the aggregate price. If you do not, then the fee is kept."

I nodded my understanding of this financial logic.

"As I extended the invitation, I shall, of course, pay your entrance fee. Now come along."

I said to his back, as we started the necessary steps down the outside hallway, "You do realize I can already hear the agonized cry of your wallet as it is being bereft of...?"

"Twenty pounds."

I gasped. But only through my mouth. I was not quite stupid enough to do so through my nose, though the mouth-only gasping was stupid enough. I could actually *taste* the foulness. I wondered if this odor was going to be my own damned spot about which I would forever be moaning "out, out, out."

"Each."

I kept my mouth clamped shut.

If it wouldn't have cut off breathing, I would have clamped a finger and thumb on my nose. In those few steps, my... *the*... odors bounced back and forth off the walls, viciously assaulting the two of us. Then they expanded their field of operations when the door opened and we entered an enclosed space, once the door shut behind us. An anteroom of some sort, with only two doors.

The giant who let us in merely twitched when he got the full, closed-room, no-open-windows, no-windows-at-all effect of me. I let Fotherby, *not*, most definitely *not* Harry just then, hand over the card and the whole bloody forty pounds without so much as a wink or a blink or a nod.

I again spoke to the back of his head. "Mistake or not... sir, for obvious reasons our visit to this site of glorious artistry will be a short one. Mercifully so, for all concerned."

Bentley had arranged all this. Nevertheless, despite what I was beginning to suspect about this place, I most sincerely hoped Bentley had not bruited about our names or our ranks, and that the invitation cards were all the identification required for admission.

"Not necessarily."

I looked up and up and seemingly endlessly ever up to find amused eyes looking down at me. The voice was not the expected rumbling, growling, inarticulate bass that should have gone with that mountainous mass, but a rather melodious tenor. With flawless diction. "I am confident we can take care of... *that*... while you are here, if you choose to stay for a while. The artistry is rather glorious, perhaps even... decadent?" He gave me a little grin, making me wonder if, how, he had overheard our conversation in the hallway. "It will be ready to go when you are."

I stepped back just slightly so my neck would not ache quite so much from looking so very far up. "Let me understand this. A gallery... no, no, no, excuse me, excuse me, an *emporium*, one which purveys only the finest of portraits of gentlemen engaged in gloriously decadent gentlemanly pursuits, not only has its own private transportation service, but a laundry on the premises?"

The giant was clearly repressing... I had no choice but to use the word in my head... a giant grin. He shrugged, spread his hands. "But of course, ah, *sir*. *Spills*... of various types... are not unknown here, and we strive to have our visiting gentlemen depart in the same degree of elegance with which they arrived."

I shrugged. Just... Ah, well, bugger it all. I looked at Harry and directed my words to him. "Very well, then. You go ahead and visit the gallery, while I wait somewhere private until my waistcoat is cleaned."

"You should not delay your own pleasures, sir," the giant interjected. "You can enjoy everything in which you might wish to partake, *while* the cleaning is being done."

My gasp was only partly feigned. "Walk about in public half-naked? With my *braces* on display?"

"Oh, really—" His lips parted and pursed in the way preceding the "S" of "Smythe," but he caught my glare, realized its cause and stumbled on with, "my dear friend, *please*. I'd wager a ha'penny to a guinea your braces are as elegant as your waistcoat."

"You think my waistcoat elegant?" It was. There was no way anyone could in good conscience say anything different, but it always helps to have the excellence of your taste reaffirmed. Better when it comes from perfect strangers passing by, who are so awed by your awesomeness they are compelled to stop and tell you how awesome you are, but a best friend's approbation is definitely not to be sneezed at. And my braces had, in fact, been created to match the waistcoat. But still, walking around with a jacket on, no waistcoat to complete the ensemble, was not something with which I could be entirely comfortable. Especially among strangers.

Fotherby sighed the sigh of the long-suffering, something he was fairly often wont to do in my presence. Though he sometimes said he couldn't safely sigh very much around Bentley, I was, apparently, fair game.

"Isn't that what I just said?" He shook his head with a look fairly like exasperation, or rather, exactly like, and said, "Here, I have an idea to resolve your concerns."

And he began disrobing!

"*Sir!*"

He paused with half his jacket off. "Sir!" he said back to me, with a silly smile.

Arse-wipe. "You are disrobing!"

He looked about him, then at himself, and his feigned shock was a marvel to behold. "Why, so I am."

Sometimes a reasoned response and a blurt race to be first to my lips. The blurts naturally never win. This time, blurt and reason were identical: "Your coat and jacket will get dirty!"

Not a response that indicated disapproval of his being half-dressed, but one that recognized, even tacitly approved, what he was doing, and expressed only concern that his removed clothes avoid damage while he was strolling or prancing about without them.

And he was clearly expecting me, by the nature of his so-called "solution," to prance with him.

Bloody hell.

This "adventure" seemed to be turning into a juggernaut likely to crush one or both of us.

"Sir," Fotherby said with an upward look at the giant. A *shorter* upward look than mine, though, since Fotherby-the-blighter was an inch taller than me. As he has so often found occasion to remind me over the years, even seeming to know when I plan to wear shoes or boots that might raise my height to equal or even exceed his, and he does the same thing, and thus stays ahead.

Having the giant's attention, Fotherby asked, "Since you have laundry and clothes-cleaning facilities on the premises, it seems logical you might have somewhere safe to store clothes. Am I correct?"

"You are, sir. And as for being in shirts and braces... although you might perhaps consider rolling your sleeves up... you will find there is no particular dress code for viewings of the Emporium's endeavors. As has been said, 'Pray be under no constraint in this house. This is Liberty hall, gentlemen. You may do just as you please here.'"

A giant who quotes *She Stoops to Conquer*? An eighth wonder of the world!

Fotherby handed his jacket to the giant, who carefully draped it over his left forearm. The waistcoat followed.

Fotherby then turned to me and lifted one eyebrow.

I loathe, detest, and thoroughly despise whichever eyebrow he lifts. I swear, the man could dispense thoughts in Dickensian volume with a single lift. More likely, enough thoughts to fill at least two of the longest of Mr. Dickens's many fine tomes.

"Oh, very well." My tone was more than a little sulky, but then a little of that was intentional.

Unsurprisingly, Fotherby snickered at me. *Snickered*. In public. With the giant looking and hearing on.

I loathe, detest and thoroughly despise that snicker. The one he has used again and again and again, when he has cajoled or compelled me, the latter through some trick or artifice, into doing something I truly had no desire to do, and would never voluntarily have done on my own. Even when I usually... but not always, I reminded myself, not bloody *always*... ended by enjoying whatever the “thing” was.

I turned my back on the two, and Fotherby immediately came over, put his arms around me to carefully grasp my lapels and began the somewhat arduous task of getting me out of a coat I had had, as usual, the same degree of difficulty getting into. Not that doing it by one's self was impossible, as these were not the painted-on coats of our stylish ancestors, but still, well-fitted ones. I occasionally damned the requirements of style, but nevertheless almost always adhered to them.

Except for here and now.

Once the giant had my coat, there was the matter of waistcoat removal. Fotherby waved his hands as if to say, “You're on your own.” The giant likewise did not volunteer. With a great deal of delicacy, I managed to unbutton it without getting my fingers into the noxious matter. At that point, Fotherby became brave again and peeled it back and down. I slithered my arms out and with a little dance and jiggle, avoided the flapping cloth.

He held it out, like the disgusting thing it was, arm extended and visibly holding his breath. I had no choice. I took it from him, gingerly, I admit, and managed to fold the fronts in on themselves, and then looked round. The giant sighed, and with deep resignation held out his hand in turn. Once in possession, he turned and with one of his seven-league-boots steps, moved to the inner door.

“Reginald!” he bellowed.

I could not help but start. Fotherby managed not to raise an eyebrow. Had he, I'm rather sure I would have, for one of the rare times in our lives, punched him. And not mockingly, but hard enough to hurt.

“Aye, milord?” the voice came mockingly back.

“Open the bloody door.”

“And what's the password?”

“None of your bloody fucking business. Open the bloody door.”

The door swung inward. The giant looked back at us. “Apparently you two are worthy of some degree of trust. So I can tell you. Had you been holding a gun to my back, or a knife at my neck, or if you’d been someone from bloody Scotland Yard, I’d have said, ‘Open the door.’ That would have been sufficient warning.”

Coded signals to get into a bloody damned gallery of artistic fucking photographs? What in the bloody hell had Har... Fotherby gotten us into? “And the door would have stayed locked? Leaving you out here to deal with... whatever?”

The giant shrugged. “It is what I am paid for. There is a quite remarkable bonus for each day spent in Newgate or any other prison for the first three months, and an even higher one should I have to stay longer. Now, if you don’t mind, gentlemen, you have... artistic endeavors to view... and the staff has a waistcoat to get cleaned.”

He waved his hand, and we carefully edged by him, as there was very little space available. He followed us, the sheer mass of his presence moving us farther into the inner room so the second gatekeeper could close the door behind us. The second gatekeeper recoiled once my waistcoat wafted at him. He looked even more unhappy when the giant held out the hand with the dangling, reeking garment.

The second gatekeeper, small, stocky, only slightly brutish—really, not at all what a *Reginald* should be—took my waistcoat in a finger and a thumb that quite clearly disdained the task which had been delegated to them. The giant draped the other garments in the crook of my namesake’s arm and waved him away. He departed, so my suddenly fanciful mind said, for the nether realms where the gallery’s mysterious couture magic might be worked.

The giant took a key from his waistcoat pocket... the giant had a waistcoat and a jacket while I had none! ...and opened a drawer in a desk pressed flush against the wall. He reached in, examined the contents momentarily, took out two disks, and handed one to each of us. They were of some sort of metal, about the size of a guinea, gold painted, with a *very* florid “F” on the front. On the back was a number.

“For the private showing, my lords. Wait here until Reginald returns to escort you.” And then he turned away, and returned to his lair, guarding whatever hoard this gallery... *gallery?* bloody fucking hell... contained.

As I was utterly incapable of that single what-the-bloody-fuck eyebrow lift, I fell back on that old standby: language. We were alone in yet another anteroom with the door through which the gatekeeper exited, the door through which the giant had gone, and another, larger, more elegant door. Quite obviously, the entrance to this holy of holies. I kept it simple, calm, and quiet, only a whisper and nothing more.

“*What the bloody fucking hell?*” Even though we appeared to be alone, I eliminated the name with which I would ordinarily have finished the sentence.

Har... Fotherby, damn it, *Fotherby*, had no immediate retort. Most unusually, he looked away.

“I thought you had never been here before, but with all your dithering about whether I should be here, you seem to know quite a bit you haven’t conveyed. Have you been here before? Did you bloody *lie* to me?”

He looked abashed, even flushed. His “no,” however, was not quite the ringing denial I had expected. To either question.

“Then what, to *coin* a phrase, is bloody going on?” I waved the coin at him. “A photographer’s gallery that has a private showing, with an enormous, mandatory admission fee you uncharacteristically neither balk nor wince at paying out, accompanied by a requirement to use a coin kept in a locked drawer before being handed out, all to get into the inner sanctum?? And all this shite about whether I should or should not be here?”

“I’m truly... sorry,” he said, that little pause taunting my paranoia as he pretended for just an instant to be about to say “Smythe.” He looked about, almost furtively, and then stepped closer, not intimately close, of course, but closer than he might normally intentionally stand. He dropped his voice. What? Did he believe we were of such great interest that someone was standing in some cubbyhole, perhaps behind that large oil painting over there, ear pressed to the wall, to listen?

He paused, coughed. Nervously rolled up his sleeves, displaying surprisingly muscular, pale forearms, with red hair so fine it would take a rather observant person to, ah, *observe* that fact. I had not previously considered myself to be all that observant. Who knew?

I gave him a moment to gather himself up for whatever tale he had to tell and rolled up my own sleeves. My own forearms were rather hairy. I mentally compared our two sets for some odd reason, though I found neither to be “better” than the other.

Enough.

"Are you, perhaps, hoping that if you dither long enough, some other gentlemen might arrive, thus interrupting this yet-to-begin conversation, and thus deprive you of the necessity for unburdening your bloody damned soul?"

Fotherby has a quite nice smile, as I've noticed upon occasion over the years. He gave me a small one just then.

Another large sigh. "Oh, very well. I... came across some photographs belonging to Bentley. I did not know at the time that he acquired them from here." A slight hand wave round ensured I followed him on the meaning of "here."

I encouraged him with a nod, to show my understanding.

"They are quite... interesting. Very, ah, realistic."

"Photographs of things do tend to be that way, you know. Realistic."

Fotherby glared at me. "I could not, of course, keep his photographs for my own... subsequent enjoyment."

"Having already enjoyed their, realistic, I think you said, artistry, the first time around? Quite mysterious, these photographs."

"Oh, there is nothing at all *mysterious* about them. On the contrary, they are quite plain, one might even say explicit, in their clarity. So I enquired about their source, and Bentley told me about Mr. Felcher's emporium, and that he had acquired his set of photographs here. I hope you will not take it amiss that I wanted a set of my own, which Bentley said could be arranged.

"And while we were talking, the subject somehow, and to be honest I'm not quite sure precisely how, though it was more likely than not mine, although it could have been Bentley's, but still..." He paused as his sentence became hopelessly convoluted, untangled his thoughts, and went on, "The subject which came up was about whether you might enjoy Mr. Felcher's artistry as well. And I thought... *hoped*... you might. So Bentley arranged our visit, as, clearly, one does not just walk up to the door and demand entrance. And, well, here we are."

"Indeed." It was my turn to sigh. "My dear fellow, did it *ever* occur to you to ascertain my interest, or lack thereof, in this particular artistic endeavor, just by asking me?"

Dear, dear Fotherby looked quite gobsmacked. "Uh, what?"

"Simplicity. You invite me to your home as you have done all these countless times since we became men out on the ton. You serve me a bottle of one of your father's rather extraordinary vintages you or Bentley have accidentally nipped from his wine cellar. You engage me in the frivolous conversation for which you are so well-known. You finally get to the point when I, having sampled a sufficiency of the wine, tell you, most politely, 'Get to the bloody point, Fotherby.' You advise me you wish my advice on a matter of artistic expertise. You explain that you have... some..."

"Six. Six in that set."

"Very well. Some six photographs you very much like, and about which you wish my opinion. Although explaining you like them would have been superfluous, since if you *didn't* like them you would not be asking. And then, if my opinion is favorable, you ask whether I might like to purchase the same or another set. After which there would be some raillery on my part concerning whether you would be earning a commission on my doing so. You see? Simplicity. A pattern you might well endeavor to become fond of, you know."

Fotherby had dithered, and we had dialogued, long enough that he could escape further inquisition. For now. The other Reginald returned.

He gestured towards the ornate door. "Follow me, my lords, if you will be so kind."

I have never understood why a servant says "follow me," when as a matter of proper precedent it is his duty to follow one of higher rank. Yet Reginald did so before unlocking the door, which swung inward. We naturally preceded him, but having learned our lesson, paused when we were clear, so he could close it and lock it. A most astounding degree of secrecy pervaded the very air of this place.

The room we were in was fairly large, fairly open, with gleaming floors reflecting the flickering gas lights. There were a few scattered, small tables, accompanied by not quite top-of-the-line chairs. And the place was filled with photographs of various sizes, covering the walls from immediately above the wainscoting to just high enough that for some you might have to tilt your head and stretch your neck to view them properly. Though not, I thought, with a quick glance round, excessively so. There were also a number of freestanding panels of some dark wood, to which photographs were affixed as well.

Finally. I was going to get to see the photographs about which Fotherby had made all this fuss.

Except that Reginald started walking directly towards yet another door, clearly expecting us to follow him. Upon our arrival there, we would undoubtedly be engaging in the follow-me-preceding-him thing again. I broke away, however, and walked over to examine some of the photographs, each of which had a small tag on it which would logically contain the price.

While, at this point, I was quite curious, nevertheless I felt that if the photographs on display did not match the clarity and artistry of Fotherby's descriptions, it was unlikely I would, after all, enjoy anything in the private showing, which was presumably beyond that other door. Whether it would be polite to persuade him to leave at that stage, should the artistic quality of the photographs not meet my standards, was another matter. I rather have a talent for persuading Fotherby, but it is a power which must be used wisely and well.

I looked at the photographs. Blinked. Looked at several price tags. Blinked yet again, more firmly.

Whatever belief I might have had in the quality of Fotherby's artistic tastes plummeted to unsounded depths. Within easy range of my vision, just turning my head a bit in either direction, were numerous excellent photographs, if one was solely concerned with the physical processes that resulted in them. The subject matter, however, was nothing more than mundane. And barely that.

Portraits, certainly. All of men. Sitting, standing, leaning. Full length, from the waist up, head and shoulders only. For the most part, only a single man. There were, though, a scattered number of photographs of two men. And at the edge of the easily visible from my present location, one of three men. Their attire ranged from farm workers to servants to merchants, barristers, clerks, and on up to those one might believe to be among the nobility, though they were men unknown to me. And presumably the rest of the room was like this.

The prices were far from mundane.

The head-and-shoulders images, and the waist-up images were each an amazing £0.5s. Five shillings for a photograph of an ordinary man's head or upper torso? The rest were even more bizarre. From a quick inspection, the full-length images had two prices, if that was indeed what the tags represented, and neither of them made sense. An "A" price of £1.5s and a "B" price £1. The images of two men had *three* prices. "A" was £3.15s, "B" was £2.5s, and "C" was £6.10s. Despite all this, I was still not sufficiently prepared for the prices on the image of three dandies in evening wear: "A" was £8, "B" was £7, and "C" was £15.

I managed to refrain from commenting on the fact that only the wealthy could afford the prices being charged for these photographs, and the further fact that I saw absolutely no reason why anyone would ever wish to do so.

I had been so focused on these unimpressive images at the more-than-impressive prices that I had not noticed Fotherby was doing the same thing. Looking at him, I saw the same degree of carefully concealed shock over subject matter and cost. Carefully concealed from others. We had known each other so long it was more than a little difficult for us to conceal anything from each other, at least not for very long.

I would, of course, if Fotherby either directly or indirectly insisted, purchase some of these photographs. Both of us could well afford them. Granted, we were a pair of spares, originally living on the bounty of our fathers, who wanted us hale and hearty in case the spare had to become the heir. That concern lessened when our elder brothers married, but by then (me), or shortly thereafter (him), we had both had the good fortune to have a relative die and bequeath us each land and money. We were now even more spare than ever, as my brother had his own heir-and-a-spare pair of twins, and Fotherby's brother had four sons and two daughters.

Fotherby had once taken a brisk fist to my shoulder when I referred to his older brother as Frederick the forever-fucking Fotherby. But his heart wasn't really in it, as he knew I was quite right. The blow after that was even more brisk, however, merely because I inquired whether he thought Elspeth might be relieved to have a respite if we could figure out a way to cage his cock. Or introduce saltpeter with some degree of circumspection and regularity into his diet.

I was about to ask whether we were really going to stay when the other Reginald interrupted our respective stupefactions over the picture prices.

"Gentlemen. If you please, the private showing is about to begin, and you will need to be in place."

You had a "place" to be "in" for a private viewing of *photographs*? What? Did someone bring them around to you, like a servant with a little tray of drinks and edibles for the guests? And you were required to stay in that location so that you could be "served" with samples in proper sequence?

As it turned out, I was not precisely correct, but not all that far off the mark, either.

Reginald opened the door for us, but this time it was only for Fotherby and me. As directed, we mounted the somewhat narrow stairs, and stepped onto the landing. We opened the door, and found ourselves in a curtained alcove. It contained a rather prim, almost fussy, older gentleman seated behind a small table. There was a pen and inkwell on it, a small silver hand bell, and a sheet with a typed list of names. "Your coins, my lords?"

We dropped them onto his palm. He examined them carefully, so much so I thought he might pull out a jeweler's loupe to examine them for authenticity, even though they had only made a journey from the front entrance to the first floor. And would undoubtedly eventually make the same voyage in reverse. He set them down, dipped the pen in the ornate, old-fashioned inkwell, and with great precision put ticks by two names.

I was not so crass as to lean forward to see if I could figure out any of the names, even upside down, though I do admit to a great deal of curiosity. There seemed to be about a dozen of us. He lifted the bell and shook it.

A not-quite-giant... giant in waiting? ...held open the curtain. "Number four," the old man said. The giant's younger brother merely nodded, and tilted his head in a very clear "Move yer arses, gentlemen" gesture. We stepped into: oddness.

Directly ahead of us we could see the far wall of the space, as it was definitely larger than just an ordinary room. To our left and right were wooden walls or panels about seven feet tall, running in parallel towards the brightly lit area, about eight feet apart. To our right was a dimly lit, somehow slightly curving—to the left—corridor, not very wide. We followed him in that direction.

As we walked, I noticed... how could I not? ...that we were passing a series of what were probably the same tall wooden panels as downstairs, which obviously created enclosed spaces, each of which was further enclosed by heavy black curtains instead of a rear wall. The distances between the walls varied, so they were patently moveable. "Curiouser and curiouser," I murmured to Fotherby, as, like Alice, I was so much surprised I quite forgot how to speak good English.

The "number four" became clear. The fourth such space had the rear curtains open. The far side was also open, revealing an extraordinary theatrical-type backdrop of some sort of sylvan glade hanging from ropes disappearing above. There was a very large carpet, of an intricate pattern, on the floor. It

looked rather faded and well-worn. On top of it was a large towel spread out, perhaps of the size one might use at a beach.

Nearer at hand, inside what was to be our “room,” was a small couch or settee, not of the first stare of fashion, of still-smooth dark leather, facing out towards the backdrop and larger room. At the right side of the couch was a small end table. A similar table was directly behind the left end of the couch. That location was clearly intentional as, though there was space between the right-hand table and the wall, you could not use that space very easily to get past the table and reach the couch, at least not without scraping your arse over the wood.

Fotherby and I squeezed past the left end of the couch, noticing as we did a thick book on the seat. The type of book which was used to store and display photographs. Finally! As Fotherby started to reach for it, I swooped in first and grabbed it up. He tried to wrest it away, but I gripped it firmly with both hands and held it down in front of me, as it would have been too awkward, given its weight, to hold behind my back. Quite childlike of both of us, particularly with a strange... quite strange... servant staring at us.

Fotherby made one more swipe at it but desisted when I held firm. Then, recalling, perhaps, the servant's presence, he stepped back, coughed, and *ahem'd*, and flushed again. This time it was quite visible.

“If you will be seated, sirs, you will have time to examine samples of our wares before the viewing begins.” He grinned more than a little lewdly at us from behind the couch.

After placing the second table, which effectively blocked us in, he leaned over it, pulled open the drawer, and pulled out a linen handkerchief, and handed it to me. Not truly fine linen, which was immediately obvious, though certainly respectable. A quality you might give your servants as a Boxing Day gift. “There is another in the other table. Oils as well if you desire them.”

My face must have shown my perplexity, which only became worse when he said, “Your first time here, then?”

I nodded.

“And no one mentioned—” His gesture encompassed the whole issue of linens and oils and the necessity thereof when looking at damned gentlemanly portraits.

My “no” wasn't quite as indignant as it was entitled to be, but just enough to show some degree of displeasure.

He gave us a broad grin. "Well, then, sirs, it's intended to be a surprise. A real good showing today, gennulmen. You'll definitely have need." He then adopted a very confidential air. "O'course, ain't nothin' like a Bendy Ben private showin'."

"Uh, who?"

"That blackamoor fellow. All bendy-like, id'nt 'e? Got me a set of 'is pictures. Biggest damn prick oi ever seen, 'n' what 'e kin do all bendy-like! Well. Seein's believin', as they say."

Fotherby was coughing so hard I had to turn and whack him sternly on the back. He gulped. The new flush was probably bright enough to illuminate the whole area in front of the backdrop. He said, "I, ah, I believe we, ah, might have met him. But, ah, not, er, *seen* him, so to speak."

"Yer'll 'ave to come back when 'e's 'ere, then. If y'kin get in. 'e don't do private showin's very often, 'n' they're allus packed. Waitin' list, too, but nobody don't never cancel, not 'nless it's some'pin serious-like."

He paused to think, a patently difficult endeavor resulting in strain to his brain and his face.

"Well, there was that one time... Lord... uh, well, I can't rightly say, anyways, 'is wife just up 'n' keeled over whilst dinin', face down in th' bloody soup, 'n' cool as y'please, 'is lordship shuts the door on 'er, instructs the servants not t'disturb 'er ladyship. Then 'e nips on over here, *enjoys* Bendy's private showin' indeed. Right bloody well, if y'get my drift. Then nips back 'ome, 'n' is all 'orrified 'n' shocked-like when he discovers 'er ladyship. Started back up right after the fun'ral 'n' been real reg'lar-like ever since. Well, enjoy yerselves, sirs."

Noblemen do not, of course, gawp at the vagaries of the lower class. So we did not. And while I am sure we both appreciated his delicacy in refraining from naming the lord, it was hardly likely we would not know the story. Though, as we had not mentioned our ranks and had dressed in a downward manner to the best of our wardrobes' ability, there was no reason he should suspect he was titillating the nobility, rather than a man perhaps interested, perhaps obsessed, obsessed with the goings on so many society layers above him.

Clearly, however, none of us had known *all* about the lady's death. The tale of Lady Crenshaw being found face down in her cold vichyssoise was

inevitably bruited about the ton within an hour of her husband's discovery. Or as it now appeared, his *second* discovery.

I had no idea what there could be about these ghastly expensive private showings that was so nearly addictive, if the Crenshaw tale were true. And if Crenshaw was addicted, would he be here? Would we see each other?

Dear God, I could only hope we would be spared that. We did not move in the same circles, he being of our parents' age, and a bit above, so if he were to see us, he might not recognize us.

Fotherby managed to bring the coughing under control. "I, uh, we, ah, certainly hope to do that."

"Right, then. So, this bein' yer first time 'n' all, kinda virgin-like, 'ere's the rules. You don't try to see who the other guests are. You stay in 'ere, 'n' no matter how 'thusiastic y'might get, y'don't go out 'n' join in the display. Keep as quiet as possible, so as not to distract the others. And when yer done, even if yer done a mite early, wait 'til the private viewing is done, an' me or summun'll be 'round t'escort ye out. Yer *not*, sirs, t'go walkin' about on yer ownsomes."

Well, that certainly relieved my Crenshaw, and any-other-perverted-noblemen, fear. Which, of course, I kept hidden behind my customary stolid façade.

He kept looking at us, until we finally realized we were required to accede to his list of rules. We did so.

He left the way we came in, pulling the curtain across behind him.

We watched him go in silence. Which then continued. We seemed to have entirely lost the power of speech.

However, when I inhaled to say something, anything, my internal gaping having left me bereft of the ability to choose words and string them together in a meaningful sequence, Fotherby cut me off with a wave of his hand, and then spoke softly. Very softly. And with a very worried look on his face. "You don't, ah, think that, ah, 'Bendy Ben' might be, ah, Bentley, do you?"

"Bloody hell!" I whispered back and dropped onto the couch, still holding the book.

Fotherby gingerly sat beside me. *Close* beside me. There was no choice. It was a rather intimate seating arrangement, to say the least.

“Why would you say a thing like that?”

“Well, you know... The names. Ben. Bentley. And both Ben and Bentley being black and all.

I gawped at him. No other word could so aptly describe my expression. That it was only a partial gawp—I had not allowed my jaw to drop, which would have been quite unseemly—did not lessen its impact on Fotherby, who recognized it for what it was.

Fotherby flushed. “Well, damn it, Bentley is... well, rather bendy.”

Despite the innocuousness of the photographic display in the room below, there was a somewhat *off* atmosphere to this entire place, not quite rising to the level of sinister, but still, the levels of secrecy here made it quite clear this was not a place to which you would readily bring near and dear ones, particularly of the young and innocent variety. The feeling was not at all diminished by the definitely salacious look on the face of our escort, when mentioning this bendy fellow.

“How could you *possibly* know that?” I whispered quite furiously back, with no understanding at all how the furious had been added to what was a quite logical question. One asked with a great deal of equally logical suspiciousness attached. I was experiencing rather horrible, if not quite horrifying, feelings.

It was his turn to gawp, though he favored me with the full version. Then his mouth snapped shut. Opened. Snapped shut. Opened again as he smacked me sharply on my right shoulder.

“You bloody arse! *Really!* As if I... I can’t believe you would think a thought like that!”

I wasn’t *thinking* anything just then, just feeling these terrible feelings, and I nearly asked him to explain just what he thought the thought was. I settled for, “Then how?”

“Because of the way he picks things up off the floor. When it, the, the thing, whatever it is, is right in front of his foot. He just, well, he just... *bends*.”

“Other than getting on your hands and knees—” and I did *not* have a sudden recollection of the last time I had seen Harry on his hands and knees, years ago at university, in our room, his fine linen drawers drawn tight across his cheeks, and somewhat wedged, so his crack was a crevice of unexplored depths, as he

fumbled under the bed for a cufflink he had dropped—"or squatting down, bending is the only way to go, don't you think?"

"But he doesn't bend his knees, or anything. He just bends bloody straight down like he's going to rest his forehead on his toes, and then just... just *unfolds* back up again. I can't do that. *You* certainly can't do that."

I kept my huff of annoyance to myself. I would admit, privately, never publicly, I might be somewhat thicker in the waist than my annoyingly dear... dearly annoying? ...best friend. But as usual, he discerned my thoughts. And snickered.

Bastard.

"So you see, it was a quite logical progression of thought: black, bendy, Ben, Bentley. And Bentley did arrange our tickets." There was the tiniest hint in his voice of a "So there!" tongue stuck out, but I graciously let it pass without calling him on it.

"And can you truly, ah, *picture* Bentley, your Bentley, although I hope not *literally* so, participating in any kind of activity visible or known to that man which would earn him the... what? *nom de la photographie* of 'Bendy Ben'?"

He deflated and slumped back against the couch. "Very well. No, I can't imagine that."

"Quite right. Now that that bit of, what is it you say?" I pretended for a moment not to recall. "Ah, yes, now that that bit of ridiculousness has been dealt with, shall we see what's in the book?"

"*No!*" His whisper was sharp.

I gave him one of my "What the bloody hell are you on about now, Fotherby?" looks. One of my finer ones actually, but then, over the years I have had rather extensive experience employing it.

"This isn't... Damn it all, this isn't what I wanted to happen tonight. Let's just... Bloody fucking hell. Let's just fucking leave."

He started to rise, but became still with that same degree of unusual stillness when I clasped his forearm. His skin was so remarkably soft and smo... I stopped that thought. It was only surprise at the sensation. I had never touched him. Very well, not quite never but so very, very long ago, and I no longer thought about that.

Not even occasionally.

He sat down again. This time our thighs touched, where before there had been a parchment's thickness of space between us. As a practical matter, given the size of the couch, touching was not a choice, merely something unavoidable. So I did not think about it.

I also most assuredly did not wonder why this increasingly odd evening was causing me to experience a variety of disconcerting feelings, giving me woozums in my tum-tum, as my nanny used to describe the sensation, whenever I was feeling giddy or odd and could not find the words to explain why.

I firmly bade my woozums to be still.

I also firmly bade my hands to stop toying with the book in my lap and open the damned thing. Head down to ensure my orders were being obeyed, I said, "I suggest we simply ignore all this for now, get through this display of artistic gentlemanly endeavors, and then... *oh my God.*"

I suspect Fotherby turned his head towards me at that, but I wouldn't know, since during the course of my "let us not put ourselves to even more unseemly public displays than those in which we have already been engaged" speech, I found myself looking at the book my fingers had opened. That look was more than ample justification for my exclamation, as well as explanation for why my head remained fully turned down to stare at the pictures.

One on each side of the facing pages.

They were pictures of friends of Edward's! A whole, *thick* book of them. That was all they could be, for surely only neddies would... would... put themselves on display in that way.

I quashed the thought... indeed, I most firmly bound, gagged, and tossed it into a deep cellar room, locked and re-locked the door with multiple padlocks... that wanted to ask why Fotherby thought I might enjoy looking at pictures of friends of Edward's. Why *he* did.

I focused on the first two photographs.

They were, as Fotherby promised, quite clear. Unquestionably clear. And real. *Remarkably* real. Magnificently, *impressively* real.

To add to the oddity of the evening, I found myself engaging in one of Harry's proclivities: rewriting, one might even say mangling, Shakespeare. I at least spoke in low tones hopefully heard only by the pair of us, whereas his mangling was mostly mightily declaimed.

"The purpose of photography, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show each man's features, scorn covering any part of his image, and show the very age and body of our time, each man's form and measure."

I was nearly surprised, but not truly much so, that my fingertip was stroking most carefully over each man's measure, as if by doing so I might calculate important mathematical matters such as length and breadth and depth.

Though I had never done such a thing before. And realized in that moment I was in all likelihood going to do so again.

Frequently.

Bloody hell.

Then he said, "*What the bloody hell, Smythe!*"

For the first time I understood the expression about someone "hissing" an entire sentence when there was only a single sibilant in the words being said. He sounded like a snake poised to strike.

I raised a single finger to indicate he was to wait. He *harrumphed!* but subsided. He should have been grateful it was not the middle finger.

I flipped the page. Multiple images were affixed. These were mostly heads and faces, with enough shoulder to be clear the men were naked. Flipped more pages. Nude half-body views, down to slightly below the waist; full-body views, front and back and side, cocks soft, half-soft, jutting proudly. Two men, standing, sitting, lounging, doing nothing, something. Then three.

Until I turned that next page, rather hurriedly, these might arguably have been artistic photographic studies of the male nude, erections or no.

There could be no such excusing explanation for the next pages. Facing images of two different pairs of men, four such different erections, four hands wanking. And on the next turn, one of the pair leaning in, suckling on the other's nipple. Ridiculous. A man's nipples were not sexual. The idea was absurd. And yet... and yet... the look on the recipient of that mouth work said it was so very much not absurd. Unless he was being paid to lie with his face in just that way. But... it looked so very real.

And then it hit me.

This time I did look at Fotherby. "These are Bentley's pictures."

"No!"

I had never seen Fotherby quite this flustered. And successively so. One blush rolling right into the next. Perhaps I was more perverse than I had ever imagined. I was quite enjoying it.

"Oh, very well," he said. "Not precisely those pictures. But, yes, well, similar. And not that many! *I told* you. It was only six. Or, at least, I don't think there were more. I didn't ask."

"And these are the pictures you thought I might be interested in seeing. Which caused you such nervousness about whether you should or should not mention or even show them to me." Somehow I managed to keep my tone even, perhaps nearly flat, a little bit cold, giving away little to nothing of whatever opinion I might hold about that idea.

He winced and slightly pulled away. And only nodded. I nearly gave over, but I was having too much fun. I had been quite truthful earlier. The scenario I had described would have been a most effective way to make his inquiries about these images and my degree of interest in them.

That degree was... rather high on the temperature chart. Not that I was about to divulge that bit of information.

Yet.

Fotherby, having opted for this elaborate charade in lieu of friendly forthrightness, could just suffer a while longer.

And then I paused as a struck match illuminated, a light dawned and Archimedes bellowed in his bath.

"How many?"

He looked at me as if *I* were the loony recently escaped from Bedlam, and the grin struggling to escape from beneath my mustache into freedom, was clearly partly responsible for his conclusion.

"What does tha—"

I cut him off. "How many did you say you came across?"

"Bloody hell. Six. Just bloody six, as I have now repeatedly informed you."

"Oh my god, F—" I was at least conscious of the need to cut off his name, even though I could not quite prevent my voice rising to levels easily heard beyond these thin walls, open space and a bloody curtain. I let loose the hilarity I could no longer leash. "*You came* across those photographs. *Came*. Literally."

I could not help myself. I burst out laughing. "You wanker, you! And all six at one... coming across!" And that set me off again, entranced and exceedingly entertained as I so often am by my own wit, or at least, low humor.

Apparently my wit and/or low humor easily propelled themselves to at least a few nearby ears, whose owners were startled into surprised laughter.

Fotherby's reaction was to sit quite stiffly—a word I dared not use aloud—beside me, having moved a fraction of a millimeter away so our knees, thighs, hips, arms, shoulders were no longer touching. Though a single deep breath and an exhale would automatically change that. His voice was as flat as mine had been earlier. Flatter. He was truthfully upset whereas I had merely been shamming.

"I should like to leave. Now."

I was not a good cajoler. I had so little experience, as in the usual set of circumstances I was the one being cajoled. But I had often observed a master of cajolery at work, and I realized something entirely different was called for. Truth, not artful persuasion. It was my turn to bowl first.

So I softly said, "Fotherby, I'm sorry," and lightly touched his arm. I refrained from gently rubbing my thumb across his flesh, the kind of rubbing one does to sooth a fretful hound. Or an unusually fretting friend. "You were right about my, ah, *interest* in viewing the photographs."

This time, my touch did not bring an increase in the tension in his body, but a decrease, and for a little while longer, I let my hand remain where it was. He relaxed, and I lifted my hand away. Our bodies were touching again. But merely with the same lightness as my touch. We were not pressing against one another. Not quite.

He looked at me with a kind of wonderment in his eyes.

Harry is a handsome fellow. Striking blue eyes, almost-curly red hair, a youthful round face with a hint of freckles that had matured into clean, elegant lines. A wide-shouldered, but still lean and elegant body. Quite unlike my own staid and stodgy typical English looks. Brown hair, brown eyes, quite ordinary sideburns, a mustache I am *somewhat* proud of, though my hopes for it making me somewhat more distinguished than I would ordinarily be, are, in all likelihood, quite dashed. A stocky, rather blockish, and some might say, including, at times, myself, an overly hairy body.

But still...

Wonderment went well with Harry. Especially when it was directed at me.

We both opened our mouths to speak, though he beat me to it. "Do you? Truly?"

Earnest, quiet, with that quick nervous nip of his lower lip. I knew what he was asking. Whether I was being truthful, or merely telling him what I thought he wanted to hear.

I gave him the courtesy of thinking it through. Did I like, perhaps even more than merely "like," the photographs, as he thought when he extended the invitation, and now, I could see with the rather extraordinary hindsight available, clearly *hoped*? I neither teased nor taunted him with any true delay.

"Quite."

He or I would have said more, in all likelihood. But that was, of course, when the Emporium decided to begin the private showing.

It was *not*... oh, it was most definitely *not*... staff members bringing round a selection of their newest photographs to each of the private quasi-rooms, for private perusals. Photographs which had perhaps not yet made it into the thick volume sitting on my lap, or its companions in the other spaces nearby. Did the volumes there serve to hide a certain unaccustomed hardness in its holder, or were the other holders so experienced that the hardness was neither unaccustomed nor unwanted, but eagerly anticipated and well appreciated upon arrival? Or such new photographs that they might eventually serve as the start of a new volume?

No, this private showing was far more real, far more immediate than any photographer's artistry could capture.

Two men appeared from somewhere as a voice announced, loud enough to be more than a little shocking in the near silence that covered the area, "Mr. Ralph and Mr. Alexander will now begin this evening's private showing."

They were wearing only robes. Short robes barely draped past their buttocks, allowing all eyes in the room that wished to feast on the nakedness of their legs to do so. That was, I was certain, all eyes in all of these miniature rooms. A quick sideways glance at Harry—Fotherby was quite obviously forever gone from my mind and my mouth... my mouth? ...except when in public—found him glancing at me. His halfway-hesitant grin met my own and then darted back to the display. Yes, the eyes in *this* little room were most definitely feasting.

There were four distinct gasps from the small rooms when the men dropped the robes to reveal that they were, indeed, most naked. Two were in our room. So there were at least two other private showing virgins about, or else the two others who gasped were merely showing their appreciation.

They were so very delightfully naked. Though if one wanted to be overly technical, one might say not *entirely* so. They both wore stockings and shoes, which somehow enhanced the erection-inducing nature of what we were watching.

We were watching two friends of Edward's, two neddy-boys if one wanted to be vulgar—a mood I could quite appreciate just then. And for the second time in my life, the first being moments earlier with the examination of the book, I found myself aroused by naked and aroused men.

What that arousal said about me was another thought that quickly joined the earlier one in confinement. And I dragged the lurking thought about Harry down there as well.

Those were matters to be thought on... later. I didn't bother trying to convince myself that they would not be thought on, because they were thoughts of too great an importance.

Just... not now.

Now was a time for adventure. For learning what gentlemanly pursuits I might possibly wish to pursue here and now, or later on. Wanking, at least, I was familiar with, but those brief photographic glimpses said there was more I had to learn. So very much more.

I resolutely did not look at Harry and concentrated on the pair.

I decided the dark-haired one was Ralph, and the other, Alexander. Neither of them were young and astonishingly handsome. They were quite ordinary fellows, like the ones in the book that had become so excessively heavy on my lap, three parts of my lap in particular. I bent forward, but with my head up and eyes forward as well, so as to be sure not to lose even an instant's glimpse of the showing, and with a modest thump, dropped the book to my left, in front of the table. I straightened and surreptitiously adjusted myself. My surreptitiousness left a great deal to be desired, as Harry, clearly aware of it, shoulder-bumped me and then smirked when I looked at him. After which, far more boldly than I, he adjusted himself, as well.

Then we both sort of flushed and looked ahead again.

For some reason, I kept looking at their feet and their stockings. And casually, most, *most* casually, reached between my legs to squeeze my prick just a little. Only a little and nothing more.

Ralph wore dark leather shoes with laces, cut to rise just below his anklebone. His stockings were light colored, almost flesh toned, and ribbed, clinging tightly to his calves, and with a dark band circling just below the knee to hold them up. Alexander's footwear was more of a half-boot, coming above his ankles, with laces up the arch, and then hooks to wind the laces about the rest of the way. His stockings were darker, and held up by a garter belt immediately below the knee, with two little clasps, front and back, that grabbed the upper edge of the stockings.

They paid us no attention. With their positions and the brilliance of the light in their area, only someone at the very back of these mini-rooms would be likely to be hidden in shadow. I rather doubted that any of us were doing much shadow-hiding.

The pair might have been anyone. Butcher, baker, candlestick maker. A bloody barrister down on his luck. A groom in a nobleman's stable. A merchant's son or nephew or brother.

They were both smooth bodied. No visible hair except what curled thickly at the base of their pricks and down around their balls. A bit in their armpits. Ralph was shorter, somewhat thicker in the waist, with a little belly. Arse cheeks that dimpled quite deeply when he squeezed them. Clean-shaven faces, no sideburns. The hair on Ralph's head was thick, and as dark as his cock hair, though not as curly. Alexander, however, was more slender bodied, but still, it was a body accustomed to work. Only a slight softness around the waist, and large, protruding nipples, each a proud, pale purple-red against white flesh. His hair was a light brown, almost blond, worn pushed back from his forehead and face, falling behind his head to just below jaw level.

They stood looking at each other, their cocks inflating quickly to full extension, without a hand touching them. While I frequently had erections in the morning before pissing finished them off, erections that just happened because of the sight of something arousing, had never happened with me, not before the look at the book. So many firsts already this night. What more were there to be?

I had never seen another man erect before. Cocks, yes. Of course. In the company of men of the ton, particularly after sporting events, out hunting, in

changing rooms at boxing or fencing salons, toilets anywhere, cocks were on display. Rarely prominently, but you would have to walk around with your eyes shut not to see them.

My own member had been merely plump from looking at the photographs, but the sight of those two erections had me joining them. Just not quite so publicly.

Their cocks were much of the same size. Although we were close enough for them to be quite visible, I was clearly no expert on measurements, so my six-inch thought was at best a guess. Ralph was somewhat thicker, with a slight twist to his knob. Alexander... oh, very well, if I was going to watch the man have sex with another man, as I so definitely was, side by side with my still-nervous best friend, I could at least be friendly and call him Alex... was far more slender, but it looked like someone had glued a dark-purple, fat, fat plum on the end of a polished white tube with faint blue trceries. And it was weeping. Already.

Mine rarely wept, and then only just before it no longer had a reason to weep.

They were staring at each other, and it was quite odd, but in those moments before their hands reached and began stroking, first themselves for a stroke or two, and then each other, they made me, and presumably some or all of the others here to watch as well, believe that they were totally unaware of all or any of us. That they were alone in some space that enclosed them in walls we could not see... walls that were solid to them, private, impenetrable, leaving them unobserved, though the same walls were nonexistent to the eager voyeurs that comprised the dozen on that typed list. Our collective eagerness was palpable.

And then they began to make love. I told myself it was that, that only men who somehow loved could display themselves this way. Though a colder, more cynical part of me disagreed with that analysis.

I had never in my wildest dreams imagined that I would become aroused by photographs of naked men, and become even harder, aching, actually, in an instant, by watching two equally naked men have sex. But then, that was not all that surprising. My dreams have never been wild. My dreams were always of the staid and utterly mundane variety. Seeing what I was seeing, I eagerly anticipated an entirely new, not-mundane-at-all set of dreams.

They kissed and stroked and rubbed, tweaked and twisted and manipulated. Ralph found himself the recipient of an obviously talented cock sucking,

though not to completion. So much so, that he of course reciprocated. Once Alex's prick was buried in Ralph's mouth, the blond leaned forward, his hair falling to hide his face, stretching out a long arm, somewhat disproportionate, I noticed, to the rest of his body, but certainly advantageous in that moment, as it enabled him to reach the crack of Ralph's ass.

Ralph liked that. He moaned around the flesh in his mouth as that long forefinger moved up and down the crevice, each move getting closer to his hole. A visible tap, stroke, rub on his asshole elicited another moan. Was it fakery? They were, after all, performing for an audience. Undoubtedly well-paid performers given the prices charged for photographs of these men in action or even without action at all, just poses from nakedly quiet and dignified to nakedly lewd and crude.

Yet the moans did not sound fake, but real. Very real.

Only... how could a man's hole... How could a *touch* on that circle of muscle be sensuous? I thought of my own hole. It was used for shitting and wiping. Nothing sensuous about either activity. But perhaps...

My attention was dragged, or rather, yanked back from my musings to the scene before us, with an even louder moan. As that finger was plunged inside him.

And then Alex took it out and bloody well sucked it into his mouth, the slurping noises loud in the room. That finger had just been inside a man's arsehole! I took a quick look to the side to see if Harry was as shocked as I.

Apparently not.

His cock was out!

And he was wanking!

I couldn't help the gasp. He turned his head towards me. And bloody smirked again.

Without a damned blush. He wasn't even the slightest bit embarrassed.

I could not help but stare.

How was it possible for another man's cock to be beautiful? Especially when my own was so very much not.

Harry's was indeed beautiful. It was long and slender, carved from palest smooth ivory, with a long, flushed-red, arrowhead-shaped knob, on clear display with the skin pulled back. I wondered...

No. I wondered nothing.

When I looked up at his face, his smile was smug, as if he had heard my thoughts. And then he leaned in so I was, perforce, obliged to do the same, and whispered, "You do understand why they supply linen handkerchiefs, do you not? And a vial or three of oil?"

And with that he straightened and went right on wanking.

Smug bastard.

Of *course* I understood. I was not a lackwit. Even though I nearly rushed to my non-lackwit defense by claiming I had instantly perceived the whole, the moment the young giant had produced the handkerchief and mentioned the oils. An explanation that would have demonstrated my true lack of wit, given that whole difficult-to-lie-to-Fotherby thing. Had I spoken I would undoubtedly have been evasive, thus quite clearly establishing I had understood nothing at all until Fotherby's quasi-caustic disclosure.

I had never before considered, not even been aware of, the benefits of a good linen cloth, something softer and more fine than the one I had draped across my left knee. Even more surprising was the thought of slicking my prick for wanking. Something I had never done, never considered doing.

And still I was uncertain that I could do what Harry was doing just then, despite how desperately hard my prick was.

And if I didn't... if I could not, or would not, what kind of a friend was I?

Truly not a friend of Harry's?

Not... *a friend of Edward's?*

Was I still the stocky blocky boy who had to be dragged, quietly resisting, loudly resisting, into any sort of an adventure, no matter how mild? And once we were past the come-home-covered-in-dirt, grinning all the while, adventures of boyhood, our "adventures" had been ordinary ones. We rode to hounds, but not exceedingly well, neither at the front of the pack or the rear. We got drunk with our friends, or upon occasion, with one another, but never excessively so. And our definition of excessive was certainly not of the same degree as that of the rest of the men of the nobility with whom we associated. We gambled, but never more than we could comfortably lose. I realized that for the most part our lives were like riding to hounds: we were always in the middle of the pack that comprised the ton. Neither standing out, nor fading into near invisibility, but simply... *there*.

Fotherby, though, had broken through that middling shell that surrounded him. He had *bowled* first, and offered me an adventure unlike any other in which we had ever engaged.

Except...

Except... that... *almost*-adventure, that nearly-happened-but-never-did, so long ago.

All of which gave me pause. And made me pause.

And wonder whether I could, whether I dared.

Although, perhaps... *perhaps*... it was my turn again to bowl? To mash a metaphor into a muddle, as it were.

Indeed, my prick must have known the outcome of my mental maunderings before my mind comprehended, since it was as hard as ever it had been. And pushing, like the demanding prick it was, against the layers of cloth that covered it, demanding freedom.

I have never been fond of my cock. It does what God... or whoever or whatever might be responsible for Darwin's *origin*... intended it to do: serve as a method for removing piss and seed from one's body. The first relieves an ache that sets young boys dancing who are required to wait, and men, from time to time, to jiggle in place as subtly as possible when they are similarly constrained. The second relieves the ache that turns one's ballocks blue, though, despite numerous inspections, whether awkwardly bent over, or thrust upon a mirror, when they were unquestionably in that condition, I have never noticed a change in color.

Beyond the necessities of function, it is, as any objective cock-observer would most assuredly observe, quite ugly.

It struck me, then, that there were *ten*—if my upside-down count was correct—other cock-observers nearby, plus the two who were not merely observers but flaunters, plus however many of Mr. Felcher's staff were observing as well. I could put my prick to a vote!

Or not.

I looked down at my hidden self. I am quite, quite thick, with a long foreskin that creates very visible bunched-up flesh when pulled back, yet feels so very good when sliding down and over and back again, slicked up with my leakings, once they have finally started. My knob is only slightly wider than my

shaft, with a long slit, though I have never compared it with another cock to be sure my judgment of length is accurate. For all I know, I could proportionately be the veriest David to the usual Goliaths of other men's openings. And then there are the veins. Thick, ropy, the dark blue I imagined my ballocks to occasionally be, gnarly and coiling around like a series of small, dangerous snakes.

As our dear Queen is said to have admonished her daughter on the eve of the daughter's wedding, to lie back and think of England, I would... as it were... *bowl* for England.

I opened my trousers and with some degree of difficulty, pulled my cock out, grasped it, and shuddered. Began to stroke and shuddered more.

I looked at Ralph and Alex who were now down on the floor. Ralph was on his back, cross-wise on the towel, his legs spread wide. Alex was... Alex was... I gulped and swallowed and tried to wrap my mind around what I was seeing, though my prick had no problems... on *top* of him. His knees were spread as well, just above Ralph's shoulders, with Ralph's arms curled around Alex's thighs.

The photographic image my head created just then was of Alex with his mouth on Ralph's knob, which was fat and shiny and slick, and drool was running down its length. Alex's hair was frozen in a long arc as it started to fall forward. Ralph's ballocks were drawn up tight at his base. And though I could not see, I knew Alex's cock was in Ralph's mouth, in his throat. I could tell from the tautness of Alex's muscles that he was about to fuck his face down the full length of Ralph's prick, just as his hips were only an instant away from thrusting full-length, roughly and repeatedly, into Ralph's open mouth and throat.

I began a rough wanking of my own prick, my left hand resting on the handkerchief, so that I could grab it up and use it to capture my spend, which I was fairly certain would be far too soon for my liking.

I made the mistake, then, of shutting my eyes, for just a moment. The mistake of forgetting *not* to remember.

I remembered.

We were facing each other, not touching at all, or rather, not touching each other after that one, hesitant, so-very-brief fingertip touch. We were not even moving. Had not begun to move.

I was suddenly, after so many years, certain we had not known *how* to move, nor even that there might be a reason to move. Other than a boy's innocent curiosity.

I remembered.

His voice.

The reverberating rage as he shouted, "I will not have a friend of Edward's in my family! I will not allow that vileness, that abomination to taint our name!"

I remembered.

Screaming, "I'm not! I didn't! We didn't! We weren't!" over and over and over, tumbling arse over ears down the river into the whitewater rapids of a boy's babbling incoherency.

I remembered.

Those age-twisted fingers and the open palm that slapped, and then backhanded me. The powerful fists that beat me until I collapsed.

I remembered.

Fotherby screaming with me, but frozen, not daring to attack the Earl of Wilshire.

I remembered... think I remembered... the silence when he was done with me, except the gasps of strain (his), and the shallow, terrified breathing that was not my ragged own (Harry's). Then *his* voice, cold with a coldness I had never heard before, never heard again as he so rarely spoke to me afterwards.

"You are vile, boy," *he* said. "Wickedness incarnate. You will burn in hell for your wicked ways, for attempting to seduce him to your perversions. I cannot treat you as you deserve, but if you say one word of today, *your friend* will be punished. Severely."

And fading sobs of fright as Harry did all he could do. He ran. And never told. Nor had I.

I had not known that beneath the cellar in which I stored the thoughts and fears I did not wish to face, until, if ever, I *could*, there was a vast cavern where all this had been. And now it was back. Every moment of it, because I knew what I did not know then, because I was doing what I had not done, had not known to do, but still, instinctively, *wanted* to do.

My breathing was loud, far too loud, panting, gasping great gulps in a futile effort to fill my suddenly starving lungs. I had to, had to, *had to* get away. Panic-stricken, I started to rise and run, heedless of my surroundings, uncaring of my flapping cock.

I was stopped by Harry's left hand grabbing my right wrist. Holding me. Tight.

Painfully tight, as I imagined a prisoner's manacles might be on the way to the gallows, when no one, least of all the prisoner, cared for his pain.

It was the shock of that pain that held me motionless, awkwardly tilted, nearly unbalanced. That and the fierce, furious whisper from Harry. "That day?"

I could only nod. He tugged downward, and marionette-like, I sat.

"Your grandfather's not here. He's dead, Reggie. The old fucker is dead and alone in his coffin since even the worms and the maggots wouldn't have him. *Gone*, Reggie. He can't hurt you."

He didn't release my wrist right away. Did he feel the tension? How could he not? I felt as if I were made of bands and strands, and plates both straight and curved, and coils and coils, all of steel and iron welded together, with some monstrous steam boiler inside me, hissing and burbling and gurgling and boiling, pushing and *pushing*, threatening to erupt in howling fury.

But Harry's hand, warm and surprisingly strong, held on, even as the pressure drained away, the metal vanishing, leaving me merely mortal flesh.

He did not let go when I sagged back, regained control of my breathing, beat down the urge to lean in and seek comfort from the arms of my best friend.

Harry finally relaxed his grip, but his fingers still gently circled my wrist. There was something *protective* about it. "I... I am so very sorry, Reggie. I never meant for this to happen, never thought it might. I should have. Please, let's just leave. And... and not come back."

Such a tempting offer. *Nothing* in my life had ever been as tempting as that offer.

But I realized if I left, grandfather, or as Harry had suggested, that damnable, self-righteous, miserable old bastard who, to my everlasting good fortune, dropped dead not long thereafter, in the midst of a screaming rage against a groom who had polished the tack insufficiently bright, would win.

I could not... *would not*... let that happen.

Were the others around us aware? Were they listening in on our... *my*... drama? I cared neither more nor less, nor indeed, at all.

If so, to hell with them all.

We would stay. I told him so.

Poor Harry just gaped at the firmness of my tone. Which was not at all matched by my cock. Nor his, as I for the very first time boldly and directly looked at another man's prick.

"I'm really not up for inspection, you know." Harry sort of glared at me, but without much force.

"Nor am I."

We sat there for a moment, limp pricks and all, ignoring whatever it was that Ralph and Alex were doing out there, if they were still doing anything at all. It was our turn to be inside invisible walls, or at least that fourth wall between us and the men privately showing.

"What would a friend of Edward's do, right now?" I asked him.

"How the bloody hell would I know?" Harry's expression was disgruntled, perhaps by the fact that his implicit denial was not as vigorous as it might have been.

But still, if he told the truth, and I rather thought he had, then Harry was only slightly less virginal than I. After all, he at least had the experience of viewing six of Felcher's finest, as I was sure Bentley's good taste would require that he acquire nothing less than the very best. *And* coming across them, or *one* of them. I had come across nothing like that. In any sense of that most marvelous word.

We might have remained in an odd kind of limbo had our attention not been attracted by the suddenly vociferous Ralph and Alex. Our marionette heads turned to look.

They were not in quite the same position as when Harry and I became distracted. Our angle of view was better, if by better you mean everything was in sight, and I most assuredly meant "better" in that way. Their bodies were gleaming with sweat now, shimmering under the lights, Alex still on top, only now it was clear that he had two fingers buried inside Ralph's hole. Not merely buried but moving in and out. From body motions, it appeared Ralph was doing the same to him.

Was that what caused the groan which had caused us to look again?

The groans that became mutual, louder, as heads and fingers bobbed and shoved. At which point we discovered what friends of Edward's do in such circumstances.

Wank.

Our gazes were tied, chained, to Alex's thrusting hips, his moving head, the upward shoves of Ralph's hips, urging his own prick to go deeper, deeper, deeper, even as Alex's was doing.

Our cocks were hard again. We were stroking again, with the same feverish rapidity as the two were moving. We were back to the state of arousal we had been in when matters had gone temporarily wrong, but then we were beyond that into the next level, and beyond that into culmination. I did not even peripherally glance to see if Harry was grasping his handkerchief as I was my own, grunting restrained grunts as we spilled spurt after spurt of our seed into our greedily waiting, cloth-covered palms.

And then we were done. As *they* were done.

We cleaned ourselves as efficiently, I presumed, as we were wont to when we did this in our own privacy. Ralph and Alex did not bother, once cocks and fingers were disconnected from mouths and holes. Alex rolled off and away from Ralph, onto his back, breathed heavily, and then twisted again, and got to his feet. An extended hand pulled Ralph up.

That wall that had made us invisible to them was gone. They were most assuredly aware of their silent, sated audience. Their robes were picked up, used to wipe sweat from their chests, their armpits, and then a cleansing grope and swipe of cocks and balls. With only slightly smug smiles to indicate their awareness of what their... exertions... had done to and for us all, they bowed without any flourishes, in several directions, so as to encompass all their observers, and left.

The room was not quite silent. We heard some breathing, some murmuring voices, and then a rather loud, much-belated grunt that showed satisfaction had been achieved. Perhaps a second time?

We tucked ourselves away, started to get up, and remembered the instructions. We sat back, neither wanting to stand, neither willing to quite look at the other.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man, possessed of a good cock and in want of a come, is embarrassed when it's done.

I could attest to that. Even in the dark of my bedroom, in the smallest hours of the night, as my breathing slowed and I dabbed at drips and drops, I still felt I had just finished a dirty deed, something sinful which must, of necessity, be hidden away.

And now, here I was—here *we* were—in *flagrante* most deliciously *delicto*. If not as public as, say, the same activity in Hyde Park, when the ton packed the walkways and carriageways and horse ways to see and be seen, still, people knew. Harry knew, I knew. All the men around us knew, if not *precisely* what was being done in each of our little viewing rooms, then with the sure knowledge that *something* was being done with or to cocks that ultimately involved spewing seed.

Before this adventure, we could only have assumed, based on the most simple of syllogisms: All men wank. I/we/they are men. Therefore, I/we/they wank. Bloody often. Which is not quite part of the syllogism, but is implicit.

But now, after we had gathered, had paid our entrance fees, or had them paid for us, had viewed the varied gentlemanly portraits available for purchase, had watched with lascivious eyes such an extraordinary private viewing, and in the quasi-privacy of our little rooms done such things as required privacy, without ever seeing one another, still... we all *knew*. About each other.

Unnerving.

Was Harry as unnerved as I, or... more experienced? At least, beyond his admitted coming across Bentley's photograph?

I was a virgin in so many ways, in ways I could not even begin to fully comprehend, though the gentlemanly portraits, comparatively few though I had seen, had certainly given me ideas. But was losing your virginity always this awkward, when all was said and done? Was it, Heaven forfend, to be repeated with every virginity I lost hereafter? And I was certain that there were far more virginities to be lost than I had ever dreamt of, particularly given I had never dreamt *any* of this. Had not known it existed.

Assuming I would... be doing this, any of this, again, or any of the other known or unknown possibilities. I wasn't at all certain if...

My self laughed. Loud and raucous and rude. *Self-deluding idiot!* My self sneered at me.

After a pause, *How true*, I told myself, albeit a bit ruefully. *For bloody decades. So. No more delusions. But definitely... more adventures.*

I wanted so much, just then.

I wanted to weep, and not from my prick. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to hug my best friend. I wanted to beg him—and I would, if necessary, if a simple request was not enough—to go on a quest with me, an adventure in this new, and more than a little frightening, world in which we found ourselves.

I smiled at him, and he tentatively smiled back, with a sort of what-the-bloody-hell-is-going-on tinge to it.

I realized just then that I could *touch* my friend. Oh, not in public, nor even quasi-private where there was a risk we might be discovered by something so stupidly simple as having forgotten to lock a door. But here and now, I could.

I did.

He looked down at my right hand, resting lightly on his left thigh.

I vaguely heard the voices and noises of other “rooms” being emptied, presumably their occupants being escorted in some privacy to waiting transportation. I did not care. I had something *important* to say.

“We could go on an adventure, you and I. An exploration of the secret world of friends of Edward’s.”

Ah. I recognized that eyebrow-lift. That was the Lord-what-a-daft-bugger-you-are one.

“I could be... Richard Burton. And you, my intrepid assistant.”

“Whom no one has ever heard of, whose name is not known, much less remembered. Naturally.” That last was said with a great deal of dryness.

“Oh, I would give you full credit. In much smaller print, though. Only natural.”

“Print?”

“But of course. We would go as he did into Mecca, if not quite in disguise, and not risking death but mere disgrace. And we shall come out of it—oh, *most* delightfully, I am sure, *come* out of it... several times—with our very own *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights*. With an expurgated edition for the masses, most tastefully bound, and all names and distinguishing features carefully hidden. And an unexpurgated edition which we will make so very, ah, *hard* to *come* by, or over, or across. For an appropriately elevated price. What do you think?”

"That you are a daft bugger."

"You already said that. True wits do not repeat themselves in such close sequence."

"A thought that profound, that accurate, bears repetition. Endlessly, if needed to ensure the lesson is driven home."

"With you doing the driving."

"I have recently envisioned myself in that role." He paused. "Though I expect I might learn to be driven."

It was my turn to pause. I was no longer quite certain what we were talking about. Neither of us drove our own carriages, and we were not really part of the set that engaged in carriage races and dares, though naturally we participated through observation, and applause or commiserating groans as required.

"Well, then," I said.

"Well, then," he said.

Before we could further entertain each other with similar instances of scintillating badinage, we heard the voice of the turtle known as Reginald. "May I enter, my lords?"

As one, we said, "But of course," and stood, turning to face the curtain he was drawing back. Beside and slightly behind the Emporium's Reginald was a much younger man, whose blond looks and prominent bulge suggested he might also be employed in capacities other than as a conveyor of clothing temporarily discarded by... guests? patrons? customers?

Reginald did not look at the wadded-up, stained handkerchief on the table by Harry, and mine was momentarily out of sight on the floor, beneath my right shoe. Such sights must be so commonplace that he no longer really saw them.

He briskly moved forward, choosing the sans handkerchief table to move out of the way, so that we could troop around it.

The two then worked with such efficiency in returning our waistcoats and jackets, and assisting us in donning them, I could only conclude this, too, was not a new occurrence here. Of course, the odds were it was an event inside the Emporium which engendered stains needing removal before returning home, rather than what had happened to me.

When the three of us—the young blond patently had no vote in the matter, as he was merely the cart which carried the baggage—were satisfied with the results of our re-clothing endeavors, Reginald said, "Follow me."

This time, the words were actually meant, as neither of us had any bloody idea how to get out of the building once we turned left as we exited our little room, rather than right towards the way we came in.

As we walked, Reginald politely asked if we might be interested in examining any of the photographic selections with an eye towards purchase.

Harry spoke before I could. "Indeed, sir, I believe I speak for both L... my companion and myself when I say we are quite interested. But tonight has been a somewhat... *unusual* experience for both of us. I think we must have time to fully take it all in. May we come back on another occasion?"

If Reginald was disgruntled that all we had seen and presumably done had not put us in the right frame of mind to immediately and impulsively denude our wallets of all the cash we possessed—after all, Mr. Felcher was providing transportation, so we had no need of funds for either fare or tip—he hid it well. We must not have been the only ones so disinclined following a first private showing, as he was well prepared for our rejection. He took two cards from his waistcoat pocket, handed one to each of us.

"Our hours are listed on the cards, my lords. Mr. Felcher's initial on the back will allow you access to a private reading room where you may inspect the photographs at your leisure, even in some degree of comfort, in order to determine which you might appreciate even more in the privacy of your own homes."

We thanked him, and followed him through something of a maze of corridors and stairs until we were outside, though not where we had entered. Two carriages awaited.

"Only one will be necessary," Harry said.

Reginald's visage in the light from above the door did not indicate one way or the other what he thought of the two of us going off together after having shared such activities, though as I thought of it, he would surely be no more unduly surprised at that occurrence than he would be at finding the various residues of the various activities in the little rooms.

"Eighteen—" Harry started to say, but I cut him off.

"Do you know the Pig and Whistle, driver?"

"Aye, sir."

"Then let us out there."

“Aye, sir.”

We clambered in and shut the doors.

The ride to the tavern was silent. Harry had, as I expected he would, immediately understood my reluctance to share our actual addresses, or one of them, with anyone employed by the Emporium. Just as he had gone along with my desire not to disclose any part of our names. True, that might have been in vain, if Bentley had in fact made such a disclosure. And true, we might still be found out, as we were not attempting to visit the Emporium in some disguise, but there was no need to offer information on a silver salver.

The ride was an odd kind of combination of comfortable... and *not*.

We got out in front of the tavern, which was not one of London's finest, nor yet one of its worst, in a Seven Dials sort of way. Though if it were on a scale it would definitely tilt towards the slum side of the balance.

We had discovered it quite by accident one night when we had been out drinking and were quite in our altitudes. As we'd gotten into the cab, Harry was laughing uproariously over the joke we had just heard, the punch line of which was “The pig can whistle!” He repeated the punch line quite loudly, and in just the tone the teller had used, which set us into peals of laughter again. The cab lurched and started, and neither of us noticed we hadn't given the driver our directions.

Retrospectively, it was a somewhat long drive, much longer than it would have been to get to our homes from the Aurora Belle gambling hell, at which we had been judiciously and frugally losing money, and imbibing with neither judiciousness nor frugality. Nevertheless, we paid time no mind, nearly fell on our arses getting down the steps of the cab to the street, promptly paid and overpaid the driver, and *finally* noticed just where we were not.

We were, for a brief period, quite popular with the Pig's patrons, standing three rounds for the house, which mysteriously seemed to grow fuller with each round.

After that, it became something of a refuge for us. Where we could be just us, and laugh aloud in circumstances or for a reason for which the ton might only permit a smile, or a half smile at best. It seemed the logical location for a destination.

As the Emporium's carriage drove off, Harry sighed one of his great sighs and looked at me.

“Are you sorry?”

“For what?” My tone was puzzled, though if I had been less lost in my own thoughts, I would have realized without needing to be told.

He waved his arms in a broad gesture that encompassed photographs, photographers, private showings, private seedings in an almost public place, remembrances, all the ways in which we both knew our lives had changed in these few hours.

“My dear friend, not in the slightest.”

He sighed and grinned and said, “Well, then.”

I sighed and grinned and “Well, then’d” him back. Again.

He waited outside while I went in and gave the bartender a pair of shillings to send one of his lads for a hansom. The driver would likely be a friend of the bartender, and thus the slightly inflated fare would be shared. It was the way of the world.

The silence between us was now comfortable, as was the silence in which we shared the ride to Harry’s house.

Harry paid the driver, and in silence still, we watched the carriage roll away.

I let the silence linger just a little longer, enjoying his presence. Then he broke it. “*Well, then*, best of friends in this suddenly best of all possible worlds, will you come by tomorrow, and we can discuss this great adventure you have your heart set on, Mr. Burton?”

“Naturally, Intrepid Assistant.” I paused. “I just realized I have never inquired. *Do* you possess a name? I must needs jot it down in my notebook, to be sure I remember.”

He punched my shoulder lightly. We both knew we did not dare more, not even risk a handshake, as I suspected that had we engaged in even that innocuous and socially acceptable touching upon a parting, we might have laid ourselves open to suspicions, just from the sheer length of time our hands were together.

We nodded, and I turned and walked away. Had it not been odd to do so, I might have glanced back over my shoulder for one more look before he vanished inside. I resolutely looked forward towards my own destination.

I did not know what our ultimate Mecca might be for this Burton-esque journey of discovery upon which we were about to embark, but felt rather

certain that our Mecca-for-tomorrow, or the day after that, might well be Mr. Felcher's *Grand* Emporium.

Oh, grand indeed.

I grinned like an escaped loony, thankful no one could see me.

And if, behind the grin, I worried a little over what might happen to me, to us, if anyone in the ton—which is to say the entire ton, since what one knows, all know soon thereafter—found out one-tenth of one percent of what we had already done, or even less than that of the adventures we were contemplating, the adventures yet unknown to us, I was also thankful no one could see.

THE SECOND VISIT

Harry

14 October 1882, 8:00 a.m.

18 Bramwell Road

London

In that odd state between the blissful unawareness of full sleep and the beginning unpleasantness of waking up, I was exercising my poetic muscle, as I was sometimes wont to do. Stroking it, as it were. A pastime in which I was loathe to engage in public—glorious though I knew my muscle to be—as doing so subjected me to the slings and arrows of outrageous slurs from those who were entirely unable to comprehend the quality of what I produced, even if it bloody well bit them on each of their ignorant arses.

Once upon a morning dreary, while I slumbered, tired and weary

From the tumult of the day before—

While I slept on, clearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,

As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my bloody door.

“Goddamn visitor,” I more than muttered, “stop tapping at my chamber door!”

And then I realized the rapping and tapping were real. They ceased at my stern command, issued from above the pillow but beneath the bedclothes. However, they were almost immediately followed by the sound of the door opening, footsteps, and the rattling of the drapery rings on the rod as Bentley—no one else would dare—hurled the curtains open.

A breach! A most palpable breach!

I could discharge the blighter for this. I would, too, as soon as I became fully functional.

Bentley and I had a firm agreement about mornings. Or rather, to be accurate, it was a clear and remarkably precise set of instructions from a noble to his manservant. Designed—*well* designed, I might add—to establish efficient, proper procedures one could rely on, for uniformity in starting one's day. When I originally issued them—typewritten for the sake of clarity, as my handwriting sometimes confounds clarity—Bentley, instead of acknowledging them, and by his silence simply consenting to heed them, chose to begin a

discussion of them. He was not quite refusing to follow the points and procedures I had listed. Nevertheless, he was taking what might, to the uninitiated, be perceived as an adversarial stance vis-à-vis his employer's wishes, ah, *orders*. The result was an *invigorating* give and take, with some pushing and pulling, and an occasional verbal shove, perhaps, covering a wide range of shared and differing viewpoints.

Whenever I thought about the discussion, which was understandably as little as possible, it reminded me of that loud American at the Pemley rout, a fortnight prior, inquiring in that bold and brassy voice about "tuh-MAY-toes." Dreadful, quite dreadful, the American inability to pronounce anything correctly. Ever since we allowed their independence all those years ago, a consummation for which we have devoutly given repeated gratitude to the good God over the decades, their use of a fine language, the leading language of the world, had simply gone into an apparently never-ending downward spiral of inaccuracies and oddities.

I had, of course, regaled Bentley with the tale of my careful explanation of proper enunciation and pronunciation, which had unfortunately fallen on deaf, rather drunken ears. Thus, when articulating our differing conceptions with respect to instruction *versus* agreement, Bentley had been moved to comment, "Tuh-MAY-toe, toe-MAH-toe, my lord. Shall we call the whole matter off?"

"What matter?"

"Mornings."

I might have boggled a bit at him just then. "Mornings? You suggest we dispense with mornings, in their entirety? And leap, perhaps, straight to noon without any intervening hours? But I *need* mornings. They are quite the most important part of the day, when done properly."

It was only a little sigh, really. Such a tiny one. It was the "*Really*, my lord? Did you *really* just say that?" sigh.

It got to me; indeed it did, every time he used it.

So I instructed, he negotiated, and we came to an amicable understanding. Somehow, though, most of my listed points, carefully typed up, seemed afterward to be littering the floor of my sitting room. Rather as if he had taken the sheet of paper and ripped off each point, tossed it away, until only a tiny shred of paper remained as the outcome of our... journey to an understanding?

And that understanding was that not the slightest sliver of the dimmest daylight was to be allowed to enter my room until I had awakened, risen, taken

care of the most urgent physical necessities of morning, donned the robe Bentley had laid out the night before—although, of course, reserving the right to exercise my authority as master of the household to override his selection in favor of another—and finished my first cup of tea, with a hint of honey, a modicum of mint, and a little lemon.

Then, and only then, were the drapes to be drawn open, and whatever degree of daylight was loitering about the premises, craving admission, would be allowed to enter.

Fortunately for the future of Bentley's employment, the daylight he allowed in with his unseemly change of schedule was of the dim and dreary variety, thanks to thick grey clouds which portended rain. It kind of draped itself over everything in the room, layered itself over the bedclothes, beneath which I still hoped for a return to slumber, and then like an invading army of tiny, biting insects, crept under the covers and began assaulting my eyelids.

Defeated, I removed the covers from my head, twisted about so that as I sat up enough to support myself on my elbows, Bentley could receive the full effect of my glare.

I recall once, as a child, Reggie and I were taken to view one of Her Majesty's most powerful warships, recently arrived in port. It was towering, and above the water line gleaming brightly in the sun. We somehow got into one of our nonsensical arguments, that one being about who was the strongest. In truth, Reggie was—indeed, always has been—the stronger of the pair of us, with a body that even then displayed the promise of power, though I would never willingly admit that truth. That didn't stop me from arguing. Being in the wrong rarely did. And our assertions of what we would do to prove our claims rapidly escalated from the possible, to the mildly silly, to the ridiculous and then into the fantastical.

We of course did not just stop by mutual agreement, not even when reaching the realms of ridiculousness, as it was an understood thing such challenges could only end when one or the other of us would cease attempting to be at the top of the heap and challenge, "Prove it." After which one would have to make a good faith effort to do so, and if one failed—and given the stubbornness with which we both held on, failure was less of an option and more of an almost inevitability—one had to spend a part of one's allowance on a treat for the other, without buying anything for one's self, plus having to watch while the silly bugger devoured it.

Reggie said, "Prove it!" just after I blurted out "I can dent it!"

It was the HMS Agincourt, looking perhaps a thousand feet tall, in our eyes, as we stood in its shadow. We were on a dock where a Royal Navy ironclad was moored. Of course there was an abundance of things for me to use to "prove it!" I threw them all. A rock, a stone, several pieces of metal, a chunk of wood. I even threw a tantrum at it. Obviously to no avail.

The same lack of avail that went with my glare at Bentley.

Ah, well, one tried one's best.

I was about to toss off the covers, when I realized I was hard. A usual morning thing, of course, but today was different. By comparison, my ordinary erection was more of the softwood variety, a fir or a pine. This one, though, was a hardwood. Mahogany, perhaps, or teak. I avoided thinking of ebony. And then I chuckled. I would have to share my thought with Reggie. I had *morning wood!*

Alas, my wit did not solve the problem. Bentley has, quite naturally, seen my cock numerous times in our years together. How could he not? Most often flaccid, in the course of changing, but he has also seen my... yes, my *morning wood*... more than once. For a moment I could not understand why I hesitated to briefly display what had been so frequently displayed before.

And then came the other realization. Things had changed between us.

Certainly they had changed when I happened upon... came across in every sense... what I suspected to be only *part* of his collection of photographs of men doing the most erotic things together. And alone. Part of that change was that I now knew that he knew all about Mr. Felcher's Grand Emporium. Indeed, he had so intimate a knowledge of it that he could quite easily arrange for our admission, Reggie's and mine, to a *private* showing.

And that whole "Bendy Ben" thing. I could not believe that Bentley, *my* Bentley, was that person. And between last night and this rude awakening I had not had the opportunity to decide whether I even dared ask.

But most important was that he *knew*. Oh, I knew he would not be so crude as to say, "I know what you and Lord Smythe did last night," or last summer, or whenever. I did not seriously believe he had somehow been there, spying on us, so he could know no particulars, but the mere fact that we went, that he has gone as well, means he can guess with some degree of accuracy what went on.

I was not at all sure one's manservant should have such intimate knowledge of what one does with one's cock. He may freely assume, imagine, even, if he

will, but *knowing*? My accidental discovery seemed to have made a fine kettle of fish of our relationship.

Bentley sighed. As I was still not quite awake, although somewhat sitting up, and I had shut my eyes for my ruminations, I had to pause to figure that one out. Ah. The sigh that said, "If my lord wouldn't mind getting his arse moving about, I have better things to do with my time than waiting around while you do nothing." Perhaps phrased more politely if spoken aloud. Perhaps not.

I still dithered. My one small rebellion against the mores of society—undoubtedly now drowned in the vastly wider and far more dangerous rebellion into which Reggie and I had launched ourselves—was that I slept naked. Not even a nightcap. Had I worn the usual ankle-length, quite opaque nightshirt, even if my morning wood—a most delightful expression, I wonder who thought of it?—pushed it out, it would still be hidden. I could pretend it wasn't happening. But if I arose as I was I would be so exposed, somehow more than ever before.

The sigh not having done its job of getting my arse in motion, Bentley resorted to a repeat sigh, and words. "My lord, I have seen your prick and ballocks before. I am neither awed nor put off by the sight, regardless of the condition in which they are when I have observed them. You are, of course, the... ah... master of the house, so you are quite within your rights to stay where you are. However, as your visitor has expressed a most urgent desire to see you, though perhaps he did not quite intend that expression to be interpreted so literally by you, I shall simply show him up here."

"A visitor?"

"As I said, my lord."

"Who was then rapping, rapping on my chamber door?"

"No one, my lord."

"But I heard it!"

"Perhaps you heard him rapping on your *front* door, my lord. What with your excellent hearing and all. He was quite vigorous. Indeed, I feared for young Robert's safety when he opened it, but a fist to the forehead was fortunately avoided. Your guest has superb reflexes. I rather thought he might, though I have never previously had the opportunity to observe them in action. I came directly to advise you."

I clutched my head in consternation, uncaring that doing so added to the disarray. "But I said to stop the rapping and the rapping stopped."

"Inexplicable, my lord, inexplicable."

He paused.

I paused.

He paused longer than I did.

Truly, it was almost a foregone conclusion I would give in. I fully tossed back the covers, thankful my morning wood had become a *softwood*, rather than remaining a *hardwood*, and stood up.

Ha! I would have to share that with Reggie and Binky. They will get a chuckle out of it, perhaps even laugh out loud. But even as I turned towards the screen which hid the chamber pot, there was still some awkwardness between us. Bentley and me. Certainly not between me and Reggie and Binky. Ridiculous.

Though, perhaps, not *quite* ridiculous as to Reggie—an idea I found quite unnerving, as we had been such grand pals for so very long. But still, I would have to wait until I saw him later today, probably at the shooting match Hazelton had foolishly gotten himself involved in, to find out for sure. After all, we had wanked ourselves quite vigorously to a veritable Tambourine conclusion while watching two men suck each other, and slide their fingers in and out of each other's arses. Something we had most assuredly never done before, never contemplated doing.

Though perhaps I... No! I never.

And whatever awkwardness there might be, it would be far less if he was not aware, as he seemed not to be, as I prayed he in fact was not, that I was mostly watching him, and not Ralph and whoever. What a magnificent prick Reggie has! And how could I not have noticed it before?

I had been in his presence, along with other men, sometimes not, on occasions when he was partially disrobed, or even fully so. He was briefly visible in a changing room in that moment between drawers down, and during the occasional foolish dance men do to get them down to their ankles, or drawers up. Or as a towel was wrapped or unwrapped about his waist. As was proper, I had always quickly averted my eyes.

Always.

Sort of.

I had also seen him erect over the years, on five... no... *six* occasions.

Wait.

That was a thought I had never thought before! And as anyone in my circle of friends would be most happy to affirm, Reggie chiefest among them, a new thought in my brain box was a rarity indeed. A thing worthy of a modest celebration, even.

I actually *knew* when I had seen Reggie with an erection?

It appears I did.

Which thought, of course, did nothing whatsoever for my tumescence as I rounded the screen, vanished from Bentley's view, and pointed my prick in the direction of the piss-collector.

My prick was so... ordinary. Had Benedick been speaking of his dick, instead of Beatrice and her lips, et cetera, what might he have said? "One prick, of indifferent length and girth, of palest color; item, one knob, flushed dark and with usual red when aroused; item, two ballocks, of smallish egg size..."

And then there was Reggie's. Shorter than mine, though I profess no prick proficiency in terms of visual comparative size determinations. It was only right, it seemed to me, that in at least *one* other measurement, besides height, that he would be smaller than me. In all other ways, he was superior. Shoulders broader than mine. A wide, bulky chest to go with his wonderfully stocky frame. A mustache of which he could be proud, whereas I could only grow wisps that would never amount to anything remotely approaching a mustache.

And then there was, I now knew with certainty, his prick. Those brilliant, ropy veins. And his girth. So very, very thick. I wondered how he could get his hand around it, though I saw that he seemed to.

I wondered if my hand...

Bloody hell! No. I didn't wonder that at all. That was a... disgusting? ...no, that was an *unnerving* thought to think about one's best friend.

Wasn't it?

Bentley's assertive cough interrupted my thoughts. He has almost as sophisticated a language of coughs as he does of sighs. This one was "*Well*, my lord?" Were we other than master and manservant, that cough might have

conveyed a tacked on "What the bloody hell is taking you so long to piss?" But of course he would never do that.

I forced my mind to engage in erection-reducing, piss-inducing thoughts. Ah. The very thought. Great-aunt Ophelia walking in and seeing my morning hardwood, and expiring on the spot from apoplexy. Not a thing one wanted to do to one's great-aunt, who might yet leave one a bit or more than a bit in the Funds.

At last! I began what turned out to be a rather long and loud piss. Oh well, nothing he had not heard before, either. Pissing is a perfect time for either thinking no thoughts at all, or thinking quickly.

Reggie and I had been more than loose fishes last night. And in the bright, oh, very well, the dim grey light of the next day, I was uncertain whether having done so was good or bad, for all our Burton-esque enthusiasm at the end of last night's adventure. Ah well, as the Bard should have said, "Whether good or woe, put on your thinking caps, and make it so."

I stroked the last drops out, flipped a bit to be sure, and allowed myself just a single stroke more while wishing for a wank, but restrained myself.

I stepped out, and the uncertainties that had vanished in my contemplation of prick dimensions, and fish, returned. Bentley was seeing my front again. And as I walked towards the screen he had seen my arse, as he had so often before. But I could not help but wonder, nervously, whether Bentley had been *looking* at my arse, whereas before he might have been merely observing it. Uncaring, as it were. Like one might observe a chair, or a wall hanging. Though my arse was, if I said so myself, and who the bloody else possibly could, a rather fine, tight, muscular arse.

I shook my head to dislodge it of these nearly riotous thoughts, and held up my hand to indicate it was nothing about which Bentley need be concerned.

I would take my cue from Bentley, who once so wisely said, as he was holding my head whilst I cast up my accounts, "This too, shall pass, my lord, though of course no passing would be needed if you didn't find quite so many occasions to go off and be something of a loose fish."

Last night's loose fishiness firmly set aside, I looked at the clothes he had set out. Unacceptable. And I would certainly tell him so. A nobleman of good breeding, though that is, to a certain extent, an oxymoron, would never greet a visitor wearing so few clothes. A pair of silk drawers, a somewhat full-sleeved shirt to be pulled over one's head and buttoned up the front, a pair of loose

trousers, dark braces, and slippers! No cuffs. No collars. No vest. No coat. No stockings!

Unacceptable, indeed!

I opened my mouth to advise Bentley—in a most polite manner, naturally, as upon occasion he has from time to time taken exception to what was really a most innocuous comment—that his selection was... was... Well, I was not quite sure precisely how to phrase it, but he eliminated the necessity of my chastising him.

Bentley of the discerning eye had obviously discerned my disgruntlement over his garment designations, as he said, “Do you wish to keep Lord Smythe waiting?”

Reggie was here! I almost curtly told Bentley that of course I did not wish him to wait, and that I would dress... *properly dress*... in a jiffy. I was more astute than some might at times believe me to be, as I immediately realized making such a statement was akin to my last brag during that word war on the dock with the *Agincourt*. Dressing properly and my jiffiness were inherently incompatible.

Bentley would naturally have held the drawers so that I might step into them easily, but there was still that woozum in my tum-tum feeling, so I got to the bed first, grabbed them up, and put them on. He held out my shirt, leaned in slightly, and delicately sniffed.

It was while he was holding the shirt in a position from which I could more readily get my arms and head properly placed, and thus when I straightened he could pull it down, he said, “You might briefly avail yourself of a breath mint, my lord. And in lieu of bathing, I have set out an appropriate cologne. A little dab will do for you, my lord. Only a little.”

One overdoes it with one's selection of cologne once... *only once and nevermore!* ...and one is never allowed to forget it.

I minted, and dabbed, and donned in a flurry, and rushed downstairs. Though only a reasonable rush. The stairs are polished mahogany, *highly* polished, and soft slippers combined with rushing were a combination designed to create a long slip-slide-fall-flip-bounce-tumble-twist down to the bottom, ending with the bang of a broken limb. A wrist, it was.

And when I reached the bottom of the steps, I stopped what might have been a headlong rush to the library where I was sure he had taken himself, if Merriman had not suggested it.

What if... What if he had changed his mind? Was no longer Burton to my Intrepid Assistant? What if he regretted all he and I had seen and done? Despite the fact there were other men there doing precisely, or presumably precisely, the same *type* of thing we were doing, we had gone far beyond the pale.

Our arrival at the Emporium was perhaps only a furlong outside the ton's boundaries. Staying once we both knew what we would be seeing, and quite possibly doing, put us a mile or more outside. But staying and *doing* left us league upon league upon league away. So many leagues, if we had looked back we could not have seen the staked fence that set the border.

And was this urgency to see me, then, this urgency so vast he could not wait to arrive at a considerably more decent hour—his arrival being something a bit beyond my personal pale, as it were—because he wished to inform me of a change of heart? Was I about to be told he had firmly re-ensconced himself well inside the pale once more, and that if I wished to go adventuring outside, I would have to do it without my best friend?

I slowed even more.

Stopped outside the door with my hand on the knob.

Inhaled. Exhaled.

I was no Hal before the siege of Harfleur. Nor ever would be. I was more that man of modest stillness and humility, and if it was not a blast of war blowing in my ears, still it was a battle of sorts before me. So I imitated perhaps a tiger kitten, summoning up its blood, and hesitantly opened the bloody door to my own damned library.

Reggie

14 October 1882, 8:02 a.m.

18 Bramwell Road

London

I really should not have come so early.

I should not, perhaps, have come at all.

I *know* Harry is a less-than-early riser, with *early* being somewhere around ten, and *ordinary* between eleven and twelve. I had ample time in which to consider the wisdom of my action.

I was far too excited to continue sleeping until my usual rising at nine. Granted, perhaps that is not all that much earlier than Harry, but then I am awake when I wake. I do not require a careful, rigorously followed procedure and a major infusion of oddly made tea—mint? really?—before being able to communicate in a rational fashion.

My excitement was, obviously, partially in *that* way, which I readily resolved by taking matters in hand, but also because my mind was brimming over with turbulent, tumbling ideas and feelings. I was experiencing, as Harry would probably describe it, a very major mini-Tambourine mental moment.

I allowed my thoughts to digress to a brief wonderment about whether I could ever educate him to the fact it was Mount *Tambora*. Or whether he knew and just did it to bedevil me.

Waking at half past six, or more correctly, waking earlier and finally deciding to rise at half six, thoroughly upset my household. They were all accustomed to my deep sleep, and equally accustomed to having time to themselves, to get their own days started in a perhaps more leisurely fashion than in most fashionable households. Though I would rate mine as only quasi-fashionable. No. 24 Bramwell Road is not one of the most desirable locations in the city. And I am certainly not in the upper echelons of the ton when it comes to entertaining... or anything, really.

When I rang for Bartlett, he showed up after a wait not discernibly longer than the usual one at nine, which is not long at all, looking as immaculate as ever. I briefly wondered if he was some sort of kin to Polidori's vampyre... standing beside his bed the whole night, motionless, fully dressed. But of

course, given his plumpness and ability to endure the occasional English days of bright sun, it could not be. But still... I wondered: how does he do that?

Not for long. A bathe, a shave, a careful trimming and tip-waxing of my mustache, a rather ridiculous amount of time spent deciding what I would wear on a far-too-early morning call on my best friend, and by a quarter to eight I was ready to storm down the street and pound on the door to No. 18.

I managed to restrain myself until 7:58. A normal walk from the closing of my front door to the use of the knocker on his is three minutes. I made it in two. And used the knocker... vigorously. Followed by my fist.

Stupid thing, using your fist on a door when there's a perfectly good knocker you have just used. Even more stupid to be paying less than perfect attention so that you almost smash a perfectly good servant in the face and render him useless.

We recovered from our respective startlements, and I managed a reasonably polite apology as I brushed past him into the foyer. Whereupon I quite manfully refrained from bellowing that ancient army command, "Wakey-wakey, rise and shine!" Followed immediately, of course, by, "Harry, you bugger!"

Wouldn't that have given Merriman and Harry's staff a cause for apoplexy?

Other than Robert, the nearly face-smashed, and a maid of some sort peeking around a corner, for a moment there was no one else around. I was inhaling to do, or say... something... when Merriman appeared. His expression was, of course, perfectly blank, emotionless, the kind of expression that *lacks* expression, and was one to which most men of the ton aspire, but never achieve quite so well as the finest of butlers. Or manservants.

Merriman had undoubtedly graduated at the head of his class in the Royal Academy of Butlery. Given the color of Bentley's skin, he would not have been given admittance to the Royal Academy of Manservantry, so I could only conclude his was an innate ability that matched the finest education known to buttledom.

And it was Merriman's fine education which was being used against me just then. The non-expression that was so very disapproving of the riotous escapades of one who should have known better than to cause such alarums and excursions at an inexcusably early hour in this household. The "one," of course, being me.

Noblemen do not apologize to servants, even to the royalty of servanthood: a butler. Most particularly not one who has known you since you were in nappies. "I need to see... Lord Fotherby. Quite urgent."

Fortunately for my inability to lie rapidly and effectively, Merriman did not inquire about the nature of the urgency and sent Robert upstairs. He would naturally not have the temerity to knock on Harry's door, but would instead seek out Bentley. He was ascending the long staircase at a pace befitting a funeral procession, or so I interpreted it. I could not, of course, directly give him an order, but nothing prevented me from saying in a tone loud enough to be heard by the slowest of servants, "Did I mention, Merriman, that the matter is rather urgent?"

"Why, yes, my lord. I heard you quite clearly the first time. Are you dying?"

My denial was somewhat sputtered.

"Then, my lord, I suggest you await Lord Fotherby's rising elsewhere than the foyer. The library?"

I could hardly object, and by the time this little colloquy had ended, Robert had vanished. *Finally*.

I allowed myself to be led to the room *I* had pointed out to Harry as the best selection for his library. Not that Harry was much of a reader. I learned on the occasion of my first visit to the stocked library that while he had purchased impressive and tasteful furnishings—both synonymous with him—he had apparently purchased the books that lined the shelves of the floor-to-ceiling bookcases by the yard. The books were even more impressively bound than the room they adorned, fine leathers, gilt lettering... and utterly worthless.

Alone, I looked somewhat longingly at the second-most comfortable chair in the room. The first was, of course, the one behind the carved mahogany desk. The second was part of the arrangement before the fireplace. I had a legitimate claim to have its benefits for my own arse, since I was there first, but I graciously deferred to my lazy-arsed host who would undoubtedly make me wait until nine or later.

I would sit elsewhere. When I finally sat. Pacing was better just then.

Because it had suddenly occurred to me: what if Harry had changed his mind? True, he was responsible for everything that happened last night. Indeed,

he was. I could, quite, quite easily, as I did so very many times in our youth, blame his impulsiveness, his... venturesomeness, for the escapade into which he launched us last night, and its consequences. So it was not logical that after all that, after he had offered me the sight of that glorious prick, and introduced me to the incredible joys of wanking beside your best friend while watching beyond the pale perversions being enacted before you, that he would retreat.

But logic and Harry are not always close acquaintances.

I wanted Harry to be experiencing all the feelings I was feeling when I awakened, when I dressed, when I waited, when I rushed over here.

Except... what if he wasn't?

We were so... unaware of ourselves all these years. So rigid in following the rules laid down for our class. Harry has his Wednesday night women, and I... have Marie. We did all the things expected of spares who were no longer needed, but had enough money to live, if not extravagantly, though Harry was far closer to that than I, but still well enough.

Our rule-following was public. And even with each other. Yet I still managed my own tiny, tiny rebellions. In private. In secret. All the while wanting something more, something to alleviate the sameness of our days and evenings and nights, even though I so thoroughly enjoyed the companionship of my best friend.

After last night, I was certain Harry had his own secret rebellions, as small and private as mine. Until a fortuitous chance led him to come across Bentley's photographs.

My lips twitched at the mental... ah... picture that evoked. Before last night I would have had no basis in fact for imaging what that "coming across" might have looked like. I had so few details once he relented and told me the tale. Pictures. Six. One of which was two men doing what Ralph and Alex were doing so enthusiastically while so many men watched and wanked.

And if he wasn't sharing my feelings, I would... I would *persuade* him it was the only right and proper thing to do. Harry is all about what is right and proper.

Or... mostly so. He has always said that of the two of us, *I* was the one with the propriety stick up my arse. And I will admit, though naturally never aloud, that there might be a modicum of truth to that. But still, to whatever differing

degree of belief or adherence we worshipped at the altar of propriety, we had always done so. Had expected that we would do so *ad infinitum*. Together.

How very odd. An image of two horses in tandem, pulling together, until they finally died in harness, still together. I shrugged it off.

But that all changed last night.

Perhaps.

We could, and if he insisted I would, as I would have no choice, just pretend last night never happened. Put those memories on a Viking longship incongruously docked at a London wharf. Lay them out properly on highly flammable twigs and branches. Drape them in flammable cloths, soaked in kerosene. And then with all due solemnity, pomp, and the odd circumstance, tow the longship to the middle of the Thames, where the current could grab it up, toss a torch or two on it, and with great good fortune, the brilliant pyre would make it all the way to the sea without setting anything else afire.

No.

I wouldn't—*couldn't!*—allow that to happen.

Harry had to see, I had to make him see all I had seen when I couldn't sleep.

And when I wasn't wanking.

There are so very many possibilities now. We have, I think, a potentially amazing journey ahead of us, considering how many things there are we never knew, have never experienced. And now we can. Try them all, or, well, perhaps not quite *all*. I rather suspect that there are some things about men having sex with each other that I will decide I do not want to be doing. Not even with Harry's damned, wheedling, "Oh, come on, you should try it just once. Then you'll *really* know if you like it or not."

But still, we are, we can be, we must be, on an open road, as it were, perhaps even a road leading to love.

Though I rather have my doubts about men being capable of love, at least with members of their own gender. For all the rigidity of the ton's moral rules, as most delicately laid down over the years by Her Majesty's most dainty iron fist, our sex is far more the flighty of the two. Generally emotionally unstable, flitting from this to that, from hither to thither to yon, all for no more sound reason than that our emotions, or the whim of the day, send us off that way. Unable to commit to something with vast dedication and for the long term. Unless, of course, the subject of the commitment is business, gambling, sports,

women, or drinking. And, in addition, possibly gambling, sports, women and drinking.

Harry and I should count ourselves lucky that we were not afflicted with the women part of the list of obsessions. And that we have, while engaging with some avidity in our own business interests, been rather more moderate with sports, gambling and drinking. Though moderation has not *always* been our byword with the latter.

But whether we could each find a man, the *right* man, the man we might love in private and in secret shadows, the way some few couples of men and women loved brightly and well in the light of the sun, was something I could not quite figure out. Although one thing I *had* figured, and that was the likelihood of devastation on the part of the one left behind, if only *one* of us achieved that.

I ceased my dreary ruminations and my pacing and stared out the window at the rain which had just begun to fall in visible delicate downward lines. I heard the door open. Undoubtedly Merriman or someone to give me some idea of how long I would have to wait for their lord and master's august presence. But when I turned around, it was Harry entering.

My mouth fell open.

Still gaping, I glanced at the clock on the mantle... 8:18? ...then looked back at Harry. "You're here."

He looked somewhat miffed, and, for him, somewhat tense. "Well, of course I'm here. I *live* here, chowderhead."

"I *know* that, dunderhead, but as you well know I was referring to the fact that you are awake and moving about, and actually *here*, in this very room."

"Through no fault of mine."

I waved that silliness away. "I was quite prepared to wait for you, you know."

"No, I didn't know. How the bloody hell could I?" He plopped down on the more comfortable fireplace chair I so generously forbore from using.

I sat opposite him. "When are you going to get more comfortable chairs to replace these two?" I squirmed a little. "I was here first, and the fact I did not use *that* chair was solely because of the deep and abiding affection in which I hold you."

Plus not wishing to wait out the emotional fluctuations if I were occupying it when he entered. Harry is *such* a stickler for order, and regularity in all things.

Harry was sitting nearly erect in the chair, not as relaxed as he normally was when we chatted together anywhere. "Why should I make such a purchase? Those chairs are invaluable for hinting to unwanted, importunate, far-too-bloody-early-arriving visitors, that their time might be better used elsewhere. And soon."

I somewhat wriggled again and found the least-uncomfortable position for my arse. Harry smiled and began to relax. Just a little.

"But there you are and here am I, yanked from my most *comfortable* bed betimes. And if you were willing to wait until a more reasonable time, the least you could have done was to communicate that minor fact so that word would reach Bentley, before he betimes'd me out of sleep. Instead you apparently went on and on and possibly, *bloody on!* about needing to see me on a most urgent matter." He did his very best to sound petulant, an effect he sometimes quite spontaneously achieved, though more in his earlier years than these latter days, but could not quite carry it off.

I gave him one of my best huffs. "I *merely* said—"

He wagged his finger at me. "You are about to lie, you know."

"*I most certainly am not!*"

The bastard smirked at me. "Well, of course you're not going to lie *now*. I caught you out, and you'd look rather a fool if you tried anyway. And did you listen to yourself just now?"

I always listen to myself, for certainty about what I have said.

Mostly.

Sometimes.

I glared.

He smirked. "When I pointed out your incipient lie, your response was a vigorous 'I am not,' which is a statement that *at that instant* you were not going to be lying to me. Not at all the same thing as a vigorous denial that you *were* on the verge of lying."

Caught.

"Oh, very well. Yes, I was about to lie, and say I had not said anything about urgent, but had merely urged importance." I paused. "And how did you know? Or was it just a bloody good guess?"

Smugness abounded in the room. Filled it overfull, pushed at the walls and doors and windows, seeking outlet. "I always know. Ah. That is not quite true. *Nearly* always know."

"How?"

Another finger-waggle. "That would be telling."

"Indeed it would. Inquiring minds wish to know. One in particular."

He paused. "Oh, very well. I'll tell you, but I don't think it will change anything. For a while, perhaps, but then you'll forget. You see, you do this... this *thing* with your lips."

"I most certainly do not. I am an *excellent* liar! Ah, when the proper occasion requires it."

"Indeed, you are. If called upon, I would laud your lying abilities to the skies, to Her Majesty herself. But still, you do have your, ah, *thing*."

"And just what bloody thing is that?"

"I cannot begin to describe it. Well, I most likely could, if I gave some thought to it, but too much detail might allow you to overcome it. And then, where would I be? Suffice it to say that there is a peculiar compression of your lips, and the tiniest of twitches which indicate your nefarious intent."

I composed my face into the rigidity of one of Madame Tussaud's creations, and lied. "My name is Harold Cuthbert Montgomery James Fotherby." I finished and gave him a "Ha!" smirk. I refrained from sticking my tongue out at him, and saying, "So there!" He would understand I was thinking it, anyway.

"Reggie, you..."

He paused, looking somewhat... shocked? aghast?

In the... excitements... of last night he had addressed me by my first name five times. I seem to have been counting them for no apparent reason I can discern. I had not done the same to him, and have avoided trying to determine why. Avoided thinking about it all, truth be told.

Until this moment I could have told myself it was merely high emotion that led to such a departure from proper address; could have assured myself that in

the light of day, however bright or dim, we would revert to the old ways, the right and proper ways.

Where before it would have been Smythe, or something ambiguous, Harry stopped all that delusion with just one word. Aloud. In daylight. Under no discernible duress or distress.

Did it... could it? ...mean he did not wish to go backwards to propriety, but perhaps step out on that suddenly more-wide-than-ever open road with me?

I could only find out by taking my turn. "Harry."

We sat mumchance for a moment. The tension I sensed in Harry on his entrance was still there, expanded now. I was feeling it as well.

Harry sighed, a quite ordinary sigh, exactly like the one I was repressing. "We have to talk don't we?"

I nodded.

"Bloody hell."

"Bloody bugging hell."

"Bloody bugging *fucking* hell."

"Bloody bugging fucking *goddamn* hell."

"HMS *Agincourt*."

I spread my arms, graciously tilted my torso slightly forward, bowing with nearly no condescension to acknowledge his win. "Game."

"Set."

"Match."

"Piqued." And then he laughed, letting a tiny bit of tension out of the air. He went on, "Repiqued. And capoted. And no more of that."

I grinned an "Oh, very well, if you insist" back at him.

But not all the tension was gone. How could it be?

I had asked for this meeting—forced it, in fact—knowing that while he could have had Bentley, or any of his other servants deny me entrance, deny his presence... "Called away to the country, last night, my lord. Didn't say when he'd return." I should set things in motion.

"I had some revelations last night, Harry. A whole bloody book of them."

And I waited, while he sat blank faced.

And waited.

Finally, he said, with a large grin most assuredly not directed at my words, "Did you *really* expect me to laugh, Reggie? Smile even? I hope you didn't spend any vast amount of time thinking that line up. Awful, Reggie, just... bloody awful. I do not think you have a career in writing for the music halls."

Then the bloody bugger laughed. *At* me.

It took me only a moment to realize he was quite right. And realize that with that feeble attempt at humor I was trying to avoid what we needed to learn from each other.

Another silence settled in.

Which I was duty-bound to break. "Do you... do you *regret* last night?"

"Regret? I? *I was worried about you, you daft bugger!*"

And with that he let out a sharp burst of laughter and sagged back in his chair, all tension gone. If he did not look quite as boneless and sagging as we most surely had at the just-past-the-peak of things last night, it was near enough so as make no discernible difference.

I followed his lead and sagged and grinned as well.

The silence this time was... to use a word I had used far too often since my arrival... *comfortable*. We even smiled at each other in a most unusual manner. It would probably have earned us a "what are you loons grinning about?" from Binky, or others of our friends. Most particularly as we were not known for that kind of public display of emotion.

Privately, however. Ah, privately had changed, indeed.

"So, what next, *Reggie*?" he asked, sitting up again, planting his feet squarely on the floor as if he might leap up and do something *active* so very early in the morning. Not even nine yet! I found I quite... *liked*, only that and nothing more, the sound of my name on his lips. And his eyes said he delighted in saying it.

"What next, indeed, *Harry*?" How very childlike, perhaps, to take so much delight in using our private names once again. No one in my family used that degree of intimacy; formality was the preferred mode. And for all his inherent ebullience, frequently masked, or at the least, restrained, when out among the ton, I felt sure his family was as formal as mine.

I shared with him my thoughts on open roads leading to adventure. There was no need to mention love in relation to those roads, as it was such an unlikely ending to the journey. No, if I were honest with myself, an impossibility. Although that kind of ending would actually be the beginning of a new adventure. I sighed inwardly, wishing it were so, regretting it was not, would never be.

"So, Mr. Burton... or might I, as your faithful, Intrepid Assistant, be so bold as to address you as... Richard? Perhaps even... Dick?" Harry sniggered a childish snigger, and I sniggered right back.

I gave him a very queenly wave indicating approval, his twinkling eyes recognizing Her Majesty as the source. Not that we ever saw her up close. While a cat may certainly look at a king, and get close enough to do so, a pair of spares could only observe a queen from a distance. "You may address my dick if you wish, Harry, but I rather think I prefer just... Reggie."

This first-name usage and accompanying grins were going to derail our discussion. It was clearly my obligation to get us back on track.

"Lose your virginity last night, did you?"

"*What?*" His voice was pure astonishment. "I have been wanking, I'll have you know, since... since forever. I am sure I discovered it well before you did, you stodgy old thing."

"Arse. And you know that's not what I meant."

"Very well, then. *Yes*. I had not done that with anyone before. Or to be more precise, *beside* anyone before, or even more precisely, in the presence of anyone else."

"The same for me."

"And the reason for this inquiry?"

"To determine a starting point for our journey. A journey should always have a clear starting point and a plan. And a goal."

"A goal, Reggie? A bloody *plan*? Good Lord, just what do you have in mind for a goal towards which we must ever strive via this undisclosed plan of yours?"

"Oh, very well... again. I don't know what the goal should be. It's not like we've decided to take a trip to see your bloody Mount Tambourine."

"Where?"

"*Mount Tambourine*, you silly arse. You say it all the time."

"I never. I'm not acquainted with any mountain named after a percussion instrument with tiny bells. Do you by any chance refer to that volcano in the East Indies that exploded some while back? It's *Mount Tambora*, you know."

I glared. He giggled in a most unmanly manner. Something he would never, I thought, have allowed himself to do before last night.

"Still, even if we don't quite know—"

"Have no bloody idea—"

"As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, even if we have no idea where we might finish, we should plan out what we would like to do, what we would like to accomplish."

"You mean *experience*, don't you? Your bloody plan is to make a list of the things you... we... would like, might like, to do with... with men? And then what, we tick them off as we do them?"

He snickered. "Item: suck a cock. Done, 17 October. Tick! Item: finger an arse. Done, 18 October. Tick! Item: Get my cock sucked. Done, 19 October. Tick!"

As he went on and on with his silly, and oh-so-very-true examples of what we had seen at the Emporium, he started laughing until he lost control and had to stop. I endured.

When he finally stopped gasping for air, I said, "Quite."

"But how will you know what to put on your list?"

"What?"

"Well, my dear friend, what did we learn last night? We learned that one's cock can go most enjoyably in and out of another chap's mouth. Suck and be sucked as it were. We learned that it is possible for one or more of one's fingers to go in and out of another man's arse, to the mutual enjoyment of both. We learned, much to my surprise, I freely admit, that placing one's mouth on another man's arse, or to be more precise, his arsehole, can also be a method of mutual enjoyment. Though I am not at all certain how or why that might be."

I quite naturally did not mention the image in my mind of Harry with... with *someone's* mouth on his arse, writhing and panting in incipient ecstasy.

"And by a natural and logical extension of our observations, we learned, though we did not observe, that quite probably a man might enjoy having a cock up his arse, as much if not more than one might enjoy, ah, shoving it in."

Ridiculous. We were *not* breathing more heavily merely from the activity of creating a list of... of *activities*.

"So, what do we add to this list of yours next, Reggie?"

"Uh, I thought *you* might have some ideas. After all, you have access to Bentley's, ah, collection."

Harry sighed and leaned towards me. Almost as if he were about to kiss me? Ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous. And I held my breath—*not*, most assuredly *not* in any sort of anticipation—until he ostentatiously... *sniffed!* me.

"Well, as I cannot smell it, I can only conclude you have been *tippling—extensively*—from that rather large bottle of vodka Count Bykov pressed on you for introducing him to the delights of that gambling hell, and the brothel next door. How else could you be foxed so early in the morning?"

"Foxed? F-f-foxed?" I paused until I was able to rein in my suddenly stuttering tongue. "I am *not* foxed. I don't *get* foxed." I stopped at that. "Very well, damn it. Not often. And not in the bloody morning!"

"Then you must be a candidate for Bedlam. It is the only alternative explanation I can come up with for your, how shall I put this delicately? ...your *insane* belief that I have *access* to what you term Bentley's 'collection.'"

"Uh. You don't?"

"Reggie, with all the respect to which you are entitled because of our long friendship, are you bloody off your chump? I have seen six—count them in your mind if you are capable of counting to such an astronomical value—*six* of his photographs. I saw them on *one* occasion, quite by chance. I am now the owner of one of them since he was reluctant to accept the return of a photograph so thoroughly stained with his employer's bloody damned seed." He paused for breath. "And none of the six showed anything other than what is already on this list of yours."

"Perhaps you might ask?"

Harry waved his hands in the air and said something that sounded remarkably like "argh!" but I could not quite ascertain its meaning. However, the sort-of growl which followed gave me a hint.

"Just how do you see that conversation going, Reggie? 'Bentley, would you be so kind as to allow me to borrow your photographic collection for a comparatively short time, if I promise that when I wank over them I will catch all of my seed and avoid staining?'"

"Ah, well—"

"Or perhaps I might say, 'Bentley, your employer, who has now realized he is a bloody friend of Edward's, is quite committed to outdoing the infamous Mr. Scrooge when it comes to miserliness, so rather than spend money acquiring my own set of photographs, might I borrow yours? *If I bloody well promise not to stain them when I wank because of them?*'"

"But... but you don't have to wank."

"Really, Reggie? *Really?* And just what was your reaction when you examined the photographs that were in the book at Mr. Felcher's Emporium?"

The bastard knew damned well what my reaction was. And his silence made me say it. "I became erect."

"Oh," he said with far more mockery than was strictly necessary, "you became *aroused*. In other words your cock got hard. And you wanked. And you fairly well drenched that cloth with your seed." He paused, blank faced for just a moment. "Or so I assume."

"But that was because I was... because *we were*... watching Ralph and Alex do all those things."

"Are you seriously claiming that if everything they did was displayed in a series of photographs showing every activity in clearest detail, set out before you, that you would *not* have wanked?"

He was, of course, quite right. And I had no choice but to agree with him. Though my concession speech was somewhat grumbling and brief. "Well, I wouldn't have spewed that well with just photographs."

He merely looked at me with that game-set-match expression. And then, with the tone of one leading a child... a perhaps utterly recalcitrant child... to the edge of actually learning something, said, "So. Your first plan being an abysmal failure, what alternative do you have?"

"It was *not* a plan, Harry. It was merely... a thought. A suggestion. A *possibility*. After all, why should you expend funds if there is a way to avoid doing so?"

"Scrooge."

"Profligate nephew, whatever-the-hell-his-name-was."

"So, then. We are going to visit the Emporium in lieu of checking the eighth edition of the *Britannica*, or those volumes of the ninth already published, to see what knowledge we might acquire?"

"Yes, arse." I reached into my waistcoat pocket and extracted the card the other Reginald had given to me.

"You are going to carry that card with you forever, or until it wears out?"

"Well, I can't exactly leave it at home unless I can find a safe hiding place. Bartlett might find it."

"So you slept with it under your pillow?"

"Ah, well, no. I, um, put it under the mattress. I didn't want it tossed on the floor if I became restless on my pillows."

"Wanking restless?"

Damn. The best defense thing, then. "And you didn't?"

"Of course I did. You don't really think I would be so foolish as to waste all those marvelous images in my head on a single wank, no matter how gloriously enjoyable it was, do you?"

He thought our wank was glorious? Or perhaps not. Perhaps only that the wank was glorious, and the "our" part, the side-by-side part with me furtively watching that glorious prick being stroked, was something he was unaware of, or did not feel.

"No, of course not." I looked down and examined the rather fine print on the card. "It appears they are open on Saturdays from noon to four. And again from nine onwards."

"I think I would prefer my, ah, education, sooner rather than later."

"Agreed. Shall we meet there?"

"Or ride, side by side, in a hansom?"

That odd image, of two horses in tandem, flickered through my thoughts and vanished.

"Side by side, indeed."

And then we both just sat there. It was not long at all before Harry grinned at me. "I *have* seen your cock before."

"I am aware of that."

"An impressive prick, really. Thick and veiny, though I have so few others to compare it with in terms of impressiveness. But still, I *have* seen it. So why are you embarrassed?"

"I am *not* embarrassed."

"But you are nevertheless sitting there, undoubtedly as erect as I am, without making a move to leave when we both know this conversation has ended." And Harry, the bastard, spread his legs wide so I could see how very, *very* erect he was. Leaking erect. *Staining* erect.

Perforce, I had no recourse but to flaunt myself to him as well, lest I be derided as cowardly. Our stares at our best friends' pricks were intense. But still...

"I am merely waiting," I told him, "for a brief time so that I do not embarrass myself."

"By leaving here erect and... yes, yes, *leaking* as well?"

"Of course that's what I mean, you silly blighter."

Harry put his bloody *damn him damn him damn him* hand between his legs and squeezed his prick. "*This* isn't going to go down without a good wank, now that you've planted all these images in my head, and stirred up recollections of the others. You're in the same condition, are you not?"

"Yes, damn it."

"And it should be obvious even to the dimmest of minds that we cannot reenact last night in my library at this time of morning? Or most likely, at *any* time of day or night?"

I begrudgingly acknowledged the truth of his words with a squeeze of my own, and upped the ante—as we had recently learned in playing poker—with a slight stroke.

He winced.

I won that round.

"We are about to embark on an adventure, are we not, Reggie?"

I acknowledged that truth with a nod.

"The *old* Reggie, the staid and stodgy Reggie who abides by all the rules, would never do something so outrageous as simply getting up, letting himself out of the library, out of this house, and boldly walk back to No. 24 with something of a saunter, despite the rain, not hiding his prick display at all. Would he?"

I of course saw where this was going. I was helpless to stop it. I didn't really want to. "Not bloody likely."

“But the *new* Reggie, the neddy-boy who’s going to soon set off on an adventure into the wildness of pricks and mouths and arses, and experience all the inventiveness in which friends of Edward’s might indulge—”

“Not *all*, Harry.” I had to retain some boundaries.

The bugger laughed. I found I quite liked his laugh, more than I ever had before. “Very well. *Some* of the inventiveness, perhaps even *most* of the inventiveness that friends of Edward’s have conjured up before. The *new* Reggie would do just that, and when he got home, he would retire to privacy and wank himself to a marvelous seeding, knowing all the while his best friend would be in private himself, doing the same. Perhaps even with the two of them sharing the same images inside their heads. Wouldn’t he?”

I doubted his images would be quite the same as mine, but he was nevertheless essentially correct. “He would.”

I sat there. Just to taunt him. He finally gave in—another victory for me—and asked why I was not moving.

“My dear friend, as you well know I have had a propriety pole lodged so far up my arse for so many bloody years that it’s rather difficult to get rid of it. ’arf a mo’, guv’nor.”

I grinned. He grinned. I stood, and with a final teasing squeeze did exactly as he had described, or more accurately, as he *prescribed*.

It was a most glorious wank not all that many minutes later. I was confident his was glorious as well.

Harry

14 October 1882, Noon
37 Preston Street
London

Precisely on time. How very un-tonnish of us. We even managed to arrive just as the various bells of the city hit the first stroke of noon. At differing-by-seconds times. I looked at Reggie and grinned in response to his. It was a grin I had not seen in many years, and since we were still in the cab, something so unseemly as public grinning could be allowed, at least between we two.

Our grins were the grins of the children we once were, before we had, in obedience to that book, put away childish things, with open delight and laughter included among those put-away things. But here we were, childlike still in an odd way, off on a possibly dangerous escapade, a venture into the virtually unknown. But if it was unknown, our parents would have said, it could not be approved as acceptable, and if not approved, and therefore unacceptable, the adventure was of the type about which our parents inevitably frowned and chastised and occasionally blistered never-bare bottoms with the family birch rod.

Generations of Fotherbys had used that well-worn stick, or had it used on them, or both. I was of the middle group. I had never really aspired to be in the first group, but with Reggie's damned *Book of Revelations* behind us... and in front of us as well... it was vastly unlikely I would ever be. No, to be absolutely honest, I knew now for certain I would never be in the procreation part of the Fotherby family line.

I shook off my maunderings and looked at the Emporium. It was somewhat different in the light of day, not that there was all that much light, given the dark clouds, the general miasma that comprised what passed for air in London, and the steady drizzle. There were, however, two noticeable differences. One minor, the other, if not major, nevertheless surprising.

As we stared, we heard the hatch above us creak open, hinges squealing. Followed by the heavy-handed words of a London cabbie who has seen it all, heard it all, was bored by it all, but still needed to get back to the next round of repetition. "We're 'ere, m'lords."

Which we should have been doing something about, along the lines of paying and alighting, had we been paying attention, instead of gawping like the children we no longer were.

Crikey! as the driver might say. We'd done it again. At this rate, the cabbies would form an alliance for the sole purpose of warning their fellows about us, either for purposes of avoidance or increased rates because of the increased delays we caused.

"Pay the man, Reggie."

"You're the man with the bigger... estate. You can better afford it."

Bastard. Reminding me of bigger... things. "Bah. And also, humbug. Were you Shylock, you'd have demanded not only that pound of flesh from Antonio as security, but a mortgage on the family estates, and a lien on his first born. Furthermore, my estate is *not* bigger than yours in all ways. It is as big as it should be, only that and nothing more." I smiled. "Besides, it's your turn to pay."

"Humbug back to you, sir. Who paid for last night?"

Ah. That. My mouth occasionally runs ahead of my brains, scattered as they sometimes are, but unless we are truly engaged in one of our Battles of Agincourt, we freely admit when we are in error.

Sometimes.

It was my "sometimes" pause—the one used to determine will I, or nill I—that permitted the intervention from on high.

"Oi, gents. Why don't yer just pull yer pricks out 'n' measure 'em. Longest pays. Or shortest. No diff'rence t'me, as long as I gets paid."

Now *that* was a shock heard 'round the world. After which our marionette strings were wiggled and jiggled and we found our heads being swiveled and tilted up, and our jaws yanked down.

We instinctively began, though with a beat apart that created an echo effect, "I-I-beg-beg-your-your—"

He cut us off with a laugh, and a leer. A king leer, as it were. "No need to beg, gents, but seein' as 'ow yer pricks'll be out 'n' about in a trice, anyway, I doubt there'll be any beggin' o' pardons. More like for more 'n' 'arder."

Noblemen in the reign of our dear Queen must always be prepared. It is our motto—invisibly emblazoned on each and every one of our escutcheons. So

well prepared, we must at all times have a stiff upper lip immediately available, readily at mouth, as it were, to meet all circumstances, thereby ensuring we display no emotion, perhaps even feel no emotion. At that moment, however, Reggie and I were an utter disgrace to the Empire and our dear Queen—God save her! So much so that were our lapses known we would undoubtedly be drummed out of the corps.

I am sure we both tried to speak, but nothing came out. Right idiots we looked, with our mouths opening and closing, fishlike.

The cabbie laughed and leered again and leaned down. We had not paid any attention to his looks when we waved him to the curb outside the Pig and Whistle. Well, one does not, does one? The face of a temporary servant is of no importance unless it becomes necessary to chastise him. This, however, was an impressive head which loomed unnaturally large above us. A face for remembering.

He looked perhaps in his forties, though men of the lower classes, working physically demanding jobs that require repeated doses of thick, eye-burning, foul-smelling, almost tangible London air, often appear far older than they might in reality be. Or so I understood. It was not a fact of life with which I had any personal familiarity.

Thick, shaggy, dark hair, liberally streaked with grey and silver, visible beneath the hat that dripped raindrops down on us. Bushy, tufted eyebrows above deep-set, dark eyes. A disfigured nose. Cheeks and jaws creased with lines, and adorned with stubble that was not yet the start of a beard. A wide slash of a mouth, open in a smile that revealed a chipped lower tooth.

When it was clear we were still incapable of speech, perhaps so stunned by his verbal assault on our noble sensitivities we might possibly never regain that ability, he took over the reins of the conversation again.

"I knows what goes on in that Emporium, gents. Like they says, I been there, I done that—or really, done *them*—'n' I'm bloody damned well gonna do it again. 'n' I even drives some of the gents 'ome after one o' their *special* nights."

He licked his lips. "Not many gents like you two, though. All 'ansome 'n' kinda soft-like." He paused and licked his lips again, so very lewdly I felt my prick lurch. Damned traitor to his class.

"Like a bit o' rough, gents? Them mouths o' yers'd be real nice on me dick 'n' me balls. Hell, if yer as good as yer look, with yer lips parted like that, all

eager 'n' waitin', why, I'd prob'ly even let yer 'ave the ride 'ere for free. Kind of a bonus, like."

I should have been shocked. Offended. Outraged!

Instead, I found myself... intrigued. I had never had my mouth on another man's cock, but I knew I was going to do it. If not today, then tomorrow. If not tomorrow, then the day after that. Or the next. But not longer than that. Soon. I wanted to experience it all... or mostly all... soon.

But a mouth on one's ballocks? Just one at a time? Both? That was almost as shocking as Ralph and Alex licking each other's arses last night. One's *ballocks* could be erotic? Odd, but it must be so. For why do it, have it done, if it was not pleasurable? Both for the doer and the, ah, the do-ee? The done?

I looked sideways, noticing as my eyes slid down and across towards Reggie, that the driver was looking somewhat smug. From the lack of immediate, furious rejection of that offensive, totally immoral idea, he knew we were at least considering his proposal. Or I was.

My eyes met Reggie's. Yes, he was considering, too, though with not *quite* the enthusiastic contemplation one should have for the possibility of a brief, exciting diversion from, and return to, one's planned pathway. I sighed inwardly, realizing that as ever, Reggie was in all likelihood reverting to his old ways and would have to be dragged, drumming his heels along the way, into an adventure.

Alas. In that meeting of eyes, there was also a meeting of the minds, accompanied by a mutual twinge of regret. We had screwed our courage to our very own sticking place just to get in the cab and direct our driver here, and we both knew we might well lose it all were we to let ourselves be enticed away to a separate frolic. Even one that promised to be quite educational, if not *quite* so educational as seeing the rest of the gentlemanly portraits was certain to be.

Reggie naturally left it to me to properly phrase our reluctant rejection.

Offensive though the driver's proposal should have been, he somehow knew what we were learning to be, or simply assumed from our destination and its reputation that we were men of a... certain... ilk. By saying no, we ran the risk of giving offense.

And in turn, risked revenge being taken on our reputations if he managed to track us down, up in the strata where the nobility floated, generally oblivious to anything below. So I needed to phrase myself delicately.

I was quite overjoyed to learn words would not be needed. At least not on our parts.

The cabbie sighed, and the remnants of some recent spicy meal, redolent of onions and the merest *soupeçon* of garlic, fell down on us, *most* unlike a gentle rain all droppeth-ing on some place beneath. It was not pleasant, of course, mouth odor never is, but then, had we accepted his proposal we would not have been anywhere near his mouth. Though intimately acquainted with his redolence in another area.

My attention having been drawn upwards, I found myself staring at the driver's mouth, wondering, wondering, as he said, "Ah, well, gents. No offense given, none taken, I 'opes. As I always says, if yer never arsk, yer never gets. That'll be five quid."

His mouth was... yes, nearly as intriguing as his other idea had been. When some people kissed, I had heard it bruited about, they put their tongues in one another's mouths. Only fallen women and the worst of libertines would do something like that. So surely a man would never kiss another man, pushing his tongue in deep and deeper still, especially knowing, with a reasonable degree of manly certainty, wherever else that mouth, those lips, might recently have been. It wasn't the done thing, I was sure, even in the milieu of friends of Edward's. Nor in our customary circles where doing so would cause women to faint, men to roar, and frighten the horses.

Then the amount struck me. Five damned pounds? For a five-shilling ride including a gratuity?

"Pay the man," Reggie said, in a dry, no-nonsense, do-it-because-I-say-so tone.

I acknowledge fumbling a bit, but found a five-pound note. I handed it up.

He grinned back down and licked his lips again, making a show of it. "I been paid, gents, 'n' once paid, I stays paid, 'specially since y'might always change yer minds. Ever 'ad a nice, plump, eight-guinea cock afore?"

"What?" we both said.

He smirked and said, "Think on it, gents, think on it. And if yer change yer mind, or yer just want a quiet ride some'eres, all confiden'ial like, tell the gen'ulmun be'ind the bar at the Plump Partridge, in Pear Tree Street, 'n' 'e'll know where t'find me. Just ask fer 'arry the 'orse. On accounta me... 'orse, o'course."

He stretched his arm out and his fingers curled around the edge of the hatch. "Now, since yer ain't gonna be exercising yer mouths nor anythin' else wif me, off with yer."

And with that he dropped the hatch, which closed with an audible *thunk!*

I was shocked. Appalled. Outraged! I was about to remonstrate with the fellow about this gross bit of *lèse-majesté* against the dignity of the nobility, particularly two particular scions of that class, when Reggie rudely did his own remonstrating with a rather vigorous elbow in my ribs. His equally vigorous gesture suggested quite strongly I was to open my half of the doors, or panels, or whatever the things were called which protected our lower halves, and disembark.

Disregarding the offense to my person, I reminded him with quiet, or perhaps more accurately, with *moderately* quiet dignity, "You have the umbrella, you know. So if you will just come 'round—"

"My dear fellow, you are not as delicate as you would have the world believe. In fact—"

"Gen'ulmun, gen'ulman," our alternate 'arry called down. "If yer work them lips with pricks, like yer works 'em wit' words, yer prob'ly real good. So why'nt you go on inside where you can use 'em proper-like? Now, c'mon, c'mon, get along with yez, now, if yer please. *I* got a livin' t'earn, even if the two o' yez don't."

We "got along" and exited the cab quickly. And remembering the lesson of last night, I did my best to dodge between the raindrops while moving around the front of the horses. Once on the safety of the sidewalk, under the umbrella and moving a few steps away from the curb, we watched our new, once-paid-stayed-paid friend drive off in a sedate manner that splashed nothing noxious up at us.

Though had he done so, I would quite naturally have let Reggie sacrifice himself on the altar of friendship, by allowing him to dart into danger. And if he appeared unlikely to act with the requisite swiftness, as his best friend I would certainly have assisted by throwing him bodily in front of the train- or cart-load of deadly, malodorous material barreling down upon us.

There was no question it was his turn for that. Nor was there any question that it would *always* be his turn. What are best friends for, if not to make such sacrifices?

Once the cab was gone, I could turn my attention back to the oddities.

The first, and lesser, was the building itself. It was as warehouse-like as I had first believed. Today, however, the windows were unshuttered and undraped. Apparently there was no concern that whatever activities were going to take place inside would be spied upon from the building across the street. A look informed me why. Even if there were to be a private showing lit by such daylight as there was, there would be no observers. The building was quite empty.

The second, and greater oddity, all the greater for being so unexpected, was the line.

When we arrived, I had noticed two men, hunched against the rain, standing just outside the entrance to the hallway leading to the giant's door, with a barely seen hint of a man in front of them. Their body stances clearly indicated a line waiting for something. And given their location, that something could only be admission to the Emporium.

Now, the two men I originally saw were no longer visible.

But in the perhaps five to seven or eight minutes of our quasi-adventure in the cab's confines, enough men had arrived to expand the miniscule queue of three or so, to an actual queue that stretched from the hallway opening two-thirds of the way down the front of the building. And it was not a short front.

A glanced agreement set us walking, umbrella unfurled since the rain had begun to wane. We did not presume upon our rank to achieve a favored, early entrance, but instead headed towards the end of the line. Which was naturally at the end of the building opposite from where we had alighted, thereby depriving us of the opportunity to join the line in comparative obscurity. It almost felt as if we were running a gauntlet, though there was no speed, and no one was striking at us. At least not physically.

The men we passed were of clearly disparate classes, given their modes of dress. And virtually none of those modes of dress approached ours, even though we had both dressed down, as it were, choosing attire not at all suitable for a Saturday afternoon amongst the ton. The few men whose garments might have aspired to acceptance among the ton were older men, in their forties, one most certainly in his fifties, at least. They had the look of businessmen about them, bankers and the like, standing stony-faced, staring ahead, their tight expressions daring anyone to comment upon their being in line for admission to a place such as the Emporium.

A few looked like clerks, in those very same business and bank offices. I wondered for a moment what the reactions might be if one found oneself in line for entry to the Emporium, side by side with, or merely near, one's very employer, the vice president of the bank who supervised one's daily work. What could be said to explain anything away, when the truth was that one's mere presence in line was in effect a headline in *The Times*, declaring one's deviant desires and intentions. Cut and run? Pretend the other had not been seen, even though you both knew you had?

There was no cutting and running, but still, for enough of the better-clad ones, there was a rigid jaw and a stare at nothing, as if by not overtly noticing others, one would remain unnoticed oneself. The younger ones, who patently earned their way with hard labor, were varied. Some affected an expression of lack of care about who saw them, others cared very much indeed, but their hard pricks, some even visible, drove them to remain where they were. And a few, a very few, were of the unquestionable neddy-boy variety, flaunting themselves in the safety of the line leading to everyone's goal: seeding hard and well, and more than once if at all possible.

We were, so far as I could tell, the only members of the nobility standing in line, or about to be doing so. When we did this again, and I was certain that we would, we would somehow avoid the embarrassment of being so plainly better clothed than all of them.

Not that I was normally troubled by being better dressed than someone else. I do, after all, have a reputation for elegance to uphold. Despite what anybody... read Reggie... might have to say about gingers with freckle sprinkles being innately *unfashionable*. But that was an entirely different set of circumstances. In the ton, we were aspiring to *degrees* of excellence in similar attire. Here, the attire was widely varied amongst them, and the contrasts were even greater between us and them. Thus the few looks we received suggested strongly the men were not at all happy about toffs slumming, for so they would logically assume we were.

We let the looks slide off us like the water off the umbrella, and said nothing to them or to each other.

As we took our place at the end of the line and turned to face the correct direction, I had another educational realization. It is entirely possible for a group of men standing in a line, all apparent strangers, not talking, motionless except for the shuffle closer to being allowed entrance to the holy of holies—I would have to remember that slight bit of wit to share later with Reggie—and for the most part not looking at each other, to be *furtive*.

I suspected that if I raised the issue with Reggie, he would say that we were undoubtedly furtive appearing as well. We did not, after all, want the ton in general, or our friends and acquaintances in particular, to know where we were, or why. Undoubtedly, neither did the others in line, though they were of course not concerned about the ton, but more about friends, family, business associates or acquaintances.

I did not wonder at all whether these men knew what they would see, what they might do, once inside the Emporium, although I did wonder how they had even learned of the Emporium's existence. I looked back at Reggie and gave him a little smile, conveying a certain degree of smugness. We had lost our *Emporium* virginity last night. And, well, to be honest, our wanking-with-a-friend virginity, and our wanking-with-a-friend-while-watching-simultaneous-sucks virginity, as well. Therefore, we knew what to expect.

It never pays to be *that* smug. Smug when necessary, of course. That is a nobleman's inalienable prerogative. But the smugness in our shared look turned out to be excessive. More than a little excessive.

We were not *completely* gobsmacked by the later events. Merely mostly so. The initial ones were, in their way, and comparatively speaking, simply ordinary.

After what seemed an eternity of shuffle-step, stop; shuffle-step, stop, Reggie and I finally reached the hallway. It was a bit dim, given the minimal rain and rain-aftermath daylight, but there was bright illumination splashing out from the open door. Instead of the giant, or the young giant, the afternoon guardian of the gate was a tall, slender young man. Blond of hair, blue of eye, and barely dressed. At least, in terms of what was acceptable in public, regardless of class. But then, we were in line to enter a private building, and he could not be seen from the street.

I wondered if he was the blond from the night before.

We had glimpses of him as the line dwindled before us, but were not exposed to his full glory until we had achieved one-less-than-head-of-the-line status.

It was, indeed, last night's blond. I should have paid more attention to him than to getting myself properly and fully attired once more. Although had I paid attention, I might not have been so willing to depart.

Like the driver, whose image my mind kept reverting to in odd moments, the young man's hair was shaggy, but unlike the driver, whose hair style was *au*

naturel to the extreme, the blond's was carefully calculated and coifed. As was his clothing.

His attire was nothing he had just thrown on in a rush to get to his place of employment on time, and if it was a new uniform adopted by the Emporium, which had not been in evidence last night, it was certainly a most unusual style of livery.

The fabric of his shirt was white, sheer almost to the point of invisibility, and open down to below his navel, thus exposing smooth, pale flesh. His nipples were large, pink and protruding, and to my shock there appeared to be a small silver bar *through* one of them.

Through one of them? He had actually undergone the pain of piercing his flesh just to place that tiny pole in the hole? I refrained from shuddering. Our education in all things Edwardian was indeed proceeding apace, though thus far that learning was from viewing rather than doing, so it was, of course, a possibility this was merely a private perversion. Private or public, however, this was one I was more than satisfied to observe rather than perform.

I was confident that if I broached the subject of nipple puncturing as one of the things we might wish to experience on this road, Reggie would roundly reject the idea. Indeed, there were likely to be quite a number of round rejections from Reggie, once we learned what the things were which we needed to experience to become accomplished friends of Edward's, worthy of that name. I was equally sure that some, or, well, given the propriety pole which I was still not convinced had been *entirely* removed from its long-term residence up Reggie's arse, a great many of those things I would have to grab Reggie by the hand—or some *other*... no, no other appendage—and drag him, heel-drumming at all, across the finish line.

Ah. Another fine phrase to regale him with. Though there was a distinct possibility I would have to explain that on this particular road, the finish line was the moment at which one achieved ejaculation while engaging in the activity. A very clear line of demarcation, like the difference between a cock which was hard and one which was not. Nothing in between counted.

And then there we were, our turn. Despite the likelihood of grumbles, if not outright mutters and mumbles, to “move along, move along” from those behind us, I took a moment to peruse the rest of the blond's person from a much nearer perspective.

His trousers were of some ivory fabric, neither tight enough to accentuate, nor loose enough to entirely hide, his prick and ballocks. This I knew, not from

some sartorial instinct, but because he preened at my perusal, and when he looked at me looking at his groin, he waggled his hips, and everything beneath the cloth waggled with him, the fabric momentarily outlining and defining something potentially delicious. If one were in the mood to experience a cock in one's mouth. And ballocks, too?

When I finished my perusal by raising my eyes to look at his face, I realized he had been perusing *my* person as well. And then... he winked! Well, naturally, being Harry-the-ever-polite, as I was so well-deservedly known to be, I could not refrain from winking back. In the aftermath of those visual winks, ah, those winks, which seemed to have moved us closer to an uncertain sort of a finish line, there was a moment of silence.

I would *not* have allowed it to last very long, despite it being no difficulty at all to stare at equally slender facial features accentuated by plump, pink, *moist!*—because his tongue just slithered over them—lips, but Reggie chose to intervene to get us back on track, follow the course, move along the planned path, with a poke to my ribs.

It was a left-handed poke, the bastard, to my left side. A *precise* poke. Out of sight of those behind us, and invisible to the blond as well. A poke which said, in unmistakable terms, get back on the track, follow, move along, et cetera, et cetera, or the next will be a multi-finger, repetitive poke which will set you off. Reggie's fingers could be remarkably articulate in some circumstances, and I had no desire to have him follow through on that threat.

Particularly publicly. It had been some time since he had done it, and always before in private, so as to prevent me from embarrassing myself. I have a *manly* laugh, rich and full, appropriate for a man of my age, distinction, and tenor voice. When Reggie pokes me precisely *there*, as he most unfortunately learned to do when we were seven, and rapidly repeats his pokes, I begin to squirm and wriggle and most God-awful of all... *giggle*. A supremely soprano giggle in those days, but even now, it is far too high to be perceived as manly at all.

One cannot help it if one is ticklish. It is a God-given, or more precisely, a God-inflicted flaw in one's body.

Which Reggie was rudely taking advantage of. I of course did what any gentleman in similar circumstances would do: I acquiesced.

The man immediately before us had presented something to the gatekeeper which I could not see, whether money (admission fee or bribe or both), or some

sort of ticket or invitation. No words were exchanged. We had the business cards we had been given, a surfeit of the ready, and no knowledge of what was required of us. Our prior smugness had definitely been overdone.

So as the temporary spokesman of the pair, I made an assumption, and said, as I extended the card I had pulled from my waistcoat pocket, "How much?"

The blond paid no attention to the front, but flipped it over. His eyes widened slightly. I'd not looked at the back before, so I leaned forward to take a look. I had forgotten Reginald saying it bore Mr. Felcher's initial, and there it was. A bold, florid, cursive "F." Much like the one on the back of those coins.

He licked his lips. A most enjoyable prospect, but I made the excursion into enjoyment a brief one, what with the threat of a "get on with it" poking from dear old Reggie-the-ever-ready-to-poke. I cleared my throat.

He looked at me, and then at the man behind me who might, to the blond, have seemed to have been hovering in an unseemly close manner. "My... ah, sir... I have no instructions from Mr. Felcher, and in the circumstances—" a wave of his hand indicated the circumstances of the multiple men behind us becoming ever more impatient, "I cannot leave my post to inquire. Five pounds, sir."

"Pay the man, sirrah," I tossed over my shoulder. The left index finger perforce moved away, as Reggie slightly backed off, reached into his jacket pocket, removed his wallet, plucked two notes from it, and passed them around my upper right arm.

The blond brightness seemed to dim. "You gentlemen are together, sir?" he asked.

"Of course," I replied before realizing the implications, the *inaccurate* implications. "Oh, not *together* together, but still, ah, together, arriving together."

The blond brightened. I found I quite liked bright blonds. He handed us each a ticket with the date stamped on it, from a stack on the tall desk beside him. It was accompanied by another brilliant blond smile. I quite liked blond smiles. Who knew? He softly said, "I might see you upstairs, then? I get off at one."

And he might like to... get off immediately after? Or thereabouts? His tone seemed to be hinting so. I could not help but be flattered.

Reggie's voice was flat, and not in an "ered" sort of way, as he nudged me into a step forward, and said, "Five pounds? Did the man before us truly pay you that much?"

Dear Reggie, always so concerned about pounds and pence, though he has a plethora of the stuff. Yet he did have a point. The man immediately preceding us was unquestionably a laborer. Short, even more stocky than Reggie, dressed as if he had just moments earlier stopped working on some dock or in some warehouse, smelling somewhat of rain, and dirt, and sweat, and damp man. If he saw that much money in a month it would be a miracle.

The blond leaned in, to speak more confidentially. We leaned in as well. I subtly sniffed, and got a whiff of breath. Tea! With mint! A man after my own hard... er, heart.

"It is merely the application of Mr. Felcher's motto, sir. Ah, sirs," he said, flicking his eyes to Reggie and back, as if he'd momentarily forgotten his presence. "'From each according to his ability to pay, to each an image according to his needs.'"

Reggie snorted. And muttered so only we could hear, "And of course *we* can afford to pay the full freight. A modified Marxian motto, indeed."

The blond straightened and shrugged, his expression saying, "Just doing my job, sirs, just doing my job." The movement also caused a brief flash as light from the lamp bounced off the tip of his nipple... rod.

I wondered what the effect would be if I tugged on it. With my teeth.

He waved us on, and we entered the Emporium.

Reggie

14 October 1882, 12:30 p.m.

37 Preston Street

London

As we walked to the inner room with its mundane display, I wondered.

We were together, but not *together* together?

Had Harry changed his mind? I thought the whole idea of this adventure, this road trip, was to do it all together. I thought he meant *with* each other, but perhaps he only meant side by side?

My attempt to address this thought was sidetracked by Harry. A not unusual event in Harry's presence.

"And you are?" he asked the man who opened the door and took our tickets. A rather plain, and slightly plump man, of middling age, wearing attire that for some reason I expected would be extremely easy to remove if you... or someone else... wished to do so.

"Reginald, sir," he replied.

"But... the man who was here, where you are, last night. *He* was Reginald."

"Indeed, sir."

"And you're Reginald as well?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you certain?"

"Of course, sir."

"And the, ah, the rather large, somewhat mountainous man who was at the gate last night to keep the barbarians out?"

"Reginald, sir."

"All Reginald? Every one of you?"

"Oh, yes, sir." I could not quite characterize the man's smile, as it was such a small one. But I thought he might be enjoying the exchange, and Harry's obvious befuddlement. Dear Harry, his befuddlement was quite often a thing of beauty, regrettably only to be enjoyed temporarily, whilst at other times it could be annoying. Especially when he did it to annoy. This was the genuine article.

"But..." Harry's voice trailed off, and he assumed his thinking face—an unconscious trait he was not aware of, and about which I was not about to advise him. All that scrunching was so very delightful on him.

He didn't take at all long to figure it out. I could see the "Ah, ha!" gleam in his eyes. Then, just the tiniest bit more of a scrunch in order to decide how to phrase it delicately, so as not to offend by indicating awareness of excessive illegality. "Precaution."

Excellent. He had avoided an outright statement, as the more-than-mundane photographs on display in the next room, in all likelihood represented only the slightest percentage of the multifarious activities in the rest of the building. And the rest of those percentages were undoubtedly of the vastly less-than-legal variety. Using a false name might not prevent the gentlemen from Scotland Yard—though they were, of course, nearly all not gentlemen in the proper sense of the word—from tracking down the multitudinous members of the Reginald throng, but it might also cause enough delay for some or all to make their way safely from the city.

As much as I wished it were not true, I was certain that the mysterious, as-yet-unseen—was he ever seen? did he even exist?—Mr. Felcher had someone at the Yard, and more than likely a bobby or three as well, ready and willing to warn him of trouble. Especially of the major, shut-the-business-down-and-flee kind. Was a warning of that type worthy of one final, larger-than-usual gratuity? Or was that service included in the gratuity which customarily only required looking the other way?

This was a business, a well-organized, highly profitable venture, given the prices on those photographs. If men were willing to pay that much money for those...

Oh.

But they weren't.

Paying for *them*, that is.

What a brilliant idea.

Somewhere, somehow, men made their selections of the pictures they wanted to purchase. Chose them from one of those books, like the one Harry and I so briefly shared before our attention and hands were diverted elsewhere? They were then told how many of each type of "public" photographs, and at what price, they needed to purchase. The next step would be a visit to the

display room, to quite publicly browse, and then order the corresponding perfectly legal pictures. But there had to be... Yes. They would likely be given some code, note, password, to indicate what they were really purchasing. And then, concealed somewhere in the protective packing, the, ah, *arousing* photographs would be delivered along with the innocuous ones.

Delivered? Of course, delivered. Mr. Felcher would never allow the pictures, the *two sets of pictures in a single package*, to just walk out the front door. Or side door, or back door, or any of the unusual number of doors allowing ingress to and egress from the Emporium. Far too easy for the authorities, if they were suspicious—or even utterly certain, but lacking evidence—to threaten or persuade a purchaser into opening his package in front of them so they could confiscate its contents and prosecute Mr. Felcher and anyone else they could capture, to the fullest extent of Her Majesty's rigid and mostly draconian moral laws.

No, the Emporium would have its own delivery service: private, personal, direct.

Discreet.

Oh, yes, discreet, indeed.

Openly operating *un salon de la pornographie*—although that accurate phrase, or its mundane English alternative, a pornography parlor, could not be put on any calling cards—required vast quantities of demonstrable discretion. Especially if one wanted to attract the purchasing power of the upper echelons of society, whether amongst the ton or the business or merchant class.

Mr. Felcher was clearly a clever criminal. A *wealthy* criminal, as well, if this had been going on for a while, and the efficiency of the operation made it seem most likely that it had.

And here was I, or rather, here were we, Harry and I, fine, upstanding members of the ton, on the verge of contributing rather significant sums to the coffers of Mr. Felcher's Grand Emporium. Having experienced the, ah, *stiffening* effects of even a brief viewing of those fine portraits of gentlemen engaged in gentlemanly activities in last night's book, and having experienced the rather explosive effects, both personally and by *close* Harry observation, of a private showing, the question was definitely not *if* we would purchase, but how soon and how much we would spend.

I realized I viewed the pending purchases as a gift to ourselves, rather like buying a carriage you would use over and over again. Just as the pictures would be used over and over again. A gift that kept on giving.

Yes, we were embarked upon an adventure. All the more delicious because of the danger.

My musings must have put me into automaton mode, the one in which I simply follow Harry about, not quite fully conscious of my surroundings, but not so wholly unaware of them that I walk into walls. Walking into walls when fully sober was simply not done. When I returned to myself, we were in the display room, amidst a swirling crowd of moving men.

The room seemed different in the day, though the far-from-bright sunlight drifting through the unshuttered windows was not enough to change the *mood* of the room. Last night, it had seemed in retrospect to be the merest foreplay, if of a peculiar kind, to the lewdness on the floor above.

Today it was more of the same, but a “more” which was added to by the circulating men. The room had an odd kind of energy that rumbled like distant thunder. A crude energy that stressed the nerves. And the men moving about among the freestanding walls and along the room walls themselves were a mixture as odd as the energy.

I paused, my back to the wall, and let Harry wander away. I was *not* his keeper. There was no need for us to be joined at the hip, or however those Siamese twins were joined when the freak show visited the city last fall. That I even felt a twitch or a twinge of an urge in that direction—hip-joinedness, Harry would call it—was... absurd.

There seemed to be fewer men in the room, however, than could be accounted for by the number of men who preceded us, though I had neither counted them as we walked to the then end of the line, nor imprinted the images of their countenances or clothes on my mind. Nor could I be certain of my conclusion, or perhaps merely an impression, since our numbers were being augmented by the admission of those who had been in line behind us.

The crowd was of three varieties, I thought, assessing differences in terms of attitudes and moods.

The first group was inspecting the photographs with an attitude both desultory and expectant. They were going through the motions, not really seeing any of them, merely passing the time until... something happened that they fully expected to happen.

The second group examined the images with a certain intensity that reminded me of members of the ton at an art gallery, knowing absolutely nothing about the quality on display, nor caring much, but nevertheless

intending to spend. Solely because they knew they were *expected* to spend, and living to fulfill the expectations of and for their class was something which gave them a reason to exist. Or continue existing.

The final group was nervous nearly in the extreme. Almost frightened. Licking lips and wary glances. And blatantly wondering—to my eyes, at least—how all of this could possibly lead to spurting cocks. Theirs in particular, but other cocks would do nearly as well.

I had that same curiosity.

Mine was most definitely not rampantly displayed. But rampantness was rife in the room. There was nothing remotely arousing in the images being examined, but with the innate discretion of a born friend of Edward's... I paused at that thought.

I considered the phrase I had used. Came to the only certain conclusion. Yes, I had to have been born this way, as nothing in my life's history had suddenly switched my travel from the main British railway track to a side but parallel track. In actuality, the tracks were so close no one on the main track perceived any difference in travel, unless it was forcibly brought to the attention of that track's engineers and conductors and passengers.

Ah. I had sidetracked myself this time. Then, getting back on track, I did what I always did. Finished my thought as I always finished the projects on which I embarked. Including this one. With innate discretion I observed the number of bulges and outright anticipatory erections pushing at the confines of the garments of varying quality and many colors which clothed the nether regions of the men roaming the room.

Then I saw what might be an answer, though I was not quite certain how.

Men were disappearing. In ones and twos for the most part. Positioned where I was, I would have seen men leaving the way we all entered. That had not happened. Nor had I seen anyone go through the door I knew led to the room upstairs used for private showings. Or Bacchanals, complete with male maenads with enormous erections, and eternally full jugs of wine, driving every man crazy until each was overcome by lust.

Then how... I restrained the "Ah, ha!" which wanted to leap from my lips.

I noticed and others began noticing as well. Attention shifted, overtly, covertly, to a door of a very old-fashioned type: hidden in plain sight. A door that blended into the walls and was nearly invisible. It even had photographs on it.

What I... we... noticed was that it swung inward, and a man dressed as well, or as little, as Reginald-of-the-door, stepped out. He walked around for a moment or two, paused briefly to speak to three men, apparently at random, whose visages visibly brightened as they were led to and through the almost-hidden door.

That explained the blasé men. They knew what to expect and were merely passing time until they were called. Which in turn made me wonder why Harry and I were still among those waiting. The fact that the business cards we had been given last night had that large "F" emblazoned on the reverse, in handwritten ink, suggested Mr. Felcher himself, or an agent of Mr. Felcher authorized to use his initial, had supplied those cards to us *in particular*. Cards that should logically have put us at the head of whatever line could be made out of this milling crowd.

That is when I saw him.

I had no idea when or how he entered the room. Was there yet another hidden door? I was, I admit, staring at the man. So when Harry, who had come back quite unnoticed, said, "I say, Smythe," I shushed him with a hand wave and kept on watching.

The man looked briefly around, and when his eyes caught mine, he lifted a sardonic eyebrow and began walking towards us. I was to be afflicted with another damned eyebrow-lifter.

He was a most unusual man. Quite tall. Well over six feet, I should think. Exceedingly slender. His hair was black, of a hue that seemed natural, not induced. Dark eyes. A somewhat prominent nose, a rather wide mouth, with lips that were on the very verge of being overly full for the contours of his face, but managed not to cross that border.

Although he might have been taken for our age, perhaps only slightly older, he was, I thought, certainly above forty. There was something about his manner, and an air of sangfroid about him, the latter being a logical attribute for the owner of a business which on a daily—hourly? minute-by-minute?—basis exposed him to some degree of danger from Her Majesty's legal minions, that supported my suspicion. Which was all it would be, as I could hardly ask him his age to obtain confirmation or contradiction.

He wore a dark-blue frock coat, single-breasted, worn open over trousers of the same blue-black color. A waistcoat of a brighter blue, though not garish, with a threaded design in silver and dark blue as well. A stiff collar in palest

ivory to match the shirt. A neatly tied four-in-hand, with a gold stickpin. All of which served to accent skin of a most unusual color, itself a kind of warm gold that would, I was certain, extend to every nook and cranny of his person.

Nooks and crannies my cock found itself interested in inspecting. Without the impedimenta of clothing. I was shocked by my thought. Though I did not reject it, as my mind went along with the interest expressed by my hardening prick.

And running down his left thigh, a banger of prodigious proportions, though the most prodigious portion was primarily in length. Something anyone with only a modicum of perception might perceive. But having perceived it, what was I supposed to do about it?

Damn.

I was finding it ever more regrettable that someone had not done the Empire a great service by writing a manual to just bloody *explain* things. Although that would be an endeavor unlikely to earn Her Majesty's approbation and a knighthood. Far more likely that the sword would be used to take off the author's head while he knelt before the throne, than tap his shoulders.

And when you don't have a wide variety of friends of Edward's as friends, or rather, you have no way of knowing for sure whether your friends are friends of Edward's as well as friends of yours, you certainly have no one to whom you can direct questions. If I ever acquired the knowledge, though I rather expected it would take me the remainder of my lifetime to fully understand, I could write it myself. A magnum opus. I would call it: *Friends of Edward's for Dummies, or, An Explanation of the Intricacies of Intimacies Between Like-Minded Men, in Words Fit for the Simplest of Minds.*

In the meantime, Harry and I were left to wonder and ponder. Though Harry was more likely to simply act on impulse, and leave the wondering and pondering to me.

My wondering on this occasion was whether friends of Edward's *always* inspected a man's private parts—only visually, of course—every time they were introduced to someone new. Or simply saw a man who was merely passing by, on the same sidewalk, or across the street, or a half block down. And was it customary to engage in multiple inspections with respect to a man well-known, whose parts remained of avid interest merely from their impressive magnitude? Could all this inspecting be controlled, or was it an inevitable consequence of being who and what we were?

I most certainly hoped I might eventually, or preferably, far sooner than that, gain some control over eyes and thoughts, given my apparently less-than-subtle noticing of what was visible. Or perhaps it was invisible to non-Edwardian men. Not that they were not aware, as their own pricks were more or less on show in a similar way, but that the sight did not affect them. They had no, for example, sudden impulse to wonder what this particular banger, hold the mash, might taste like if it were heated properly.

The gentleman's trousers and his drawers were clearly not in the ordinary fashion, as they seemed to have been molded on him. Most likely to display precisely what they displayed so well.

The gentleman had a pronounced glitter in his eyes, a rather lewd and somewhat *knowing* one, as he stopped before us, inclined his upper half in the briefest of bows, and said, "Permit me to introduce myself. I am the proprietor of the Grand Emporium. Jack N. Felcher."

He shook hands with Harry, then shifted and extended his hand to me. As I grasped it, I could not, really, I simply *could not*, keep from lifting both eyebrows in what I hoped was an interrogative manner.

The way he elided his name and initial it almost sounded as if he were using the Americanism for wanking. As it turned out, he was.

Still holding my hand, he smiled and said, "My mother is, I fear, to blame."

"Ah... for what, Mr. Felcher?"

He finally let go of my hand, and I was oddly reluctant to release it. Was this still another Edwardian thing I had yet to learn and understand?

"My name. Mama was of, shall we say, mixed origin, and insisted, after a long and difficult birth—she quite often reminded me of the length and difficulty when I was being difficult, you see—that anyone who could cause so much trouble should have a glorious name. Her idea of glorious was to select names from men in her family. I was christened Juan Kristian—with a 'K'—Niccolo Felcher."

He paused. When we did not react, he went on. "I could not use all three names all the time, so she and Papa decided I should be more casually known as Juan K. N. Felcher."

I smiled first, and then Harry followed along. Mr. Felcher smiled back. "Alas, my parents were ignorant of British slang, but I soon learned. From the taunts of other children, primarily, but also from the mocking laughter of adult

men to whom my parents might say my name. I insisted that my name be shortened and Anglicized, though I did not know that particular word at the time. I was going to be called Jack N. Felcher, and refused to answer to any other name."

He sighed and gave us a rueful smile, though I could tell it was a well-rehearsed one. He had told this story before to British men. "I remained ignorant of the inherent error in my chosen name until I fucked my first American, and refused to allow him to seed, or to seed myself inside him, until he explained his laughter on hearing my name."

Harry gasped. I managed not to do so. A casual, offhand reference, akin in tone to a comment on the weather, about fucking men. A *public* comment where anyone might hear. And indeed, at least one man nearby heard and gasped as well. True, true, we were in an establishment which catered to men who... did that to other men... but the statement, *aloud*, might as well have been shouted out in the middle of a debate in the Commons for all the utterly shocking effect it had on us.

Satisfied that he had achieved the effect he desired, Mr. Felcher lowered his voice to a more intimate level, heard only by Harry and me. "I understand you gentlemen enjoyed yourselves last night. Quite well, in fact."

I almost attempted a sardonic eyebrow-lift of my own before I recalled the embarrassing disaster that would make of my facial expression. Instead, I merely said, in as sardonic a tone as possible, "Really? I was under the impression that we were here for a private showing. Private in that the observers attended by invitation only, well, that and payment of the fee. Private, too, in that the observers did their... observations... in private. Was I mistaken?"

"Would you have enjoyed your observations less—or more?—if *you* had been observed in turn? If you knew that each moment and movement of your observation had been seen?"

"I say!" said Harry. It was not the "I say!" that preceded words to the effect of "You rotter! How dare you spy on us?" It was more, significantly more, like those two words were to be followed by "—other men watching me wank? Looking at my, er, member and my fist? Enjoying and wanking with me? Oh, I say."

Knowing Harry, he would also be finishing with, "What jolly good fun." Had he said it aloud I would have been compelled to hurt him.

Perverted minds apparently run on the same set of tracks for the mental train departing from Kensington Station to Brighton. My stomach clenched, as did my asshole. Being watched as we watched Ralph and Alex? Men wanking while watching us, as we did to our watching of those two? Yes, it made my cock twitch. Yes, it would have enhanced my seeding to know I was being observed in that fashion.

Bloody hell. How had I hidden my perverseness from myself for all these years?

Those were thoughts, rapid ones, that I kept to myself. "You still have not answered me."

He gave me the tiniest of nods to acknowledge a mildly palpable hit. "Gentlemen, do you see those two men by the first display wall?" His tilted head directed our attention. "Do you clearly see the grey-coated man just now examining the photographs, and the man in the tan coat who is now facing in our direction?"

My nod was confirmation. My hand gestured to get on with it.

"Well, then, if you can see tan coat now, and grey coat if he turns, even if tan coat turns away, do they not see you just as well?"

Felcher laughed at our expressions, whatever they disclosed. There was, to my mind and ear, more than a hint of snide arrogance in the laughter. "Gentlemen, it is rather simple. An axiom to those of the theatre backstage during a performance. Unless you are observing from a peephole, if you can see the audience, then they can see you."

"You are saying that those two men not only saw... what we were doing as we watched them... but they noticed... and remembered?"

"Ralph and Alexander are so very experienced at what they do, that they can put on a fine showing for our private viewers, while at the same time observe others and the enjoyment of those others. Neither will, of course, admit that that watching enhances their own pleasure and their capabilities."

"But they are friends of Edward's, are they not? So why—"

"Friends of Edward's?" Felcher let out a short burst of laughter. "My dear sir, they are neither of them neddy boys, as each would hasten to assure you, one with slightly more rancor than the other. They are quite happily married, they would be pleased to let you know, with children, and one more apiece on the way."

I looked briefly at Harry who was as surprised and puzzled as I. "But they suck men's cocks!"

"Certainly they do. And other things as well. They are of a breed known as perverts for pounds. They even require payment in order to enjoy being the recipient of a marvelous cock sucking."

Having only an inkling of what it meant to be a friend of Edward's and engage in sex with men, and with no personal experience at all, except to the extent of wanking myself, and most thoroughly enjoying watching Harry wank as well, I found the concept astonishing, to say the least.

Harry, however, with an acuity he occasionally displays, went directly to the point. "But if they are not at all, uh, Edwardian, how do they manage to, well, get their pricks pointing in the right direction?"

"*Their* explanation, if asked, would undoubtedly be that they imagine it is a wife, a mistress, a whore whose mouth or cunt they are fucking. And if they are the one whose mouth or arse is being used, why, the explanation would be some variant on the Queen's advice to her daughter: lie there and think of England."

We three shared a laugh, but I couldn't quite let the subject go. "But with these imaginings, how do they, ah, get around, the presence of ballocks and the absence of tits?"

Felcher's tone became more confidential. "Not easily, sirs, not easily at all. From time to time they find themselves with a performance... deficiency, even difficulty, shall we say? Fortunately, I have access to a most efficacious drug which enhances their virility. I call it the Lazarus pill, as its effect is to raise any cock from the dead."

He paused and then resumed. "May I confide a secret, gentlemen? A most amusing one?"

Questioning a man's ability to be honorable and maintain a confidence was not the done thing, and highly offensive. But we both considered the source, and the fact he did not know we were of a rank where such a statement was highly offensive. So rather than take offense, we simply nodded.

"The drug does exist and does work, but its ingredients are difficult to obtain, and thus quite expensive. For men who are so very prominent in their field of endeavor, the investment might be worth it, but there was always the risk that if they came to rely on it, eventually its effectiveness would wear off. So I engaged in a slight bit of deceptive experimentation.

"I had my apothecary concoct a pill designed to have no efficacious effect, but no harmful one, either. A placebo, mixed with a bit of quinine, I think, to make its taste somewhat bitter. After all, it is well known that to be effective a medicine cannot taste like something one would willingly try again just for the pleasure of the experience.

"After several experiences with the real drug, I gave them the new pill. Privately, of course, as they did not wish the other to know of their 'difficulties.' I assured them it was a new and improved formula that would give them a cock stand of unusual duration, and a significant increase in rejuvenation time. And indeed the pills have."

He laughed again, but with more than a little sneer at the ease with which men could be fooled into believing that which they wished and hoped to be true was in fact so. "Of course, if *these* pills 'fail,' I shall simply start the process over again."

"And you naturally charge them for each pill they consume. The same rate for the current pill as for the original one."

He feigned shock at the idea a good businessman would do anything less. And then he shook our hands again. "Well, gentlemen, it has been a pleasure to speak with you. Your escort will be here shortly. I am sure you will enjoy the experience of our reading rooms."

Handshakes complete, he turned and left, not only us, but the room itself, as if his sole purpose for being there had been our talk.

Besides that oddness was the oddness that I was fairly certain he held my hand just a mite longer than he did Harry's. Deuced strange, that.

Harry was always the one who drew attention. With his hair and flair, and the, ah, *champagneness* of his personality, he was the one noticed first and last, and virtually all the time in between. I, on the other hand, was simply his boon companion, having no particular virtue of person or personality to make me stand out.

Well, I did have a rather fine mustache if I did say so myself. And I was the only one who would or ever did. But *I* liked it. Other than that, I had no distinguishing characteristic other than a cock that looked like an aged, gnarled stick, and that was a characteristic I did not, for obvious reasons, flaunt.

I turned to Harry, to chat with him about the conversation, about Felcher, about being here, *about this journey we were on and whether it was truly*

together or not, but had no opportunity to start. His eyes lit up, not at the sight of my well-known countenance, but at something over my shoulder.

Someone, actually.

The blond Reginald from the door and last night. Even in the brighter light of the display room, the atmosphere was somehow darker, which made his strut towards us all the more seductive. Objectively speaking. I had no choice but to be objective about it. He was heading directly towards the finest chilled champagne in an elegant flute of the finest crystal, which he unquestionably intended to enjoy, drinking deeply, and not noticing at all the thimbleful of rather dry sherry nearby.

He arrived and stood far too close to Harry for me to entirely like it, but then I had no right to control the nearness with which anyone stood to him. "Mr. Felcher has given me the honor of escorting you upstairs, to sample the pleasures of our reading rooms." He paused infinitesimally as he realized his words had been directed only to Harry. He turned his head slightly to at last include me in the one-sided conversation. "Both of you, of course, gentlemen. If you will follow me?"

Follow we did, to the almost invisible door. He did something we could not see with his back to us, lifted his right arm and pushed, and the door silently slid inward. We followed him into another hallway, dimly lit. I heard the door click shut behind us. A somewhat longish walk down the hallway ensued, in what direction in relation to the street from which we entered, I had no bloody idea. We passed several doors on each side, and then another set of stairs to a landing. Once on the landing, he grabbed the doorknob, turned it, pushed the door open, and we went through. It swung shut behind us.

Yet another *odd* room.

Rectangular and long. We had entered at one of the short ends of the rectangle. To our immediate right was a tall, wide cupboard with a quite sturdy specimen of a Polhem lock on the doors. "Reginald" gave us the opportunity to step in, out of the way of anyone who might be coming up the stairs behind us, and observe our surroundings before providing whatever educational services he was to provide to us. Or rather, to Harry. I was, of course, an educational afterthought.

Down the length of the room, on the wall to our right, starting about six or eight feet in from the wall behind us, were ten... somethings.

They were clearly not rooms, as their uniform depth was not over six feet, and as they were not much wider than the doors into each one, the width was probably only three or three and a half feet. Booths of some sort? Though for what purpose?

The walls did not reach the ceiling and were perhaps seven to eight feet in height. There was illumination in the rooms, with some appearing brighter than others.

Down the center of the room ran a duplicate set of parallel walls, eight in number, starting exactly parallel to the spaces on the right wall, and with facing doors. This created a space, a sort of hall, some six or so feet wide.

I walked the few paces necessary to be able to look down the room from the vantage point of the left-hand wall. There, there were a dozen of the doored, partitioned spaces, and the spaces in the center had doors on this side as well. In effect there was a rectangular walkway with another door at the far end, in the wall opposite to the one we had come through, that might also be an entrance and exit.

And in the walkway around all these closed-door spaces... ah, not all were entirely closed... were some of the men who had "vanished" from the display room below. They were acting in a most odd, and somewhat incomprehensible fashion. They would occasionally try the door handle of a space. If it was locked they moved on. If it was not, they might open it slightly outward and peer in. Most often, they shut the door, but in the space of several minutes of observation, I saw four men open the doors wide after the initial look, and step inside. In two the light showing above the top of the walls increased a moment later; in the other two, it remained the same.

The room was beginning to be more crowded, with new arrivals coming in the door behind us and immediately joining the throng. I was about to ask our escort for elucidation as to just what the bloody hell was going on here, when I noticed something about the nearest wall of the central partitioned spaces. It had *holes* in it. Several holes. At various heights.

The question then became what the bloody *fucking* hell was going on. But I never got to ask it.

It is a good thing we Smythe men are made of such stout stuff. Good, sturdy, solid, enduring English oak. And not all of us have our heads made of it as well. Were it not so, I would undoubtedly have collapsed with an apoplexy at what happened next.

A young man, neither well dressed nor badly so, a few feet away from the wall with holes, was staring intently at the wall or the holes, or both. Groping his crotch. Fondling himself in the open! And then a fingertip appeared at the centermost hole.

The man unbuttoned his trousers, shoved his hand inside, presumably to continue his fondling, flesh on flesh, but then he pulled his prick out! I had only a brief glimpse of a short, dark plum-colored spike before he stepped forward, and shoved it into the hole, pressing his body as close to the wall as he could. He even turned his head so his cheek rested flat against the polished wood. His eyes were closed, and he licked his lips.

“Oh, I say! Someone is sucking that man’s cock!”

Harry’s delighted-in-his-own-perspicacity blurt was one of his finest. Obvious in its point. Excellent in elocution and execution. And precisely loud enough—but not a modicum more—to be heard over whatever competing sounds were in his surroundings.

There hadn’t been much sound to begin with, but that brought about utter silence. And stares.

Harry’s follow-up, a bewilderment brought about by that cessation, was equally classic. He combined “What did I *say*?” with “Why are you all looking at me?” in an only slightly plaintive “Well, he is, isn’t he?”

“Damn right, mate!” the cocksucking recipient responded, “n’ ’e’s got a fine mouth on ’im. Want t’ ’ave a go after me?”

That rapidly repressed the usually irrepressible Lord Harold Cuthbert Montgomery James Fotherby. “I... ah... I thank you, but I think not.”

The man’s voice turned mocking. “Not good enough for yer, yer ’igh ’n’ mighty lordship? Well—”

His cocksucker was apparently annoyed at this distracting-from-the-proper-focus conversational disrespect to his talents. He must have increased his exertions, because the man moaned—*loudly*—and began thrusting his hips at the hole. Faster and faster, until with a loud moan he made one final push, and then held still, shuddering.

When he was done—a moment every man watching was aware of the instant it arrived, based on personal experience in seeding, whether from one’s hand or in a receptive hole—he pulled away from his particular pair of holes, both wall and mouth, turned, and leaned limply against the wall. All of him limp, and some of him still visible and dangling.

The conclusion of this... event? regular occurrence? ...had only one effect on the crowd. Another man stepped up to offer his cock to the holes both seen and unseen, while the rest resumed their restless walking around the rectangle, punctuated by door testing, or occasional pauses which involved staring at nothing, or staring at each other. More than one prick was caressed, fondled, touched. But always through cloth, and always only the man's own. Never another man's.

Harry turned to me, and this time his "I say" was true bewilderment that trailed off into baffled silence.

I would have spoken, but Reginald-the-blond gestured us to move aside with him, out of the way of the newcomers. Having seen what I had just seen, that word was used most advisedly.

He spoke first to Harry. What a surprise.

"You were obviously correct, sir. The holes are... a service, shall we say, that the Emporium provides. On active nights, in the early evening before entertainments get fully started, or very late at night, when the parties and balls and routs and other night entertainments have for the most part ended, there might be a man at each hole, so there is no waiting. There is, of course, another set at the far end."

"That explains two of the—" I did some rapid calculations. "—thirty... enclosed spaces? What are the rest used for?"

I felt I knew; felt, too, that Harry had more than an inkling as well. But still, it is always best to be certain, lest your assumptions make an ass of yourself and another.

"They are reading rooms, gentlemen." His face was bland at that bouncer. I was quite certain there was no reading going on in any of those spaces.

As it turned out, I was nearly wrong. Or perhaps just not quite right. There were perusals of books being essayed, though the words in them were few and far between.

"Would not 'viewing rooms' be a more accurate description?" I asked him.

He smiled and gave me the slightest bow of acknowledgment of the accuracy of my guess.

"Indeed, but... 'reading' sounds far more scholarly. Almost as if one were in a library, off somewhere relatively private, carefully examining a noted

historical work, fully able to concentrate, without being worried about interruptions.”

He was far more educated than I would have expected, considering the place in which he worked, and that his duties, given his looks, in all likelihood extended well beyond gatekeeper. I wondered how blond Reginald had acquired... I stopped the thought.

“Calling you ‘Reginald’ is ridiculous, for a number of reasons.” I ignored the Harry-snort beside me. “Either give us a real name, or a believable false one.”

“And would you know the difference?”

“Exactly. We would not.”

“Very well. My name is John.”

“And we are Tom—” I gestured to myself, and, with a negligent wave to Harry, finished, “and Jerry.”

“John” smiled. “I see. You do, indeed, remind me somewhat of a tomcat, sir.” He looked over at Harry, and his smile became broader. “And you would then be a merry mouse leading the cat a mighty chase? Rarely caught and always playing pranks on your poor pursuer?”

“Too true, too true, John.” He sighed a falsely heaving sigh. “And I wonder if he will ever catch me, however hard I try.”

There was something decidedly... odd and *off* in Harry’s tone just then, but he overrode whatever it was with that brightness he could so readily summon up. “And would the books available in this library be anything like the one we had last night?”

“Much better, sir, I believe. The gentlemanly portraits collected in each show men in a variety of vigorous, quite manly, sporting activities. Each room is supplied... Well, it would be easier to show than explain. In a place built on pictures, why use words? This way, please.”

We started to walk down the right hand hallway, walkway, whatever it might be called. We had not gone more than a few steps when the word “Reginald!”—somewhat sharply said from behind us—stopped us.

We turned. It was Mr. Felcher, and my traitor eyes dropped to his groin before I regained firm control, as you do with a headlong horse trying to have its way. But not before I noticed that that banger seemed... larger than I remembered it.

Ridiculous.

But Harry is always taunting me about what a powerfully accurate memory I have. And... bloody hell. Felcher noticed me noticing him. But to my good fortune, he said nothing of that.

Instead, he said, "Reginald, have you had the opportunity yet to share the amenities of our reading rooms with our guests?"

"I was—"

"No matter." Felcher cut him off verbally and with a gesture. "Why don't you show our friend here, young..." He let his voice fade away, patently waiting for a name.

I supplied them. Felcher looked amused. "Yes. Well. I believe young Jerry here might like Room Twenty-one. And I will engage to demonstrate to young Tom the comfort that may be achieved in Room Two."

John's—Reginald's—bow, while slight, was clearly servant to master. He turned, touched Harry's elbow and led the grinning fool off. He didn't even look back.

So be it.

Reginald-John and Harry moved ahead of us and turned left at the end of the center rooms. Felcher preceded me, assuming correctly that I would follow. I finally noticed the brass numbers on each door. No. 2 was apparently second from the far end. As we reached it, I looked to my left and saw John-Reginald holding open the door of No. 21, directly across from us.

I turned away and looked into the room Felcher was displaying to me.

That's when I heard Harry's, "Oh! *I say!*"

Harry

14 October 1882, 1:00 p.m.

37 Preston Street

London

I couldn't help myself. The "Oh! I say!" just popped out.

Although "blurted" would be how Reggie would describe it, I was sure. And he would undoubtedly do so later.

I felt it was a quite logical reaction to a most unusual room.

There was a normal-sized, dark wood armchair facing the door. It had a cushion, not at all thick, tied to the seat. Behind it was a mirror! Not much wider than the chair, but quite tall. Up to the right was a gaslight that shed just a little illumination. Reginald-John murmured from behind me, where he was standing quite, quite close, "The light is adjustable."

I gave him a polite "ah," as I observed the rest. To my right, or a seated man's left, about halfway up the wall was a triangular shelf, with the long side angled towards the chair. It was a bookrest! And I could see in the mirror that it held a book, open to display a picture.

From where I was, the reflected picture details were not as clear as I immediately knew I wanted them to be, so I naturally stepped in to get a better look. Anyone would do the same. Or at least, one would if one were a man desirous of learning all there was to learn about being a friend of Edward's. Knowledge one could then share with one's best friend. As he would share whatever knowledge was being imparted to him in Room 2.

Another small step forward would have brought my legs in contact with the front of the chair, but the movement didn't happen because I was distracted by two gasp-causing things.

The first was a downward glance that led me to notice the holes in each wall.

The second was the feel, my very first feel, of an erect prick pressed against my buttocks. I looked back up and into the mirror and into the eyes of John-Reginald. And a somewhat infinite series of images of both of us. There was a mirror on the door behind him, quite clearly closed, and I hadn't even heard it happen.

"I can leave, if you wish, sir," he said, his breath warm against my cheek. The slight motion of his body that pushed his prick up and down the crack in my buttocks was a major help in deciding how to respond.

I avoided that formality by whispering back, "Will... will someone be watching? Through the holes?"

I could hear the smile in his voice at the lust in mine. "Quite possibly. Quite likely, for a man as beautiful as you. If there are men in the rooms beside, they will certainly want to see what you do with your lovely prick. And it is a lovely prick, is it not?"

His hand reached around and gently squeezed my "loveliness."

I briefly wondered whether Reggie would be disappointed in me for becoming so very erect at the thought of watchers. I also briefly considered, and discarded, the thought of hiding this bit of me from him. We were on this road together, and we would share everything about it.

Both of his arms were around me now, unbuttoning my trousers, reaching inside my drawers, fondling my so-very-erect prick, pulling it out, and then tugging my ballocks out as well. I was not helpless to stop him, leaning back against his muscular chest, simply unwilling to do so.

"Ah, yes, beautiful, indeed." He stroked me slowly and I stood, and watched, and let him.

"So many things you could do with this prick, if you were here alone. Sit in the chair, trousers and drawers at your ankles, legs spread, watching yourself in the mirror, wanking, as you look back and forth between your reflection and the images in the book. Getting naked, turning up the light so you can see your nakedness clearly, and so can the men on either side of you. Putting on a display for them, a 'private showing' for just those two."

I whimpered as he added a swirl over my knob on an outward stroke.

"Perhaps they will whisper to you, begging for you to stick your cock through the hole, or maybe one will just signal a mouth, an arse is available for your use, with just a fingertip stroking the bottom edge of the hole."

A short gasp from me, as he tugged my ballocks.

"So many possibilities, sir. You could wank while they watched. You could stick your cock through the glorious hole and push it into whatever hole was on the other side waiting for it. Or one of them could put his own prick through,

and you could fall to your knees and suck it, while the watcher in the next room urges you on with obscenities. Or best of all, you, naked, your gorgeous pale skin glowing in the light, as you put your arse to one hole, feel a thick cock breach you, get in you, fuck you, while the man in the other room does the same to your mouth and throat.”

I was near, so very near, content to let him wank me to completion while I contemplated the glorious possibilities for the glorious hole, but the bastard stopped. He just caressed my balls as my breathing had no option but to get under my control again. “So many possibilities, so little time,” he said, “since they will not allow you to stay here long enough to try them all in one go. What do you want?”

With a somewhat shaking hand, and who could blame me for that, under the circumstances, I did that whole courage, sticking-place thing and pointed. “That.”

Reginald-John was silent for a moment, a puzzled expression on his reflection, and then he saw where I was pointing. The picture. “Pick it up,” he said.

Reluctant to step away, even for the tiny distance required, I did so, and picked up the book. Holding it open in one hand, my thumb between cover and first image, I reached up and turned the knob to brighten the little room.

Still somewhat shaky, and somehow not at all abashed about being the only one in the room with his cock out... his *still hard* cock out... I turned, backed a little, and sat down, my legs somewhat sprawled, just as John-Reginald—I was having so much fun with his names, inside my head—had suggested was appropriate for there and then. One must always do what is appropriate for one's circumstances, for the time and the place.

He stepped closer, stood between my legs, his so-very-prominent bulge right at the level of my eyes. He tilted his head for an upside-down look at the picture. “I remember that one.”

It was a very arousing image. A backdrop similar to the one used last night, perhaps even the same one, but I didn't recall many details once Ralph and Alex entered from stage... somewhere. I wasn't paying attention to much of anything but the men. And Reggie.

Odd. I had not realized until these last less-than-twenty-four hours how very much attention I pay to Reggie. Have always, I think—now that I think about it—paid to Reggie. To what he was saying and doing. To where he was in

relation to me. And how *normal* it felt that when I briefly turned my attention away from wherever it had been directed, to look over at him, so very often *he* was looking at me as well.

With some difficulty, I pulled my attention away from my attention to Reggie, and back to the photograph I wanted to emulate.

There was a blanket on the floor in front of the backdrop, as last night. An armchair sitting on the blanket, this time, padded on back and seat. Two men who, as I looked more closely, were indeed Ralph and Alex. Both naked, except for garters, stockings and shoes. Ralph—or was it Alex?—was bent forward, head towards the back of the chair, both hands wrapped tight around the slender arms. And Alex—or Ralph, although it didn't really matter which, because it was arousing either way—had part of his cock up inside the bending man's arse.

And from his expression, which appeared genuine, rather than an expression one pasted on because one was being paid for posing this way, the cock recipient was *enjoying* himself. The cock-thruster was enjoying himself as well, indeed, as much, if not more so.

"So, sir," said Reginald-John, "you wish to act out this picture here and now, instead of wanking to it? Instead of *both* of us wanking to it?"

I bent my head to look at my rampant, weeping prick, then up to his face. I noticed, in the course of my visual travels over a road I was sure was well traveled indeed, that as my glance passed over his cock en route to his face, his cock twitched. He flushed a little at my expression.

I knew with no uncertainty whatsoever that what my face just then said in subtle signs would have been said in words as, "Really? You can look at this beautiful, or so you have said, painfully erect, luxuriantly leaking prick, all ivory and delicate blue-vein tracery, and plum-colored knob, and question the veracity of my statement of purpose?"

My face can be remarkably articulate, upon occasion. Indeed, Reggie would say my face is *always* articulate on *all* occasions, which is why I rarely win at games which require the ability to not blurt one's emotions and thoughts out over one's face, repeatedly.

John-Reginald received my message, and quickly unbuttoned his own fly, and reached inside his trousers... I could not believe it! He had no drawers! ...to haul out a most pleasant prick. I was inexplicably grateful that it was

similar to my own, a veritable Goldilocks-porridge of a prick. Not too large, not too small, but just right.

He shoved his hips forward and I instinctively... it had to be instinctively as I had never done this before... leaned in as well, to breathe gently on his pale pink knob. A small additional lean and I could extend my tongue and gently lap at the leaking liquid.

I was so very tempted, because I wanted to do *that*, and have it done to me as well. But I wanted the picture more. Far more, for no reason I could explain.

As I pulled away, he displayed no disappointment, merely asking, "Do you wish to grab the chair? Or shall I?"

"You." The word leapt out of my mouth with no need for consideration.

He merely smiled, backed the few steps needed to stand before the door mirror and began disrobing. The way he moved, with his eyes half shut, it was almost as if he was divesting himself of his clothes in time to some music heard only by him. Though I could not imagine what the tune, or words might be, I sat there and enjoyed the... the strip show?

His shirt was off first, dropped on the floor to his right. With two clothed bodies in such close quarters, we were both already becoming warm, from both types of heat. His slender chest, flat belly, lean arms, lightly gleamed.

Had he planned this disrobing, he had not planned carefully enough. I doubt there is a man alive who could make the process of untying one's shoes and discarding them—particularly when one is wearing shoes with laces, which require one to stand on one foot, if one is able to balance one's self easily, untie, tug, toss, and repeat—sensuous or in time to some unheard or even heard music. Unless it had a very odd rhythm to accommodate that odd little jump jump jump we do when we lose our balance and are desperately trying to regain it without falling on our arses.

Reginald-John did it perfectly, however, even flashing me a rueful smile when he was upright, after his shoes joined his shirt. I was sure if it had been me, I would have lost some or most of my hardness, but not so with my... temporary... blond.

Standing straight again, he rubbed his hand across his chest, down over the wide line of soft-appearing golden hair from his navel down to his trousers, barely touching the waistband before traveling up again. Then he touched his wide, dark reddish-brown nipples, circling the nubs with fingertips. And then he... *squeezed* them?

He smirked at my open mouth and did it again. And did it again after looking down at his cock, so that my attention went there as well. His slit opened and oozed.

A man could enjoy having his nipples hurt? I did not think the previously amusing "Who knew?" would be wise to say just then, when the so very obvious answer was before me. John-Reginald did, and now, so did I.

I wondered if mine, if Reggie's... no. That was for later. Here and now was for my very first arse fucking.

"You should be naked."

He laughed. It was a *blond* laugh, all light and bright and sunny. He stopped his teasing strip, unbuttoned and shoved his trousers down, revealing a slender prick, similar to my own, though its base and the low, low-hanging ballocks were covered in a much brighter, much curlier golden-yellow hair than his head.

Trousers off can occasionally be as problematic as shoes, but he avoided the problem and decided upon smooth efficiency. He pushed them to his ankles, and bracing his arse lightly against the door mirror, lifted one foot, bent, tugged the leg off, repeated, and tossed the trousers aside. Our reading room was becoming quite littered with clothes.

I contemplated having my clothes join the litter but decided: another time. There would, I was sure, be another time. More than just one other time, as I... as we... had so very much still to learn.

He bent again, still arse-braced, lifting his right knee, reaching for the snaps on the garter holding his stockings, so that he could peel them off. I stopped him. "The man grabbing the chair still has his stockings... *and* shoes on."

Why I wanted to reproduce that image as closely as possible I did not know, but it just seemed right for the here and now.

He shrugged with a small, rueful smile, knowing full well that when we were done he would have to repeat the shoes off and on again process. Shoes back on, he strutted forward, his copiously leaking prick leading the way. Getting out of his way and switching places was both awkward and fun, since it involved hands on stiff members and ballocks fondling. He leaned in, as if to kiss me, and I found I could not do that.

Logic said that men and women kissed when they fucked, or before or after they did other things, but as Reggie has so often pointed out, logic and I are not

the closest of companions. And I could not do what was perhaps the logical thing for friends of Edward's who were about to fuck, so I turned my head away, regretting any offense I was giving, but still, giving that offense rather than offer up my mouth to Reginald-John.

He took my rejection, for that was what I had done, in remarkably good part. Had he, perhaps, been with other men who would not, or could not, kiss? I assumed so, to lessen my own feeling of guilt for not kissing, as he turned away.

John-Reginald leaned over the chair, bracing himself, and I inhaled with a not-quite gasp. He was so very beautiful. All those lean muscles, the narrow waist, the taut flesh of his arse, the fine, nearly invisible golden hair that covered it, the shadowed crevice where the hole I was about to enter was hidden. My very first naked man—the first of many, as I caught up on all I had missed?—up close and so very personal.

I stepped forward, so the tip of my cock barely caressed him. I ran the palms of my hands over his lower back in circular motions, then down his arse, curling my fingers around his flanks, squeezing, kneading. I moved closer, leaning over his back, sliding my hands down and around to rub down the front of his thighs, then up again, cupping his ballocks with one hand while the other stroked his cock.

I watched myself in the mirror behind the chair, and realized the way the sides of my jacket flopped around was distracting. I straightened, slightly struggled to get it off, and then tossed it behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to make sure it was out of the way, and chuckled.

“Sir?”

“It seems our clothes have decided to have their own bit of fun.”

I leaned out of his way as he twisted round and looked down. My jacket appeared to be leaning against the door, with the left sleeve at the crotch of the wide-spread legs of Reginald-John's trousers, an invisible hand down inside the open fly, fondling a hidden cock. He smiled, of course, as he would not want to offend a guest of the establishment.

I sometimes use my vaunted wit when I am nervous, as I most assuredly was just then. Although Reggie is prone to call it my *vaulted* wit, asserting that is precisely where it should be kept so as not to endanger the minds, manners and mores, what there are of them, of the ton.

John-Reginald turned back into the position I had told him I wanted him. A remarkably arousing position.

If one knew what to do with a man in that position.

I of course had the general idea, given both the picture and my vivid imagination. It was the... technique, the methodology, which was the sticking point. Or the *non*-sticking point at this point.

Another look over his shoulder, first at my starting-to-wilt prick and then up to me. To my good fortune, he did not sneer, simply softly said, "Your first time, sir?"

I nodded.

"Then I will make sure it is a *very* good first time, sir. I have, after all, a reputation to uphold as the finest arse in the Emporium? In London itself?"

His grin was engaging and I found myself grinning back at him. He put his knee on the seat of the chair for balance, and stretched out to retrieve a vial and one of the cloths from the small table. He twisted to sort of balance again, this time with his arse resting on the chair's arm, though not enough of his weight to overbalance it and send him crashing against the wall, to the consternation of whoever might be beside us.

He beckoned me forward, and I complied. He opened the vial, poured a little of the oil in the palm of his left hand, reached... and stopped. "Stains, sir?" I must have looked somewhat blank, a look Reggie said I mastered when we were eight and have perfected in the decades since to a mastery no one else could equal, as he went on to say, "Trousers?"

My trousers were most definitely not stained, so I had no... Oh. Really not a good idea to risk the oil he was going to transfer to my prick being in turned transferred to both his flesh and my trousers. Not when our departure was clearly not going to be in the dead of night, and unless a fog of the pea soup variety suddenly descended, sunlight would make stains of any variety quite visible.

I unbuttoned, unhooked my braces, and lowered trousers and drawers to my ankles, my face coming perilously close to Reginald-John's copiously oozing prick as I leaned forward. I could not resist moving further forward to embrace the peril, as it were, and licked the clear liquid off. One wouldn't want to waste anything quite so precious, nor get the floor sticky. Though I rather suspected that if I were to touch the floor, it would already be somewhat so, and in all likelihood, after several hours of *reading*, remarkably so.

He thrust his cock at me, and so I gave in to my urge and gave both of us some oral delight. But only a little. Another lick and a slurp and a quick bob down, as far as I could, and back up again. I paused, with his knob still in my mouth, my lips pressed down where the shaft started, and considered. There was really no taste at all to his flesh, though there was a faint saltiness which had to come with perspiration. The scent of his groin was... not quite intoxicating, not quite exhilarating, but heading in that direction. The source of the scent, however, was too far away for me to ascertain just what scents were there.

One would have to sniff closely and carefully to discern the components of that heady mixture, just as one had to do with a cologne one was considering for purchase. Thus, another downward stroke, a pause for smelling and component consideration, and a pull back up, would not take overly long, nor prevent achievement of the primary purpose of all this: my prick in his arse.

A brief digression of that nature would be... *educational*. I am always willing to be educated.

I did so. But really, I had not paused long enough to smell my fill. A repeat was in order.

As was another. And another. I became nearly lost in the repetitions, in the slight swelling of his cock, and the same with my own, though I did not have my hand on it, until he finally put his—fortunately, non-oily—hand on the back of my head and whispered, “Shall I fuck your face, sir? Shall I use your mouth as I would use your arse? Train your mouth, train them both, to love my prick? To love *any* prick offered to you?”

His hand was steady on my hair, ready to press down, hold me in place while he maneuvered to a slightly better position, ready to indeed fuck my face, if I but agreed.

I had almost lost my oral virginity. Unlike a woman, whose virginity is immediately gone when... that whatever it is called is broken, I concluded sucking without seeding was only a partial loss of virginity. And the virginity I wanted to lose today, *really* wanted to have forever gone as of today, delightful and educational though the suck interlude had been, was arse fucking, *with* seeding.

I shook my head just slightly, and he released my head. Reluctantly, I completed the outward stroke, and lapped a few drops of liquid from his slit before letting go.

I stood upright, and he reached out again, this time grabbing hold of my prick with his slimy palm, and making it equally slick with brief up and down strokes and swirls around my knob.

When he stopped, I politely stepped back to give him more room to turn around and get into position again.

Entirely forgetting the position of my trousers and drawers.

I promptly fell on my arse.

He laughed, which he probably should not have done under the protocols of the Emporium—never, under any circumstances, laugh at or otherwise embarrass a client—and though it was not raucous I knew it could be heard readily in the rooms next to us, and undoubtedly in other rooms and out among the milling men with their hard or hardening pricks, walking around that central set of rooms, seeking a glorious hole, whether of wood or flesh, into which to sink their pricks.

I laughed as well, and a flicker of relief passed over his face as he stood, balanced himself, and extended his right hand. I grabbed it in mine and together we managed to get me up again. Though not without a bit of... *educational*... difficulty.

It appeared that when one has one's lower clothing around one's ankles, there is a *quite* different way of walking required. Really, one could not really call it *walking* at all. Moving about, perhaps. A careful shuffle when moving forward, to avoid catching heel or toe in the ankled cloth, and falling flat onto some part of one's anatomy. If the anatomy is one's arse, getting up requires learning as well. For example, I learned that if you pull your knee back, tilting your foot up, your heel may slide up inside your trouser cuffs, so that when you try to rise, with the aid of a lifting hand, the caught fabric slides along the floor, and you fall backward again. If the lifting hand lets go, only one of you falls.

Eventually upright after awkward scrambling that was laugh worthy in and of itself, I asked, "Should I go for a clown at Astley's Amphitheatre? Do you think 'Lord' Sanger might hire me?"

He smothered a smile and tried to appear respectful. "I, ah, think you might require further training, sir, a great deal more, before you attempt anything intentionally comical."

I nodded my agreement, which left us in silence. A silence that was heading into the depths of awkwardness with the speed of one of those tropical divers

who pushes off a hugely high cliff and plunges, somehow gracefully, into the ocean waters far below. The learned one of this reading room pair somehow managed to prevent both the plunge and a demeaning belly flop.

He beckoned with his right hand, just two little curls of his first two fingers. I *shuffled* closer, entirely flat-footed, with an exquisite carefulness that led both of us to smile. He stretched out his left hand and curled it around my limp prick. Remarkably, *most* remarkably, through all our, mostly my, ups and downs and moving about, he had managed to keep nearly all the oil in his cupped palm, and thus began to transfer it to me.

Unfortunately, I did not respond as rapidly as I would have liked. Indeed, as I watched his hand work with no immediate effect I began to fear I would find myself... *dear God!* ...incapable.

It was really too bad that Felcher hadn't thought to offer us a sample Lazarus pill, of the real variety. Although... having such a pill and not selling it for the inevitable millions, suggested to me that perhaps there was no pill at all. Just a game of the mind played on his employees to get the most out of them.

But still...

With all the marvels that British inventors have been inventing, why the hell couldn't some medical inventor invent a pill or potion that could do what Felcher claimed. *Invigorate* one's prick when it was dangling, all depressed. I closed my eyes, and briefly went away, imagining the vast numbers of *older* men, and the occasional young one like me, who would buy quantities of... of... *Invigora!* No... *Vigora!* The pill to invigorate your flagging vitality, rejuvenate you so you stand upright once more and are able to achieve your full potential!

But alas! British inventors are far too stodgy to think of a thing like that. It would probably take a bloody American to do it.

Ah, well.

I let go of the fantasy and returned to find that unbeknownst to me, a Lazarus-like miracle had been performed. I was not only fully risen, but achingly so.

John-Reginald smiled at his success, turned around and assumed the position once more. Bracing himself with his right, he reached around with his left, to smear his oily fingers down his crack, and then quickly inserted one, then two, then three! with only a slight grunt.

"Come, sir," he said, smiling over his shoulder with his own fingers buried up his arse—*could I do that to myself? should I? was I flexible enough?*—"but not *just* yet."

He removed his glistening fingers and wiggled them at me, telling me quite clearly where he wanted to place them again.

I most definitely agreed. I shuffled forward, sliding my eager prick into his palm, and gasped when he grasped me. He was not looking at me, had his head dropped as if staring at something fascinating on the back or seat of the chair. I gasped again when he stroked down to my curliest-of-all hairs and out again. Did it once more when he stroked me with a swirl and a twist and a clasp and release and clasp.

I grabbed his wrist when he started another repeat. "If you wish my seed *on* your arse, instead of as far up inside it as I am capable, you will do that, oh, one and a half, perhaps *two* and a half more times, and achieve your wish."

He grinned widely at me over his left shoulder. "Arse it is. I've heard it said that all seedings are equal, but some are more equal than others. Arse seedings are most equal of all."

"Well, as it is also said, seeding is believing."

He laughed at my foray into seeding silliness, and turned his head back. This time he looked in the mirror, looked up at me, captured my eyes. He opened his mouth, licked his lips. Lips I could have had around my prick were I not so determined to have his nether hole.

Fingers curled around my shaft, he tugged, my prick moved forward, his hips moved back, and my knob was inside a man's arse for the first time!

Damn! A man's arsehole was perhaps the most glorious hole of all. Reginald-John was certainly correct in his seeding assessment.

"Fuck me, sir," he said. "Fuck me hard. I *like* my arse fucked hard."

I had obeyed commands all my life because I had no choice. I was the spare and had to be prepared to be the heir. But when my brother married and was prolific in the production of far more than merely *enough* heirs, I became a sort of Atlas who shrugged, heaving that world burden off my shoulders. I still, however, obeyed the commands, the unspoken ones of Her Majesty's morality, the unspoken ones of the ton.

Here, I had a choice. For all that Reggie and I had done last night, this moment, this *fucking of a man's arse*, if I chose to do so, would put me firmly on the path to perdition. Or so Her Majesty's moral minions would say. I think

I would call it a possible path to freedom. Or freedom of a sort that's mired in necessary secrecy.

To fuck or not to fuck? That was no question.

I fucked.

I shoved my hips forward and lost most of my arse virginity, as only seeding would finish that loss.

Bloody hell. Why had no one ever told me a man's arse could be so incredibly tight, so hot, so bloody demanding. Well, not immediately demanding. He at least let me have a moment to savor the feel of all that hot flesh wrapped around my prick, so vastly better than my hand.

But not a *long* moment.

I had never before imagined a vise being clamped down on my cock. I would never need to do so, as I experienced it just then. It was not as painful as the real thing would have been, but painful enough to get my attention. To *redirect* my attention.

His muscles relaxed slightly, enough that I could pull back, but still firmly gripped my shaft as I moved until only my knob was inside. Then I shoved back in. He relaxed so that for a moment I almost thought I was plunging into an empty space, as the walls of his channel were not even touching me, and then they were down and around and tight.

I had not lied to him about the imminence of my seeding. And while I had had a short reprieve, imminence of the *dear God! I can't stop now!* variety was approaching again.

Rapidly.

With every thrust. I moved my hips, rotated my prick, and on one inward stroke I brushed an apparent bump of some sort inside him. He gasped even more loudly than I had done. When I stayed at that angle and the next stroke in did it again, I understood it was pleasuring him in some way I did not understand, but I was more than willing to repeat it again and again, as each time I did his moans became louder and he began to beg me to fuck him, to fuck him harder, and his arse worked on my prick like some great violinist would play a Stradivarius.

Even as that fleeting thought went by, it did not matter how exaggerated beyond the slightest level of accuracy it was. What mattered was how good it felt. How good I felt. I felt good because of what I was doing for him, to him. There was no question about the *truth* behind his moans and pleas, as Reggie

and I had questioned the veracity of Ralph and Alex in their paid display. This was private. This was *real*.

I sped up, and sped up again, grabbing his waist, listening to the *slap!* of flesh against flesh, the sounds from our throats as we ignored where we were and who might hear. I was thrusting so hard I was almost certain I would bruise myself, bruise him, and then his balance became shaky, as he lifted his right arm away from the chair and began wanking himself.

We spiraled upward in our frenzy until I bloody well Mount Tambourined inside his arse, and from his sounds, and the half shouted "*Christ!*" and the arsehole grab-and-release, I knew he was seeding as well.

When we were done shaking and thrusting, we remained very still, our heavy breathing loud in the room in which no reading at all had been done.

Of the two of us, Reggie and me, I was the one who always knew, instinctively, what was socially correct at any given moment. I had not been nonplussed in decades.

I very nearly was just then.

What did one say... or do... to or with the stranger one has just fucked?

John-Reginald gave me the hint. He pulled his hips forward, and I pulled back, stepped back, being careful not to fall on my arse again.

Once my prick was clear of his arse, I watched with enjoyment as the hole closed, and a little of my seed leaked out. I had done that. I had done *that*. I had seeded a man and made him seed. And all because of coming across some photographs.

Serendipity, thy name is Bentley.

Reginald-John did not straighten up but braced himself, stretched forward and sideways, and grabbed up several of the cloths from the table. He stuffed one between his arse cheeks, and then clenched them, stood straight, turned, and handed two to me.

Arsen-clenching show-off.

Once we were wiped as clean as could be under the circumstances, using the cloths provided, which were most assuredly *not* of the quality Felcher offered at a private showing—the cheap bastard; once dressed again, we stood in silence.

I had been a near virgin until moments ago, having decided there were various virginities one could lose, and until one had lost them all one could still

consider oneself... *somewhat* pure and virginal. How long could I make my virginities last? How many things were there for me to try and were there some I would so instinctively reject that I would never lose *that* or *those* virginities? And here was another.

I was, after all, the guest... the *paying* guest... and he was on the staff. What in the bloody hell was the proper protocol?

If you never inquire, I reminded myself.

"Would you... be offended, if I..." And I trailed off, words failing as I realized I had no way to finish that sentence without calling him a whore, even without using the word, or whatever the alternative might be for a man who plied that trade.

He smiled at me, amused, but not mockingly so. "If you offered me a vail, as you might do for, say, persons not employed by you who nevertheless provided you a service for which you wish to show your gratitude? For instance, to the staff upon departing from a fine weekend's orgy at the estate of your dear friend Lord Plumpbottom?"

I laughed with him. "Quite." I affected the most annoying upper-crust tone, all round and plummy. And ruefully realized as I did, that upon occasion, *I* actually sounded that way. "The staff's staffs were all so very serviceable, don't you know."

Which only left me with that ever-important vail-question: how bloody much was not too much?

Bugger it.

I pulled out my wallet, pulled out a twenty-pound note, handed it to him. And hoped it was enough, as he was highly unlikely to educate me on what the going rate for an arse-fucking vail was.

Either it was just right or better than that, for his smile seemed genuine. He folded the note, and tucked it into his pocket. As our dressing dance left us in the positions we were in on entering, Reginald-John grinned, gave me a bow that was barely a tilt of head and shoulders, gestured widely with his hand, and said, "After me, sir?"

"After you, sir," I agreed.

He turned, opened the door, and we exited.

Reggie

14 October 1882, 1:00 p.m.

37 Preston Street

London

I more than understood Harry's, "Oh! I say!" when I looked into the room, and saw myself in the mirror behind the chair that faced me.

Smelled the faint smell of sex not so very long ago. Saw in that mirror the reflection of a volume of pictures open on a bookstand attached to the wall, at just the right height to make it so very convenient for a man in the chair to sit or sprawl, his trousers merely open, or at his knees, or all at his ankles, his cock firm and oozing, fisting himself while flipping back and forth through the pages of photographs. Deciding on just the one he would return to, but not yet, definitely not yet, but soon, the one precisely right to take him over the peak.

Noticed other things, as well, about these *reading* rooms, once I had put a cloth over the photograph in my mind—the one that pictured me, there, sprawled and fisting—and ended that prick-raising distraction.

Not that the other things I finally noticed did anything to put paid to my cock stand.

The photograph in the reflection. Perhaps a reading room, perhaps not. Well lit. A man with a mustache, though not nearly so fine as mine, broad browed, his hair brushed back from his forehead, eyes shut, his mouth not nearly full of prick, as there was so much stretching between where his lips caressed and the hole through which the prick jutted. A thick prick. A gleaming *black* one, at the start, and only at the start, I somehow knew, of its long, long journey into the mouth and throat of the white man sucking it.

"We call them glorious holes," a soft voice said, caressingly close to my right ear. I repressed a start and shifted my stare from the photograph's reflection to Felcher's. He was standing not quite to my right and behind me, but close enough that I could feel an almost fully heated banger pressing its warmth into my right buttock. "For the quite glorious things that happen through them."

Which is when I noticed the mirror on the door he was holding open, almost the width of the door itself. Christ. An infinite series of reflections as you

watched yourself wank, watched what you did with a cock that came through a glorious hole, watched your own reactions as you thrust your cock through one.

Or watched the *cocks* that came through the glorious holes in both walls. Though there was only one hole to Room 3, there were several into Room 1. My eyes must have asked the obvious question, and he answered, his fully heated, undoubtedly ready to serve, banger pressed even more closely against me. He hadn't moved, except if *that* counted as moving. But then... neither had I moved my arse away.

"Room One is... special. It allows several men to watch what happens in your room, from varying vantage points. Or if you were, perhaps, interested in multiple cocks, multiple times, while you were in this room, two men, or three, might thrust themselves through so you could service them. And their successors. If you were so inclined."

I was not so inclined. Of course not. That would make me some of kind of a man slut. I was not, could not, be that. Ever.

Liar!

My self was right, as he so often was. I *was* inclined. Inclined to do it all, experience it all, right here, right now, until I had done it all, had it all done to me, and my senses were burnt away, along with my mind.

But I would not. Could not. Not all. Not at all. But if not all, then something.

Something in my stance must have changed, though I did not notice. Felcher stepped back from me. Not much. Just enough that I was left bereft by the loss of his dick.

"You strike me, my—" His voice cut off and then resumed as if I could not see, or did not notice, his mirrored lips start to form the "L" of "lord," and changed it to "—new friend, Tom, as one who wishes always to be acquainted with the rules and regulations, the proper protocols, for whatever situation in which he finds himself."

Had Bentley betrayed us? Identified us, or at least our ranks? Harry had assured me he had not, that he had only told Felcher, though he was not then identified by name, that he knew of two men who were able to afford the Emporium's wares, and who might be interested in a private showing.

Wait. Wait a bloody minute. The original story had been that Bentley had only made arrangements for two tickets to the private showing *after* Harry had

decided to invite me. But when we recently talked about that first visit, this latter version was what he said. That Bentley had spoken to the Emporium, to Felcher, to one of the bloody Reginalds, to whoever, about *two* tickets, *before* Harry's decision.

I stiffened, and though it was only slight, it was still perceptible in the mirror. And if perceptible to me, seen by Felcher. Damn.

I kept my voice as soft as his, despite the hum and buzz of the growing crowd. I resolutely did not strain to detect any sounds of Harry coming, alone or with another, although he would presumably be coming quite well, if Reginald-John-Reginald's bulge was any guide. "I would, indeed. You are perceptive, sir."

"A requirement, given the nature of the business of specializing in the fine art of gentlemanly portraiture."

His smile was faint, and I gave him a similar one in return.

"No pain," he said. "Not in the reading rooms, even if both of you are so inclined. If someone has such inclinations, a more appropriate location can be made available. You may lock the door from the inside, but my staff and I will always be able to open it from the outside, should the need arise. A locked door signals occupancy, and a wish not to be joined.

"An unlocked door offers the possibility you will be willing to have, ah, company, but the man who opens the door to find out is as free to decide not to enter as you are to refuse him entry. We do not permit anyone to set the door to a room fully open, but the doors are well-balanced enough that you may leave them open an inch or two.

"Doing so suggests you enjoy having men peer in at you as you do whatever it is you are doing, alone or through the holes. It also suggests to most that you are not as discriminating in your choice of who may join you as the man who leaves the door closed.

"Unlike the rest of the doors, the door to Room One is hinged to the left, as this door is hinged to the right, so that you may, if you leave yours open, see who goes into Room One. Granted, the anonymity afforded by the glorious holes is what is most desired here, but sometimes, *knowing* enhances the experience.

"A fingertip, or a visibly open mouth will signal your neighbor's interests, just as you are free to signal yours to him. Accept or reject, as you choose. There may be disappointment if your choice is to reject, but there are so very

many men, so very eager to read in these rooms, and enjoy the holes, that a rejected man will unlikely be left wanting for companionship, or a warm mouth, or a tight or loose arse, for long.”

He paused, as if waiting for a comment. When I had none, he finished. “Door open or closed, Tom?”

“Closed.”

Liar!

“No. Uh, open.”

Felcher’s mouth concealed the smirk his eyes revealed, and he backed out the door. I watched him do as I said.

Which left me alone. Except for my dilemma. Just how much *was* I going to try to learn and experience this afternoon? And how the hell was I going to decide how much time I had to do whatever I decided to do?

I pulled my watch from my vest pocket, flicked open the lid. 1:07. What was Harry doing? Had he received a similar explanation from Reginald-John? Sent him away to experience things alone, or through the holes? Told him to stay and see what they could experience together? Had he already started... *experiencing*... while I dithered?

I could, if I wanted to, leave this room, cross over, and get into what... Rooms 22 or 20, on either side of him. And if they were already occupied, loiter until one became available? Get inside, and watch him through the hole to see how gloriously well he was doing? And with Harry, it would, I was sure, be *glorious* indeed.

My prick ached with those images, but even if I did all that, I could only watch and wank, never join in. Harry would recognize my cock if I impulsively shoved it through that hole to find out what... *gloriosity*, he would call it... I could achieve. The answer? None. He had decided... *we* had decided... that we were together in this adventure, but not *together* together. So I could not force him to make the choice to touch me out of pity for my patheticness in seeking him out, or humiliate me with rejection.

I was on my own.

I would *enjoy* that.

I would.

I stood facing the chair, my shins touching it. I stared at myself, at my hand squeezing and rubbing my prick through my trousers. Flipped the page. Stared at the reversed image of the next picture. I gasped.

The white man, older than I, naked now from the waist down, whose his shirttails were rolled up or tucked under so that he now displayed a soft, hairy belly, had his slightly plump arse filled... *nearly* filled... by that black cock. There was, perhaps, if my visual measurement was accurate, merely an inch, perhaps a bit more, still to insert.

I flipped to the next picture as I fumbled with my left hand, trying to get my trousers unbuttoned. The next image, the cock was sliding out, two or so inches visible through the glorious hole. I turned the page, resolutely not looking, as I decided to be efficient about working myself into seeding mood and mode, and used both hands to finish the unbuttoning, unclasp my braces, and shove trousers and drawers down my thighs, widening my stance just enough to keep them above my knees.

Three inches out now. The next picture. Four. The next. Five. Bloody hell. Either the blackamoor had prodigious staying power, or this was a series shot on separate occasions. The final image was of the prick fully on display, aimed up the crack of the just-fucked arse, a vivid contrast of the black cock against the white arse, the knob end suspended over the upper curve of the man's cheeks. It was, I was sure, and as Harry the horse-hung—I declined to drop any “aitches” merely because the man I was referring to did—would have said: at *least* a ten-guinea cock.

My ugly prick was out and leaking copiously as I slowly and awkwardly wanked with my left hand, continuing to turn photo album pages with my right. I occasionally looked up, saw someone peering through, made sure I was turned just enough so that he could see my image in the mirror, but did not otherwise acknowledge those who looked in.

Until about ten more pictures into the collection when I glanced up and saw a prick shoved through the space between door and jamb that had been pushed somewhat more open than it originally had been. A definite violation of the rules of gentlemanly portraiture conduct I was sure, but I did not scream like a frightened boy and call for the librarians who would undoubtedly see him off the premises, and indeed, might even ban him. Instead, I let him see my not entirely feigned admiration of his short fat cock, with its small ballocks, and tried to convey my regret as I shook my head no. He remained pressed close as

he hid his prick away again, stepped aside, putting the door back to where it had been, and then there was just that vertical sliver of open space.

Fine. I knew what I was going to do. I shoved my clothes around my ankles, turned, and waddled over to the door. Just as I put my hand on the knob I saw a hand reach for the knob on Room 1, grip, turn, pull, and the door swung wide. I had noticed that despite the fact everyone in this room of rooms undoubtedly knew they were all there for the same reasons involving cocks, ballocks, mouths, arses or hands in some combination, there was a certain furtiveness to most expressions. And entry to an empty room, or to one which you were invited to enter by its occupant, was quick. As if by being quick you might not be seen, and no one would know what you were going to do in that room, and no one would go to an adjacent room and watch you do it.

There was no rushed entry here. The door was held open by its imminent occupant. So I looked up, and as I looked the man moved and went into Room 1. It was only the briefest of glimpses, and he did not acknowledge me, but it was Felcher.

I shut the door, locked it. And then, more slowly than I originally intended, I waddled my way back to the chair. And stared at myself in the mirror. I was still erect, but now had a dilemma. Felcher knew I enjoyed being watched, though putting myself in this position was the first time I had ever knowingly done something... or planned to do something... with the knowledge I was going to be watched.

What did Felcher intend? Was I to put on his own very private showing of myself? Was I to put my prick through the glorious hole to see what might happen? Would he do the same and if he did, bloody hell, what was *I* going to do?

And all of those possibilities did nothing whatsoever to make my prick go soft. I waited. Staring at myself as my hand began stroking in a way that was of course familiar considering the countless times I had done it to myself over the past decades, yet it was entirely unfamiliar in this place, in this setting.

Somehow, with Harry wanking by my side, with both of us watching Ralph and Alex, or rather mostly watching, or if I were to admit the truth, with most of my watching devoted to surreptitious observance of Harry and his awesome cock, it was still not as if one of us was *focused* on the other's wanking, to the exclusion of all else.

Here, however, I knew that someone was watching me. And not some anonymous man about whom I could fantasize any attributes I wished. But a man I, if not knew, had at least been introduced to, had had a discussion with, had admired the impressive banger that ran down his leg. He knew I knew he was there. So what was he doing? What was he waiting for me to do?

I couldn't decide.

So I did what I had originally intended to do. I wanked. I finished that odd walk men do with their trousers at their ankles, scooted myself around, and sat down. I lewdly sprawled my legs as wide as I could, and watched myself in the door mirror. Watched my fist rise and fall on my prick, my thumb smearing leakage around my knob. Watched myself fondle and tug on my ballocks.

Watched myself reach between my legs, slumping down even further, so that by stretching I could rub my fingertip over my hole. Bring my finger back up to sniff and swallow, and put the resulting wetness to good use, as I pressed it up inside me, not bothering to contain my whimper when I touched some lump inside me that heightened every sensation I was feeling just then.

Watched and wanked and worked myself up towards a fine fervor, occasionally looking at the less-than-glorious holes to see if I could see an observer seeing me.

But I saw nothing.

Until I saw a fingertip curl over the bottom edge of the largest hole into Room 1, then push farther in. A long, *slender* finger the same unusual flesh tone as Mr. Felcher, caressing the wooden opening, rubbing and rubbing as if the wood were flesh that might respond. And then it withdrew.

The wood would not respond but I did.

I rose on somewhat unsteady legs, moved to my right, and shoved my prick and balls through the hole.

I was well rewarded for my offering. My prick was no longer an oral virgin, as Felcher's tongue lapped at my slit and around my knob, as his fingers pulled my foreskin back, as he lightly wanked, as his lips closed around my knob and part of my shaft, as his hand fell away and his mouth engulfed my whole cock.

I was getting my cock sucked! By a man.

And as his head bobbed, the heat and fervor of his lapping getting my prick almost slimy, I wondered what *he* got out of doing this? Did he mockingly give

thanks with a mangled prayer? “Bless me, oh Lord, and this man’s prick, which I am about to receive from thy bounty?” Did he delight in the delight he gave, the searing pleasure that was starting to engulf all of me as his mouth had done my cock? Did he get aroused by the taste and feel of cock in his mouth so that he wanked himself?

Fortunately, I have the type of mind which enables me to engage in multiple tasks simultaneously, or nearly so. A multiple-tasker, you might say. And this was multiple-tasking indeed, trying to imagine what Felcher was feeling, perhaps even trying to feel those feelings, all the while I was feeling what he was doing to my body.

While I had expected the possibility of a mouth on my prick once I was aware of the glorious holes and alone to enjoy myself and them, I had not paid any real attention to the *size* of the one through which I had thrust myself. It was simply the largest and the most accessible.

Moments of blissful sucking later I became aware of just how large it was. A slender, bare *hand* came through. It had been fondling my ballocks, which were on the other side of the opening, but now the hand was on my side, slithering between my legs, fingertips questing, questing until they found my personal holy grail. The fingers felt as slimy as my prick, and there was no hesitation, no “questioning” by a stroking and a pause as to whether I wanted this or not.

The tip of his forefinger found the center of my entrance, pushed once to get past the tight ring I was instinctively clamping shut, pushed twice to go all the way. The pain was sharp but only momentary, though it did make me gasp aloud. And then the finger curled and the tip found that bump, and I was gasping and moaning.

A few strokes to accompany the strokes with his mouth, and then he pulled his finger out. How could an arsehole used to things exiting feel bereft by the absence of something entering? But it could and it did and I didn’t like it. But I could not exactly remonstrate with him about his techniques, order him to do the new found things I wanted done, since he had no duty to do any of this.

Fortunately for my own sense of self-worth, which was already immense enough that I really needn’t have worried, I avoided begging. I might, under other circumstances, other *particular* circumstances, with a person... special enough... indeed beg and plead for what I wanted. But not Felcher. I instinctively knew I could not give him that much of me.

If he wanted to, he would... do what he wanted to do. If he did not... he would stop. And I would go on doing what I wanted to do, and enjoy myself in the way I first planned. Or see if there was a man in Room 3 who was interested... in doing something that I would like as well.

At least his mouth was steadily working my cock, even though he was no longer fingering my hole. Satisfactory. More than satisfactory. Extraordinary, you might say, but really, you could only say that something was *extraordinary* if you had experience with the ordinary. I, of course, had no experience whatsoever with ordinary cock suckings, so contented myself with deciding what he was doing with his mouth and his lips and his tongue was better than that.

Then he stopped sucking, too.

Bastard. There was apparently no honor among thieves or cocksuckers, at least with respect to the latter finishing what they had started.

I was pressed flush against the wall, and started to move my hips back, when his hand gripped my cock. I barely heard him say, "Wait."

I had been, if not quite on the verge of a Mount Tambourine spewing, at least a minor eruption. Perhaps one of those brief geysers going off in that American park named after colored stones. The hell with him. My hand would be fine. I pulled my hips back, but he clamped down on my cock. And then began to squeeze it, and curl his fingers.

Well, hell. Another man wanking me was not as good as my first cock sucking, but better than one with my own jaded hand performing the task.

Then that, too, stopped. But he still had my prick cupped in the palm of one hand. I felt something touch the base of my prick, something solid, and as he moved whatever it was steadily outward along the top of my cock it left a trail of liquid behind.

Slimy liquid. Oil scented with something I could not describe, and then his hand was circling and swirling and coating my cock.

Now that *was* an extraordinary feeling, as I knew very well what wanking without oil felt like. And only the slightest bit of knowledge of wanking with it. As with my mirror adventures, I could only use oil on my prick when I was alone, with sufficient time to clean my prick and anything my oil-slick hand might come in contact with. While the staff might suspect I wanked, they could not be provided with proof, in the form of seed-stained sheets or cloths, much

less ones stained with seed *and* an oil that could have come to my room for only one reason.

When I was thoroughly coated, with some of the excess drooling down through my hairs to my buttocks, he held my prick in an odd grip. While I had never wanked another man, nor, prior to this afternoon, had one do me, logical analysis—another aspect of the propriety pole, or the remnants thereof?—led to three, ah, *firm* conclusions.

First, if the wanker was facing you, his dominant hand would be grasping your cock from beneath, fingers curled upward, thumb curled down and over your shaft, stroking back and forth between the two of you.

Second, if the wanker was beside you, his chest and hips would probably be pressed against you, his own cock caressing the side of your buttocks, and his dominant hand would either do the awkward thing—fingers over the top, thumb under, so that on an “in” stroke towards your body his circled thumb and forefinger would hit your pubes—or the convenient thing: fingers up, thumb over and down, so that on the in-stroke the edge of his hand would touch you.

Third, if the wanker was behind you, enabling you to enjoy the feeling of a presumably hard and leaking prick pressing even more intimately against you, his wanking options would, for all practical purposes—and I am nothing, as Harry says, if not preeminently practical—would be the same.

Of course, given the confines of Room 1, which was presumably no larger than my own temporary territory, he might improvise some alternative positions which would shift the physical relationships between hand and prick.

But no, his hand was staying where it was, or mostly so. His right hand. Fingers curled around the right side, my right side, of my shaft, thumb curled around the left. He gave me tiny squeezes and not-quite strokes, as if he was trying to keep my attention. A not difficult goal to achieve when the man you are in some sort of a way having sex with is a virgin to everything but wanking and wanting. Hearing about your best friend coming across gentlemanly portraits of rather obscene activities, when all is said and done, did not count towards the loss of any kind of virginity. But I could feel Felcher moving about, an almost frantic sensation communicated through his grip on my prick, as if he were concerned that if he did not quickly finish whatever it was he was doing, I would just pull my cock out of the glorious hole and turn my attention elsewhere.

And then came the “What the bloody hell?” moment.

My hood was retracted, and I felt my knob pressed against smooth, smooth flesh. Not immediately so, because first there was some moving about of my prick and that flesh before the movement stopped. His gripping hand caused my prick to circle against the ridges... *thick* ridges, perhaps? ...of flesh, before stopping, centered on... something.

Something?

Bloody hell, my fucking prick was bloody fucking pressed against Felcher's arsehole!

He was pulling my prick towards his hole, and pressing his hole against my prick, and I was expecting a great deal more pressure being necessary to pop my prick inside, than actually occurred.

Indeed, his arse swallowed my prick whole, as easily as a whore's... or a wife's... well-used cunt. Not that I had any personal knowledge by which to make that comparison, but men of the ton are inveterate gossips about all things sexual, most particularly *their* things sexual, and lopping off fifty percent for the effects of braggadocio, I came to the immediate conclusion that this was a well-fucked, a *frequently* fucked hole.

Nevertheless, it was immediately clear that a man whose arse was used often for the pleasure of other men, and again, logically, for his own pleasure as well, else why do it, must needs develop some talented internal musculature if he wanted to continue to be used. A hole that could readily accommodate far larger pricks than mine, in length and girth, would not be a pleasing repository for seed if the shorter, thinner cocks making the donation were flailing about in essentially open space.

Felcher had excellent internal muscles. *Superb* muscles. He pushed his arse flush against the wall and let me pound his hole. And pound it I did, as this was a hole unquestionably used to pounding. I began to sweat, drops popping out of my body and running down everywhere. I heard the steady slap-slap-slap of my pelvis slamming into his slender, muscular arse. And all the while his hot channel was squeezing and relaxing, sometimes synchronizing with my thrusts, squeezing as I pulled out, relaxing as I pushed in, sometimes the reverse, but all the while that warm tunnel was sending me into a rapidly out-of-control spiral of lust, causing me to spew obscenities without regard for who might hear me, until I had no choice except to make one final, ramming push and bury myself in his hole and start pumping my seed into him as his arse gripped me tight and held me in place.

When I was finally through with that extraordinary seeding—extraordinary, of course, only in comparison to my experience; I had no basis for believing it was extraordinary to him—I rather easily pulled out, stepped back so prick and ballocks were on my side of the wall, and then backed and shuffled to sit down in the chair. Looking at myself in the door mirror, I was surprised to find I did not look as utterly dissolute as I felt in that moment. There were the same linen cloths on a small table beside the chair, though when I applied one to my more than sticky prick I realized Felcher did not offer his reading room customers quite the same linen service as he did for those paying for a private viewing.

As I waited to see if a Felcher prick would appear through the hole, I wondered about the etiquette of glorious holes. Or more precisely, perhaps, the *proprieties*. Harry would chuckle over that when I told him.

If I told him.

We shared so much of our lives, had for so many years shared nearly everything, it felt odd to add wondering about whether to tell him about this, to wondering how long good ton requires you to wait, after your prick has been sucked to completion through a glorious hole, for a prick to appear, seeking service from you, before you may, in good conscience, get redressed and leave. Though it took nothing more to realize that men without conscience, or a modicum of good breeding, might well just come and go, with all the speed of which they were capable.

And while waiting, do you attend to your disarray or dishevelment beyond the obvious prick wiping, or let it go until after you have served in your turn, or realized there would be no need?

I opted for this course of inaction. With a slight tug to get my waistcoat in place, I pulled my watch out, flicked it open. Just past 1:21 p.m. Only fourteen minutes. My endurance should have been better than that. Ah, well. I closed the lid, replaced it. Clearly no other cock was coming than mine.

I stood, bent over, pulled my drawers up, got myself tucked away, and repeated the process of pulling and tucking for my trousers. I had to open my waistcoat to properly refasten my braces. Finished, I inspected myself in the mirror. It was obvious to me that I had been engaged in conduct of a variety which would not meet with the ton's approval, much less that of the morality minions of Her Most Gracious Majesty's government. It would be equally obvious to the men who would observe me when I stepped out of the reading room.

I could only hope it was not obvious to anyone else I might encounter on the way home.

Other than Harry, of course, who would undoubtedly be displaying his own obviousness.

I opened the door and exited the room.

Harry

14 October 1882, 1:24 p.m.

37 Preston Street

London

As I stepped out, I looked across the way at Room 2. The door was closed. That could mean Reggie was still inside, or he had finished whatever “reading” he had done even more quickly than I. I was oddly certain he had more stamina than I, even in these unusual circumstances, but one never knows.

I hesitated. Looked at the even larger crowd of men milling about, testing doors, being rejected, being welcomed. I heard a loud moan and was not the only man to turn his head to look at the young workman who had made the noise. Obviously because of what was being done to his prick just then, since he had it thrust through one of the holes in the end center room. The man thrusting at the second hole from the moaner just slammed his hips against the wood and shuddered.

I could not just go banging on the door to Room 2. Or even check to see whether it was locked or unlocked. What if he wasn't done? Or worse, what if it was someone else?

I was confident, if he had finished first, he would not just abandon me. That he would wait for me in what he considered to be the most logical place. I therefore had only to emulate Reggie being logical, and I would know where to wait for him and go there. If he was there, we would depart. If not, I would wait.

I started to move, but John-Reginald lightly touched my arm. Lightly because there was no way those cloths could entirely remove the oil. He leaned in and murmured, “If you depart the way we came in, and show the card with Mr. Felcher's initial to any, ah, Reginald out there, a carriage will be provided.”

I nodded, thanked him, and went to stand by the large cupboard. I cannot say I had a clear view of the hallway leading towards Rooms 1 and 2—and I could not help but wonder who had been in Rooms 1 and 3 when Reggie was between them, and whether the glorious holes had been used, and how—but clear enough.

Reggie did not make me wait very long. Indeed, I checked my watch as I saw the door to Room 2 open and recognized his head and a quick glimpse of the side of his face. It was only 1:29.

Yes, a bit more stamina. Or a bit more variety. Ah, well, I would never know.

Unless I applied the principle of inquiry. Could I really do that?

I rather thought I might.

But not just yet.

He stood still, staring straight ahead, looking across to "my" reading room, undoubtedly. And he made the same decision I had.

Reggie turned and briskly made his way towards me. We were not large, either of us, but there has always been a certain... *something*... about Reggie, when he was focused, intent, and people tended not to stay in his way when his focus, his intent, was on getting from one point to a definite other with minimal interruptions or barriers.

When he stopped in front of me, we just stared at each other. I essayed a grin, but it withered instantly. There had been no awkwardness last night, but there was today. And there was nothing we could do about it in the Emporium.

"If we show our cards to whichever Reginald is outside that door," and I tilted my head towards it, "we will have a carriage ride home."

"The Pig and Whistle," he firmly said.

"But of course. Is that not our home... away from home?"

That tiny sally elicited a tiny grin, as fleeting as mine had been.

We left the reading room area, and not all that long after, we were exiting the Emporium's carriage in front of the tavern. I was not entirely sure whether I was grateful or not that the driver had not been 'arry and his 'orse.

"We need not go in," I said.

"I rather think *I* do. At least for an ale."

Was he washing an unpleasant *taste* out of his mouth? Had he not enjoyed his reading room adventure? Was our joint adventuring at an end?

He smiled at me. Finally. A fond smile, of the type he uses when I have been talking with my face instead of words. Something I am apparently quite proficient at doing.

"Sometimes, Harry," he said, "an ale is just an ale, and nothing more. And the ale is quite good here. Now come along, do. Adventures in ale await, and those of another sort await as well, though just not here."

I relaxed and nodded. "Just one, though. I think... I think I would like to go home and think about, well, everything."

It was his turn to nod.

"Will you dine with me this evening?" I asked. "Nothing fancy."

"Of course."

We entered the Pig and Whistle.

Reggie

14 October 1882, 7:45 p.m.

No. 18 Bramwell Road

London

As promised, Harry served a simple meal.

Or to be precise, his chef prepared it with the assistance of an appropriate number of underlings. His housekeeper, Mrs. Pryce, supervised the setting of the ten-to-twelve-guest dining room table to accommodate merely two. Merriman ensured the service was fine so that the hot food arrived hot, and the cold arrived cold, instead of the so frequent reversal of food fortunes in many homes. And when the meal was done, the remnants were efficiently whisked away, and we were left with our bottles. Port for me, claret for him.

They knew us well.

We sipped in silence, or nearly so. Harry's fingertips drummed a restless solo on the table top. I knew that after a private dinner he often, perhaps nearly always, smoked a cigar. Of the finest quality, he had ever assured me. But knowing my aversion, he did not do so in my presence. When I offered to adjourn to the library so that he could blow a cloud in private, he declined.

The tapping sound ended. We had another sip. Two. The silence was companionable, but with an odd undercurrent to it. Made all the more odd by the seriousness of Harry's expression. There is an ordinary serious look you have when the occasion is somewhat solemn, or even more than somewhat, and matters requiring a solemnity of focus are occurring or are imminent.

And then there are *serious* matters, well beyond ordinary solemnity and a lack of jokes to lighten the moment.

Harry's face was *serious*.

I have learned over our years together... as friends, only that and nothing more... that you do not rush Harry when he is involved in serious contemplation. The consequences of doing so can be anywhere from mildly to wildly humorous, or devastating in the painful accuracy with which his wicked tongue puts you in your place for your presumption.

So I sipped, and watched, and wondered a little at what he was so seriously contemplating. I rather thought I knew, but unfortunately, when he is in this

mood or mode, nothing can be read on his face. Normally, Harry's face speaks volumes. Indeed, Harry's face customarily speaks the complete *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, footnotes and all, on any given subject. When he was engaged in seriousness, as he sometimes called it, his face still spoke volumes, but each page of each book was blank.

I took a bite of one of the chocolate biscuits Merriman had left for me. Not, of course, what is usually served with port, but I enjoyed the mixture of flavors, and Harry's chef made such extraordinary biscuits. Fortunately, Harry did not care for them, or it would have been necessary to fight a duel with my best friend to secure exclusive rights to the dish on which they were carefully stacked in a once-interesting presentation.

I really hoped his contemplation wasn't going to deprive me of the chocolate biscuits. I picked up another and bit into it.

"Let's talk," he said.

There go the biscuits! my self said.

Glutton! my self accurately accused as I gulped it down.

Granted, "Let's talk" did not carry with it the weight and severity of "We need to talk." The latter always boded ill for the recipient of the words. The former boded at least the possibility of shared "ill." Neither boded well for biscuits while talking.

He rose, obviously intending the conversation to take place elsewhere. As an impeccable best friend and honored guest I rose as well. There was nothing improper in bending to pick up the bottle and top off my glass. My sideways look at the porcelain plate with the remaining one, two... *four!* biscuits, was only a *little* longing. Not at all *long*-suffering, or as if their absence from our destination meant I was being deprived of sustenance vital to my well-being.

To sigh or not to sigh, was what I was about to question, when Harry said, "Oh, just bring the damned things. We can't very well converse if you're going to be tossing yearning looks over my shoulder in the direction of the dining room."

I snatched up both napkin and plate, and with a combination of the best of walking casually and a speed intended to ensure unquestioned victory and the winner's circle at Ascot, I reached the door before him. My plan was to exit first, thereby diminishing the likelihood of his recanting on the biscuits tagging along. Occasionally, I will be the last to admit, one of my careful plans—my plans were always careful even when rapidly devised—would go awry.

At the moment, awryness involved the inherent difficulties in opening a door inward while your right hand is holding a full goblet of port, and the other a plate of precious biscuits. I perforce had to wait while Harry strolled up and stood beside me. And said nothing. And did nothing.

Bastard.

He was going to try to wait me out and make me *ask* him to open the door. Not bloody likely. Where there is a will for biscuits there is a testament to the ingenuity of British nobility. I placed the plate atop the glass, held the lower part with my left hand while I slid my right up so that my curved thumb and forefinger were both clasping the glass and supporting the porcelain, thereby freeing my left hand for knob turning and door opening.

Which was, of course, when Harry reached in front of me and did the turning-opening thing himself. Unfortunately for my exit-first strategy I necessarily had to back up when the door opened. When I was out of the way my best friend *could* have acted so by stepping aside and waving me on through. Instead, he snatched up one of *my* biscuits and crunched into it as he left.

Bastard!

As expected, he went to the library. This time, with the remnant of my biscuit in his mouth, he opened the door and waved me through. I went in, sat, set my port on the end table, and put the plate in my lap, my left hand curved protectively about it. I heard him tell the footman to tell Merriman we were not to be disturbed, and then he sat opposite me.

He laughed and said, "Do give over, Reggie. I'm not going to steal them away."

"You already did," I said, my voice somewhat mumbly around the biscuit. I finished it off, took a sip, set the glass down again. "You know these are my favorite and that I only get them here."

Harry has a chef; I have a cook. Unfortunately, Cook has no hand at all for pastries, which is perhaps good for my waistline. When you are about to fall over the cliff of thirty you have to take these things into account. I intended to do that.

Soon.

Reasonably soon.

He watched me eat the second to last biscuit. I left the last one. I was fairly sure I was going to need it.

"What happened this afternoon, Reggie?"

"Well, what the hell do you think? I seeded a nice warm hole. Like you did with the blond Reginald?"

He looked a little taken aback at my tone. Bloody hell. That couldn't have been a bit of jealousy there.

Could it?

No.

No damned way.

"Do you wish to stop?" he asked.

"What, go back to being *not* friends of Edward's? *Delusional* not friends of Edward's? Not bloody likely."

"No, that's not what I meant. *That* ship has left the station."

I opened my mouth to correct him, but saw the very slight twinkle and stopped. "Then *what*?"

He paused. And paused some more. I had never seen Harry so reluctant to speak. It was normally nearly impossible to get him to close his mouth.

"Do you wish to stop... our... journey to Mecca together? Entirely go our separate ways?"

No. Bloody hell, no!

But I could hardly shout that at him. Were I to do so I would have to explain my vehemence, and I had no explanation to give.

So I hedged. "Do you?"

"Well, bloody hell, Reggie, of course not. I thought you did. Or you might. Really, you were so damned *odd* after your adventures, whatever they might have been, in the reading room. Are you sure?"

"Am I ever not sure when I say something?"

"Sometimes wrong, but always *sure*."

I gave him the slight smile that deserved.

"But you still haven't said."

Damn. He'd noticed. "Yes, Harry, I do want to continue our adventures. Together."

But not together together, my self inevitably reminded me.

His relieved smile warmed and brightened the room. "And we're still best friends? And tell each other everything?"

"Er, yes?"

He leaned back in his chair, spread his legs just a little, no, not a little, but a great deal more than was entirely proper, folded his hands together, and let the tips of his fingers rest, well, they had to be resting on his prick. "So, then, Reggie, what did you do?"

I was somewhat mesmerized by watching his hand and wondering what it might do next that it took a moment for his words to wend their way from my ears to my brain. My response was made with all my customary articulosity. "Uh, what?"

"There in the reading room, with the book, and the mirrors and the glorious holes. We're best friends. We tell each other *everything*." I couldn't be certain, though I really was certain, that he pressed his hands down and put pressure on the base of his prick and then let them lift. "I will, if you will."

So I did.

And he did.

There in his library, facing each other in the fading firelight, the gaslights only dim, we told each other, in exquisite detail, what we each had seen and done and heard and felt that afternoon.

Talking, leaning back, our legs spread somewhat wide and then wider still. Our hands in matching positions that matched yet again when our palms were no longer up, but down, and our fingers and thumbs were down, and curled and squeezing. All as we talked and listened and watched.

Did he get his prick out first? Did I? I have no idea, and no reason to care. We did it... together.

Our words were soft, focused so there was no chance of anyone overhearing even with an ear to the keyhole. Every stroke, every thrust, every gasp and blasphemous prayer, every thought—*nearly* every thought—in meticulous, lewd detail. We built a private showing in his library, one only we two could see and hear, somehow Reginald-John's arse and Felcher's side by side, or they were facing each other, helpless on hands and knees while we fucked them, slowly at first, then faster and faster still. And faster still until we had no choice

but to grunt in near silence, moving quickly to the edges of our chairs, so we could lean forward, still watching each other, glancing down only long enough to be sure our hands were properly placed, and then we were spewing seed into our palms.

And gasping, and taking shuddering breaths in agonizing *silent* gulps lest we be overheard.

We recovered quickly. We had no choice. I lifted my head from contemplation of my overly full palm, looked at him.

“All of it,” he murmured, smugly.

All of...? Oh.

“Indeed,” I replied with equal smugness. Though I had to wonder what we did next. I doubted either of us could get at the handkerchiefs in our back trouser pockets without spilling seed and making a mess someone on his staff was sure to recognize. Bentley, if no one else.

“Have you ever tasted seed?” he asked.

He knew the answer to that; neither of us had sucked any pricks to completion. Yet. But still, I shook my head.

He grinned at me in the near darkness of the room, lifted his left hand with the kind of gesture you make when offering a toast, said “*Santé!*” bent his head and licked his palm clean! I stared at him, at the way his tongue worked every tiny crevice of his hand, between his fingers, sucking, *sucking!* his fingers.

He was nearly done, nearly ready to lift his head and look at me, so I lowered mine and followed suit. I would rather that he mock me for being slow—I could always say it was only because there was so very much more to be consumed—than know how intensely I had been staring.

When I was done and looked up, he was watching me. We looked a little, and then looked away, as we sat up, struggled to put ourselves to rights, gave up, stood up, and completed the task.

We breathed slowly, easing away the raggedness, and once normality was returned—or as close to normality as we could hope under present circumstances—I said, “I don’t think we should do this again.”

I didn’t want to say it, but had to say it.

“Indeed,” he said.

"It wouldn't be safe."

"Quite right."

A pause, not entirely awkward, before I said, "I should go."

"Yes. Ah, tomorrow?"

"Certainly. Around ten?"

"Noon."

I agreed, walked to the door, unlocked it. He escorted me to the front door, bade me goodbye in tones that sounded quite normal to anyone not a best friend since forever.

It was only after I was down the steps and turned towards home that I wondered. Surely he understood I only meant wanking together that way, in his home, in my home. Surely he understood I was not changing my mind and putting a halt to all our adventures.

He understood. Didn't he?

Harry

14 October 1882, 8:19 p.m.

No. 18 Bramwell Road

London

Surely Reggie only meant we should not do again what we had just done.
Not in our own homes.

Surely he had only meant that. He did not mean we should stop our
adventures entirely.

Did he?

THE FIRST INTERLUDE

*16 October 1882, 2:30 p.m.
37 Preston Street
London*

The man behind the desk refrained from pounding it, but his tone did it quite well for him. “Not a single damned penny.”

The man in the chair smiled in a way intended to excessively annoy the almost-desk-pounder. He achieved his goal. Then added a turn of the screw. “And what could one get for a penny? The smallest triangle of paper carefully clipped from the corner of a single photograph? And not even a good one, but one from the public display?”

“Damnitall, you promised me—”

“Nothing. Neither a rose garden nor anything else other than an opportunity. It is not my fault if you are failing to take advantage of what I’ve put in your way. Perhaps you’re not marketing your wares as well as you might?”

The man behind the desk ignored the slight. “All you have to do—”

“Is nothing more than I’ve already done. You’ve made a modest profit already, as you do from every transaction. If you can’t persuade your customers to spend not only more than they intended to spend when they walked in the door, but perhaps more than they ought to spend, given the risks they take by spending anything at all with you, you’re not doing your job. As you well know. Anything more?”

Taking the silence for the “no” that it was, he stood, turned, walked to the coat rack, removed and donned his topcoat. From another peg he removed his fedora. It was one of comparatively few in London, as the rage for the hat named after the great Bernhardt’s performance in Sardou’s play in Paris earlier this year, was only in its infant stages. He enjoyed being at the forefront of

rages. Now if he could only persuade... No, it was only after the rage was in full flood that *that* would be possible.

He walked over to the mirror in the plush office. It was large, ornate, gilded. Precisely what a friend of Edward's having readily available funds, combined with aspirations to elegance, but neither the knowledge nor the taste to quite bring it about, would choose. He placed the hat carefully, adjusted it to precisely the right angle.

Staring in the mirror at the man who stared back, he fingertip-stroked the brim of his hat, in lieu of tipping it, and left. By this time he was long familiar with the intricacies of the passages in the interlocking buildings and easily found his way to the exit he wanted.

The man left behind stared at nothing. Almost nothing. Thoughtfully.

THE THIRD VISIT

Reggie

19 October 1882, 11:00 a.m.

No. 24 Bramwell Road

London

The knock surprised me.

My staff understood that each Thursday, from nine of the clock until noon, or such shorter time as occasionally occurred, Mr. Arbuthnot and I were not to be disturbed. While I was certainly no Midas, a great deal of the wealth I had managed to accumulate since the fortuitous unfortunate demise of dear Cousin Gerald—distant, *distant* Cousin Gerald who apparently detested the entirety of our family, down to the tip of the last branch and root, but who could not bear to see his assets fall off the family tree, and had therefore selected me as the least-detestable tiny twiglet to receive them—required assiduous attention to business details. Thus my weekly, more often if necessary, meetings with Mr. Arbuthnot.

The house was not burning, as I could smell no smoke, nor hear any frightened outcries. The Queen had not died, as the bells would have been mournfully tolling.

There being no other valid reason for an interruption, whoever was knocking could wait and then be dealt with later.

I had just directed Mr. Arbuthnot's attention to certain figures relating to an American railroad expansion I was contemplating as an investment, when the knock came again. The accompanying, "My lord?" would have been diffident had it been anyone other than Bartlett. Bartlett is never diffident, even when breaking one of my rules.

I affixed my best "this had better be bloody good" expression on my face as I crossed to the door and opened it. Whatever effect it might have had on anyone else, it of course had no effect on Bartlett, but one must still try, from time to time. With Mr. Arbuthnot's presence, however, he had taken the route of formality, presenting the envelope to me on a silver salver. I did not recognize the hand which had inscribed my name and direction.

Oddly enough, given his knowledge of the high degree of trust in which Mr. Arbuthnot was held, Bartlett lowered his voice to a confidential murmur, which

could in all likelihood not be heard by Mr. Arbuthnot without visible straining to listen. And Bartlett could undoubtedly see him over my shoulder, across the room, and would alert me in the unlikely event that were to happen. I followed his lead in lowering my voice, as Bartlett did nothing without a certain purpose.

"My lord, the boy who delivered this, an urchin, really, all rags and tatters, said he was instructed to say that the contents of this envelope were of sufficient importance to warrant an interruption of your regular Thursday morning meeting. Not, of course, in those precise words. I have translated them, with reasonable accuracy I am confident, from the language of mudlarks to the Queen's English."

An urchin who was "instructed" to mention knowledge of this meeting? "And of course, on close questioning such as only you can provide, he was unable or unwilling to identify the man who gave him his instructions?"

Bartlett nodded.

"Not even the inducement of largesse beyond whatever his employer had bestowed upon him?" I asked.

Bartlett would quite naturally have attempted to bribe the child, when persuasion did not work. "My lord, I am not sure there *was* any largesse. I rather thought he looked... *frightened*, my lord, at the prospect of divulging that information."

Frightened? Odd, indeed.

I raised my voice to a normal level. "Very well, Bartlett. You acted quite rightly. And please commend the person who had the thought of bringing this matter to your attention."

I closed the door, returned to the desk, and still standing, used a thin-bladed knife to slice open the envelope. There was a folded letter inside, and as I began to pull it out, I had an utterly certain feeling the letterhead would read, "Mr. Felcher's Grand Emporium."

I slid it back in and looked to my man of business.

"Mr. Arbuthnot, please accept my apologies, but this appears to be a matter which I must address with some degree of immediacy. May we reschedule our appointment for tomorrow morning? At perhaps ten thirty? I don't anticipate it will take us much longer than an hour to complete our work."

Mr. Arbuthnot really had no power to disagree with any of my decisions, but I've found people are far more productive if most commands are conveyed

as requests, and actual commands are reserved for situations where nothing else will do.

Mr. Arbuthnot naturally nodded, gathered up his papers, and began to walk towards the door. I realized this was an occasion, after all, when a command was required. I had never tested the keenness of his hearing, so could not be *absolutely* certain he had heard nothing. "Mr. Arbuthnot."

He stopped and turned back to me.

"The conversation between Bartlett and me did not occur. Should anyone have any occasion to inquire, we were interrupted by the delivery of an envelope, upon the receipt of which I decided to curtail our meeting and you departed. You have no knowledge of the contents, as indeed, you truthfully do not. And you will, of course, inform me of any such inquiry."

"But, of course, my lord." He bowed to me, with a rigid formality that would have been accompanied, had he been of Prussian extraction, by a heel-click, but was, instead, entirely British.

Once he was gone, I returned to their proper places the documents which had been precisely laid out for the purposes of our aborted discussions. I sat down behind the desk and slid the letter out. I unfolded it, and discovered my premonition had been correct about the letterhead.

The lines beneath were written in quite small, but quite readable, near calligraphy:

19 October 1882

My dear Lord Smythe,

Please accept my sincere apologies for interrupting your regular meeting with your man of business. However, a business opportunity of a different sort has arisen and I must make a fairly rapid determination as to whether it is economically feasible. Thus this intrusion on your valuable time.

Based on your enthusiastic response to my last private showing, and the markedly similar, though perhaps slightly more effusive, response of your dear friend, Lord Fotherby, I believe you might both enjoy, even more, the new showing I am trying to arrange. Rather than images of two gentlemen, there will be a series of aesthetically pleasing photographs of at least

four gentlemen, perhaps five, to be displayed for your enjoyment.

When I approached the owners of these photographs, which is to say, the subjects of the portraits, they expressed themselves honored by my request that they lend themselves to such an extraordinary cultural event. "Lend," is, of course, not the operative word for men of business such as they. It is, therefore, incumbent upon me to ascertain whether there is sufficient interest in this four- or five-man showing that I might recover my costs, and perhaps make a modest profit.

I might have snorted in amusement had I not been so furious. I put the first page under the second and continued reading.

I have closely examined the multitude of photographs they are willing to offer for display, and can assure you that each and every pose is of the highest quality consistent with the fine art of gentlemanly portraiture.

These letters of invitation are being extended only to a most select and very limited group of fine men of high stature, such as yourself, and Lord Fotherby. Your immediate response is most respectfully requested.

The date will be 22 October, at 9:30 p.m. Transportation will, of course, be provided, directly to and from your homes.

May I put you and Lord Fotherby down for a subscription of £65 each?

For your convenience, a carriage and driver will be at your home at half twelve this day. He can convey your reply, which I trust will be a positive one, and your subscription fees. He is eminently trustworthy. Indeed, I understand you are already acquainted with him. He shares a name with your dear friend.

Inasmuch as Lord Fotherby only lives three houses away from you, unless my instructions have been disobeyed, which I beg your leave to doubt, this will have arrived in time for you to consult with him before the arrival of my coachman.

Yours most respectfully,

F.

p.s. I very much enjoyed our discussion, with its vigorous push and pull of ideas, on Saturday last. I look forward to the opportunity to renew that interaction.

The fucking “F” was of course quite... *fucking* florid.

The letter had become only a little crumpled as I read—a clenched hand tends to do that—so I set the sheets down and smoothed them out.

I picked up my pen, retrieved paper, and began writing. When the note was nearly complete, I rang the bell for Dutton. He is a fine butler, and I would put him up against Merriman any day, for buttling talent and loyalty, though I had to wonder how far that loyalty would go, should he learn how eagerly his employer was learning to be all that he could be, in the army of friends of Edward's. He entered, waited quietly while I reviewed the note, and then scrawled a large letter “R” at the end.

Harry,

Get your arse up and about and get over here. Dressed decently, of course, but you are not to spend several hours ensuring you look your very best. I have had a most interesting communiqué from the man for whom Pictures at an Exhibition might be music to warm the cockles of whatever heart he may have.

R

I carefully rolled the engraved silver blotter Harry had given me for my last birthday over the few lines. When they were dry, I put the letter in an envelope and scrawled “Lord Fotherby” on the outside. I trusted my staff not to read my correspondence, but even so I made my words vague, though hopefully not so vague as to adversely affect Harry's understanding.

Writing complexities to Harry—for all his love of the complexities of Shakespeare and others of similar ilk—is a risky endeavor at the best of times. Giving him a concept of some complexity to consider, while at the same time seeking to obtain swift action from him, is a combination best left on some “bad ideas, never under any circumstances do them” list.

“Have Neville deliver this personally to Lord Fotherby, if you would be so kind? And have him wait for a response. If necessary, he is to *insist* upon a response, and a prompt one. Although... has he the fortitude for the task?”

"I believe so, my lord. He has had some exposure to Lord Fotherby's, ah, eccentricities. I shall, of course, personally instruct him on how best to accomplish his task if obstructions are put in his way."

"Thank you."

"Of course, my lord." Dutton left with all the majesty of one of Her Majesty's large steam warships putting out to sea, led by a beak of a nose that would admirably serve as the bow, followed by a battleship-wide stern. It was rather amazing that the two large men in my employ, Bartlett and Dutton, could move with such assurance and in such silence.

I reread Felcher's letter, resisting the urge to crush the arrogance out of it, and then resolutely turned my attention to matters of business. Although aided by a fresh pot of tea, piping hot, which Dutton brought in, I found myself unable to be resolute in my resolution, and simply stared, unseeing, at the document.

It wasn't quite fifteen minutes when there was a knock, and upon being given permission, Neville entered. I held out my hand for the note.

"Uh, there's no note, my lord."

"But you gave mine directly to Lord Fotherby, did you not? And he did not have the courtesy to reply?"

Neville squirmed a little. "Well, I didn't actually give him the note, my lord, but he did reply."

My expression must have been the equivalent of strong eyebrow-lifting that demanded an explanation, because he rushed along.

"You see, my lord, Lord Fotherby hadn't risen from his bed yet, so as Dutton instructed, I asked Merriman to speak to Mr. Bentley. Well, Mr. Bentley came down, and he told me about his lordship, and on hearing my own instructions, took me upstairs. I waited in the sitting room, while Mr. Bentley went in to speak to his lordship. He came out and said his lordship asked that I give your letter to Bentley. So... so I did."

That last was said nervously, although he had already admitted he had not followed his orders. However, he was really given no opportunity to do so, and thus could not be faulted. "Quite all right, Neville. You did the right thing in the circumstances. So what was his reply?"

He bit his lip and became even more nervous.

Ah. Harry had been at it again. "Did his lordship's reply strike you as odd, Neville? Perhaps out of the ordinary? It is quite all right if you thought that, as his lordship often does things that strike nearly the entire world as being odd or out of the ordinary. So what did he say?"

Neville looked relieved. I leaned back in my chair, lifted the cup and began to take a sip of the no longer hot tea.

I should have known better than to do that just then.

"Well, my lord, Lord Fotherby said, uh, he said, he would be right along as soon as he dealt with something wooden this morning. My lord!"

The last outcry was because my tea began spewing from my mouth like a veritable Vesuvius, as I lurched upright and forward, the teacup tilting and adding to the general mess I was making, all while coughing loudly as the result of the bit I managed to inhale. Unfortunately, Neville interpreted my wildly waving hand as a plea for help rather than a "wait just a moment, I'll be all right." He spun around, leaped to the door, opened it and yelled in a rather stentorian manner, "Help! Help! His lordship is dying!"

I am not sure whether the fleet of servants which flowed into the library, with Dutton, all by himself, serving as the vanguard, was relieved or disappointed not to find a corpse. I hoped they had sense enough to feel the former, considering their lost jobs were that so, as neither Father nor my brother would have any need for this group, and would simply send them out into the world, possibly with letters of recommendation, though most likely not, on the ground that never having employed them, they could not possibly attest to their merits.

Bartlett was the last to arrive, but managed to do so just as I provided a raspy-voiced response to the chaos.

"I thank you for your care and concern. However, I merely swallowed some tea the wrong way, and it, ah, came right back." I gestured ruefully at the spattered desk. "It is good to know that if I were in danger, your response would be so rapid. Now, as I am truly quite all right, please, back to your tasks."

Ha. Back to having a bit of gossip about the master nearly dying and eyeing the clock to determine how long it was until they could stop working and hie themselves to the nearest pub to regale their fellow servants with this particular and most surprising saga in the normally staid life of Lord Reginald George Albert Smythe.

I have never quite forgiven my father for saddling me with a name that could be used to spell “gas” and thereby give rise to all the rude, crude and lewd humor known to young boys, older boys, students at university, and the occasional teacher who wrongly fancied himself a wit.

Dutton and Bartlett remained behind, Dutton to begin the process of putting my desk to rights, while waiting for cloths and cleaning solutions to be brought, and Bartlett coming close to examine me for injuries to my person or my clothing. He found none of the former but clear evidence of the latter, as shown by his *tsk-tsking*, and a gesture to my shirt and waistcoat. I could feel the large wet spot on my left trouser leg, which was bad enough, but not quite so bad as if the liquid had landed elsewhere and made me look as though I had pissed myself. Looking down, I could see what gave the appearance of being the remainders of drooling and dribbling. Surprisingly large spots, perhaps intended to complement the one on my leg.

Damn Harry! He would be “right along” ...after he dealt with his bloody *morning wood!* indeed. I would wager that was more likely what he had shouted out in that mocking tone Neville would not have understood, than what Neville thought he heard.

“Come, my lord,” Bartlett said, moving back to provide a Suez Canal–style channel through which I could pass en route to my ultimate destination: my bedroom for a change of clothes.

Rather like an automaton who has been wound up and his activation button pressed, I stood. “Lord Fotherby—”

“—can wait, my Lord.” Bartlett was quite firm about that. *I will not have you embarrass yourself and damage my reputation by your appearing before another member of the ton, Lord Fotherby or not, looking anything other than your best for the time and occasion.* Bartlett was nearly as good at conveying multiple meanings in a few words as Harry.

A nobleman does what a nobleman must. Which, in this instance, was acquiesce.

I led the way upstairs, still fuming about that fucking Felcher.

Still fearful, as well.

Harry

19 October 1882, 11:35 a.m.

No. 24 Bramwell Road

London

I looked up as he opened the door and opened his mouth to speak. What a talent Reggie had for doing more than one thing at a time. “*Morning wood?*” he said. “You bastard.”

“Really?” I lifted an eyebrow to annoy him. “*That* is how you greet your best friend, who has rushed over here at your urgent command, *pratiquement déshabillé*, as you can see?” I gestured at my not-*déshabillés*-at-all clothes. As if Bentley would allow me out of the house were I to attempt something so utterly *outré*.

As he fumed on his way across the room to stand over me, or loom, rather, since he is quite good at looming, I went for the *coup de grâce* of my morning merriment at his expense. Dutton had advised me of his lordship’s inadvertent adverse experience with tea, of course, though it was not something he would have confided to anyone less close to Reggie than I. Dutton had then brought me a steaming cup of tea, which I sipped... ostentatiously... and then set it quite carefully down on the table beside me, with equal ostentatiousity. “One would not want to make a mess of one’s clothes by being careless, would one?” I murmured.

He flushed, gritted his teeth, turned his hands into fists, and snarled, “One of these days, I shall hit you.”

He has been hitting me, off and on, for several decades, when in similar moods. Never hard enough to hurt, of course.

He gave up looming, as it was clearly not having the desired effect on me, and stalked over to his desk, muttering as he went, “One day. One damned day. I will. I really will.”

Saying “but not today” just then would have been too much of a good thing, at least for me, so in my infinite kindness I forbore.

He stretched across the front of the desk, picked up two pieces of paper, looked down at them for a moment. Oddly, his hand was trembling and his face became flushed. As he turned and came back to me, I realized the flush was the

result of genuine anger, and he clenched his fingers around the sheets even more firmly. "Here. Read this."

I thought we might have a slight tug of war as I reached for whatever it was, but he let the pages loose.

I read it.

Read it again.

Read it a third time.

I knew my rereading was annoying him, even heading him in the direction of Mount Tambourine, but for once I wasn't intent on achieving that effect. They say "three times lucky," but I certainly had no luck on any of the attempts to figure out what this letter had to do with my abrupt summoning.

"What?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'What'?" He was gracing me with his almost-roar.

"Just that. What has you upset? This is a florid invitation from Felcher, arse-kissing in every other phrase, inviting us to a rather expensive private showing, which we can well afford. I suspect, as he undoubtedly did, that we might enjoy it immensely. What with *four*, ah, portraits being on display. Perhaps five."

I paused, considered "yea" and "nay" and the motion passed by acclamation. "And from the postscript, he must have enjoyed your prick in his arse, as he is begging for a renewal of their acquaintance."

There was rather a long delay before he spoke.

And when he did, after his face became a bright red-purple I had never seen before, his voice was low and harsh, and his condemning tone so very unexpected, it crushed me. "You... bloody... *idiot*."

Once, when I was young, and we had been playing in the stable, the lower half of one of the stall doors came off its hinges and knocked me down under it. A bump on the head, a moment to regain my breath after it was lifted away, a fussing of servants, no harm done. This, though, this was different. This was... a door-size granite slab slamming down on me.

No servants to lift it away and fuss and assure me everything would be quite all right. Just pain.

A vast amount of pain.

He was *serious*! His voice had all the arrogance of one of those preachers who condemns someone for something the person has no control over, because the preacher is secure in his position of moral right and rectitude, so very, *very* far above.

Reggie had never said anything to me that fierce and hurtful since... I could not remember when. No! I *could* remember. The “when” was *never*.

I closed my eyes to avoid whatever expression came after the fierce one I had just seen.

I wouldn't cry. I would not. It wasn't manly or tonnish or, or, whatever. My chest hurt. My heart hurt. I couldn't breathe. Wasn't sure I wanted to breathe. Just a moment, only a moment, to remember how to breathe, and then I would get up and leave.

How could he—

“Christ, Harry. I'm so sorry.”

Even though his voice sounded close, I wasn't prepared to open my eyes and find him beside me on one knee, his hand stretched out as if he was going to touch my arm.

I jerked away and nearly toppled the damned chair, but he grabbed the arm—the chair's, not mine—and kept us both upright.

He looked hurt, too. As if my jerking away from him had hurt. Good! I found the voice I had lost along this little way. At least part of it. A small part. “G-get away. Just... move away.”

He looked even more hurt, but did as I said. Double good. *Triple* good. And... and whatever came after *that* good.

“I am *not* an idiot.”

Reggie had moved away, true, but just to *sit on the floor*. It should have been impossible to sit on a floor in one's own library, in the presence of someone else, indeed, even in the absence of anyone else, with a propriety pole of that length and thickness up one's arse. But he somehow managed it.

He started to say something, but I cut him off. “No. Now look, Reggie, I know I'm not as smart as you. You've always been the smart one. You... you *understand* all this, this—” I waved my hand to encompass the *smart* books that filled his library, books I couldn't begin to comprehend “—financial, and business, and agricultural... shit.”

I saw the glint in his eye and glared at him. He was going to make some comment about “manure” being the proper agricultural terminology, and do it in a way which made it funny, which would kill the mood I was in. I needed this mood. I needed to finish.

“Don’t you dare, Reggie. Don’t you *fucking dare*.”

He didn’t and the glint retreated, vanished, and he sat there, his knees drawn up, his arms wrapped around them. Almost as if he was raising a barricade to protect himself from me.

Good.

I swallowed, looked away, and then looked back at him. Inhaled slowly, let it out again. I had found my breath and lost my imminent tears.

“You’re so damned smart, Reggie. You took your inheritance and you’ve just kept on increasing it, all because of all the things you understand, and think about, and decide to do. Mine has increased, but that has nothing to do with me. It’s because I have a good man of business, and because he knows when to rely on your advice. You’ve always been the *smart* one, and I’ve been the... what? Butterfly? All elegant, brilliant colors, flapping my wings and gliding about from place to place with nothing but style to say anything for me.”

He opened his mouth, but quickly shut it again when my eyes made it clear it was still my turn.

“We’ve never been equals, Reggie. I know that. But you never made me feel *less* before. Never made me feel like I *was* an idiot, one tiny misstep away from being locked up in Bedlam.”

I paused so I could get the strength to say it. “How could you *do* that to me?”

And my lost tears were found. With a feeling I was embarking on a Noah-like flood, though hopefully not of the swallow the earth variety, I bent over and just let them do what they would.

I hadn’t let very many of them loose when I felt his arms around me, his cheek resting on my hair, holding me carefully, but close. “I’m so sorry, Harry. I didn’t mean it. I was angry, not at you, never at you, and well, I just blurted it out.”

What?

Impossible.

I jerked my head up and my skull collided with something. His chin? His jaw? I didn't give a damn. I tilted back so I could see him. "I don't believe you. You *never* blurt. You are Reginald-the-blurtless. There is nothing that comes out of your mouth that hasn't been thought over at least a dozen times before the first sound is let loose. *I* am the one who blurts."

He was sitting back on his haunches, looking up at me. He rubbed the edge of his jaw. "Well, I must have learned how, because what I said could only have been a blurt, since it was as thoughtless as any three words could possibly be. And I truly didn't mean them. I was just... furious with Felcher and took it out on you."

"But I still don't see why."

He got up, went to the chair opposite me, sat. Let out a heavy breath. "He knows where we live, Harry."

"S... Oh."

"Oh, indeed. I didn't tell him. You didn't tell him."

How odd to suddenly feel sort of joyful. Not really so, not greatly so, just a little so. And that went with the realization that the "You didn't tell him" was a statement. Not the slightest hint of a question mark anywhere about. So of course I could not just let it go.

"Are you sure it wasn't you?"

His "What?" almost reached the level of actual outrage, but then he heard my tone. We had to get past this.

"You know how men are about bed talk, Reggie. We're worse than women, or so all of our friends say, considering how many times what they've said before, during and after fucking has gotten them in trouble with the women in their lives. Which should be no different just because it is men fucking other men. So perhaps you let something slip with Felcher while you were slipping something *in* Felcher."

This time his outrage was mostly real. "We were never in a bed!"

"Well, then, glorious hole talk? Stroke out, words; stroke in, words, and so forth and so on until you finally stopped talking and started seeding?"

Reggie gave me back a rueful look. "I was too focused on what my prick, and the rest of me, was feeling to have been coherent. Perhaps when I am more used to it, my mind won't be so *out* of focus and I might actually do two things at once: fuck and talk."

"I am sure you will be a most eloquent fuck-talker... talk-fucker? ...once you have acquired more experience."

We laughed just a little, regaining our equilibrium, and then stopped.

"I *am* sorry, Harry. Truly. Are... are we all right again?"

I nodded and smiled back. "I have never been quite sure about God and Heaven, but all's right with *our* world, at least."

"Not quite."

I sighed. For a man so very smart, he could sometimes be so very slow. "*Our* world, Reggie, which is something quite different from our *world*."

"Ah." He gave me that thing men do, chin raised, chin down, which is sort of a nod in reverse, which suffices for nod purposes in most circumstances. "Very well, but that still leaves us with the problem of Mr. Felcher, and probes of a variety neither of us appreciate."

"Speak for yourself, John Alden." I blushed. Bugger! Back to blurting already.

Reggie gawked at me. Really, he should not act so surprised when this happens. He knows how, how—I hesitate to say weird and wonderful, though the words are quite accurate—my mind is. He also knows that bits and pieces of things I have read just sort of rise up like bubbles in champagne. And then they just... pop out.

Why, yes. That's it. I have a *champagne* mind. But what... Ah. I know. I have a *Renaudin-Bollinger et Cie* mind. Perhaps not one of their vintage years, but still, a most excellent bottle. I blinked. Blinked again and looked at Reggie, whose gawk had segued into a mild glare.

"You went away," he said.

"I did." I grinned at him, but he refused to grin back. *En garde!*

"Are you going to do it again?"

"Inevitably." I allowed my grin to widen.

"But not immediately."

"Unlikely." It is a marvelous thing, I think, to be able to control one's grins, and advance them in increments. I advanced.

"So we may get back to the matters at hand?"

"Indubitably."

"Very well, then. Felcher has—"

"But we were discussing probes. Shouldn't we finish that first?"

"I... What?"

"Follow along, Reggie, do. You brought up the subject of being probed in a variety of ways and us not enjoying that. And I said, 'Speak for yourself, John Alden,' which is not a correct quotation, because what Priscilla actually said was—"

"Stop."

"What? No. She *never* said... Oh."

"Yes. The 'stop, please do,' was from me. *Probes*, Harry? Really? At a time like this?"

"It seems the perfect time to me, as *I* didn't bring the subject up. You did. And I just thought, well, I've probed, but never been probed, just like you... Oh. Is that it? You've been probed? And you didn't like it? And you didn't *tell me about it*? Your best friend? How *could* you?"

I was, perhaps, overdoing it. Two scoops of marmalade on the last bite of the scone when just a dollop would have done.

"Harry." Ah. Reginald-the-ever-patient was speaking, stretching my name out into quite a long sound. Far longer than either of our pricks, I thought. A perhaps not apt comparison, but comparative prick dimensions have been much on my mind of late.

"Reggie." I patiently Harry'd him back. There! A glimmer of a grin. I did my excellent Griselda imitation. The patient part. Not the obedience part.

"Very well." He lifted his hands in a *faux* surrender and let them drop. "I, like you, engaged in rather vigorous probing on our last visit to the Emporium. I enjoyed myself immensely, as did you, as, apparently, all friends of Edward's are wont to do when their pricks are immersed in tight and talented arses. Like you, I am, myself, *unprobed*. However, unlike you, it seems, I really have no desire to *be* probed."

"Good Lord, Reggie, are you *ever* going to get rid of that propriety pole, or are you just going to keep on shoving it back up your arse whenever something new arises? And then having to be *persuaded*, indeed, one might even say *seduced* into its removal in order to try the new thing and be able to enjoy it?"

"I hardly think what we have been doing these last weeks would fall within anyone's definition of propriety, Harry."

"Quite right. Which is beside the point, when the point is simple. Did Felcher seed while you fucked him? Reginald-John did. Quite marvelously so, if I do say so myself."

"I have no idea."

Ha. I knew something Reggie did not. "Did his arse ever squeeze your prick?"

Reggie assumed his "Wait just a moment, please, I am thinking about my response, and want to be absolutely certain of the accuracy of what I say before I say it" expression. "Yes. Every time I pulled back he would squeeze me, then relax as I thrust, and squeeze again as soon as I was in, holding on quite nicely and tightly as I pulled outward."

"John-Reginald has a different technique. He squeezes and releases, squeezes and releases. But what I was talking about was whether there came a time when he clamped down rather tightly, almost like a vise on your cock, though, really, that is an image that makes one want to put protective hands across one's... ah, where was I? Oh, yes. Cock, vise, then a brief release, followed by clamp and release, several times?"

"Yes."

"There! Each clamp and release was a spurt of seed. The more vigorous the clamp, the more vigorous the spurt. And one does not spurt one's seed if one isn't bloody enjoying what is happening with one's prick."

"Very well, but—"

"No butts... oh, well, there actually are butts about. And I want to try them. And have the men who own those butts try me." I paused, but avoided going away again as I recalled all the men milling about in the Emporium reading room area, going into the rooms to share their pricks, either just to be watched, or doing or being done.

"You saw all those men at the Emporium, Reggie. And you know there are more friends of Edward's that we haven't discovered, haven't met yet. All the things we could have been doing with them, all this time, all these years, but didn't, and haven't yet. So many men, Reggie, so little time."

I wasn't offended by his laughter. Nor by his somewhat admonishing tone, when he said, "Harry, Harry, if you... if *we*... are going to do all this exploring,

we have the rest of our lives to do it. Ample time. No need to rush into it all so very rapidly.”

“Until we get old and no one wants to explore with us.”

Another laugh at my expense. “Harry, we’re just twenty-nine.”

“And we’ll both be thirty by Christmas. And I don’t want to wait around until I’m like that old gentleman at the Emporium.”

“Who?” It was only a single word, but it sounded like, “What in the bloody hell are you blathering on about now?”

So I told him.

“While I waited for you, I watched the men cruising about, looking, looking. Sometimes one would just stop, a temporary rock in a stream, head still, head perhaps turning to check the streams about him, beside him, before moving and joining one of the flows. Sometimes they stood against that back wall, watching, looking for the man who matched, for the moment, their mood, their inclination, arms folded across a chest, fists clasped across a crotch to hide what was burgeoning or already full-on. But they were too restless to stay long in one place, so they moved and rejoined the currents.

“One young man in workmen’s clothes braced his shoulder against that wall for a time, his right leg up and bent, his worn shoe flat against the wall. His right hand rested lightly on his right thigh, while his left, ah, his left was curled around his cock and balls, cupping and squeezing and then releasing so what he had could be seen. *He* was successful, or at least seemed so, when another man stopped by his side, their heads bent towards each other, talking, before they moved, together, out of my sight, but they did not come walking back to cross in front of me and start the circling movement again. I rather thought they found an open room and decided to read together.

“And then there was... him. He was not of our class, nor a businessman, or at least not one with a generous income, not well dressed, but still clean and neat. And old, Reggie. *Old*. Slightly stooped. Silver hair shading into white, a well-creased face, long-fingered hands I could imagine as having been graceful and elegant long ago, but now they were gnarled and a bit twisted. And every reading room door he tried, he was rejected.”

“Well, he could have just gone into a room by himself. And gotten whatever it was he wanted.”

"Unless the man in the next room peered through a glorious hole, or worse, the men in the rooms on either side, made the holes *unglorious*, by deciding they didn't want the old man's prick or mouth or hands or arse. And making certain, as men do, that he knew he was unwanted.

"I am *not* going to be that old man, Reggie. I am *not*. I'm gathering all the bloody damned rosebuds while I may, and 'may' is right now, or as soon as may be."

I took a breath and let it out slowly. I had intended, way back at the beginning of all this, only to have a moment or two of humor, before starting in on whatever need for serious discussion had led to me being summoned.

And later, after... after *that*, some more humor, to be sure we two were, indeed, right with *our* world. We *were* right again, so what had I done but drag us down into... I don't precisely know what. Reggie clearly had no idea, either, as he was looking somewhat dazed.

And now I had to rectify my stupid silliness. I had to drag our arses out of this... this *Slough of Despond* I realized I had dumped us into.

Well, as they say, the best offense is a *good* offense. I can be offensive with the best.

"It's all your fault, you know."

"I... *What?*"

Ah, good. That wasn't quite a roar, but it was a beginning.

"You sidetracked me. Really, Reggie, I was quite ready to discuss whatever issue you have with Felcher knowing where we live, but then *you* introduced the subject of pricks probing our arses, or vice versa, and I simply went where you led."

I accompanied these words with my most innocent, "Who, *me?*" look. The one that so clearly says, "Really, I couldn't possibly have done whatever it is you think I did, as I was nowhere in the vicinity. Any vicinity. Just name a vicinity and I was not there." It worked for so very many years when we were young, but, alas, Reggie is rarely taken in by it any more. On the other hand, it usually has the effect of softening his mood, as he finds the affectation somewhat humorous.

And so it was this time.

"Remind me to thump you later, Harry. You really deserve it this time."

"Certainly. I am always willing to be thumped whenever I deserve it. How often shall I remind you?"

"Every hour on the hour."

"Done." Which was of course a thumper. A huge one. I have often wondered, though, whether a thumper is really a thumper if the person to whom you are giving the thumper knows he's being thumped. *Thumperized*? A line of thought which could so easily have led to my going away again and annoying Reggie. So I made a point of pulling back, and pulling my watch from my waistcoat, flipping it open and checking the time. He smiled at that.

Then he became more serious, which meant he was about to instruct me to do the same. He did.

"Harry, I need you to be serious for a bit. Felcher knows not only our names, and where we live, but things about us. Well, about me, but if he knows private matters about me, he knows them about you."

"What private matters? The fact that you meet with Arbuthnot every Thursday from nine to noon?" I waved my hand. "Everyone knows that. It's not a bloody Crown secret."

He looked surprised, so I naturally told him not to.

"Reggie, you are a creature of habit, a man of schedules. As you have, in all likelihood, never told Dutton, Bartlett, or the rest of your staff, that they must never disclose anything whatsoever about anything they see or hear in your household, then disclosures are inevitable in servant gossip. Mentioning your Arbuthnot meetings would probably be a point of pride—having a master who meticulously cares about business matters means one who is meticulous in all things. Therefore, a fine master by whom to be employed."

"But still, Felcher had to investigate us. Had to send someone out to talk to our servants. Or someone to observe us. Watch our houses to see our comings and goings."

He paused, inhaled. Let the deep breath out. When he spoke again his voice was shaking. "Harry, he *knows* who we are. What if... what if he shares that knowledge?"

Oh.

Had I thought about it, I would have said that Reggie was being the grasshopper along with me in our recent doings, and enjoying each and every

hop. Even if he had been, however, he was back to enacting the ant. Prudent, cautious, concerned for the future. And not just his, but mine as well.

That was all well and good and I loved him for it... in a *friendly* sort of a loving way, not, of course, in a *love* love sort of a way, because men simply don't do that. But still... damn it. The propriety pole, this one made of fine British oak undoubtedly several feet in diameter, possibly a record of some sort, was well and truly seated by his fear. And needed to be removed. Again.

Damn. Given the number of times propriety poles of varying diameters and lengths were going in and out of my best friend's arse these days, he really should not be saying he's never been probed.

"And if he does?"

"We'd be *ruined*."

His voice was so very despairing. I had never realized that our standing in the ton meant so very much to him. Yet if I agreed, and commiserated with him, he would undoubtedly become even worse.

He was right, of course. At least in a sense. But even if it happened, I wondered if, after all the fuss and furor died down, it might not even be freeing. So I had no choice but to try to brighten his mood and lighten the load he was bearing.

"Ah. So we're as delicate as some damned debutante caught alone in a dark room with a man not related to her? We might have to... get married? *To each other?* To preserve our reputations?"

That surprised the tiniest of smiles out of him. Quite likely the tiniest ever, as Reggie is a solemn chap and is not known for the breadth or frequency of his smiles.

"Be serious, Harry."

"I am. Oh, very well, not entirely serious."

I paused to don my most serious expression. It was not one I practiced in my mirror, so it was undoubtedly not a well-done expression. One might even say underdone? Not cooked at all and somewhat raw? Nevertheless, when one is offering succor—and I most resolutely turned my thoughts away from the images the sounds of that word evoked—to one's best friend in a time of crisis, one could not be frivolous.

Which was most regrettable. Fun and frivolity are often the best answers to most crises.

"Now, pay attention, Reggie. This is me being serious on this subject. For the first, last and only time. So... Yes, I understand the consequences of being exposed."

Damn. Does everything I say or think have a sexual side today?

Hell, I am not sure how I can possibly be expected to maintain any degree of seriousness if I'm going to say things like that. I ploughed right on.

"But how is Felcher going to do that? He has no proof. We haven't exposed our pricks or the rest of us and posed for pictures, have we? And beyond that, there is only his word about anything we did or might have done."

"But what if someone *saw* us? Either visit. Both visits."

Ah. Again.

Public propriety poles are not, I think, inherently bad. So very many have them, at least amongst the ton. How could they not, in the reign of Her Most Moral Majesty Victoria, Queen, et cetera, et cetera? Consciously or unconsciously, one's every public moment and movement revolves around that pole. Revolves around ensuring that not a single moment or movement constitutes the slightest breach of the highest standards of good conduct.

In private, of course, or in the presence of like-minded fellows, the propriety poles are gleefully removed, lubricated for reinsertion prior to returning to public view, or to the presence of one's family, and then set aside until needed. The absence of a propriety pole leads, quite naturally, to lewd, lascivious, licentious, and lustful behaviors. *Our* behaviors in recent times.

My own propriety pole must always have had some inherent flaw, I realized. Perhaps a defective design, as it had been in place just as long as Reggie's. Yet once we began our adventures, I most cheerfully yanked it out, chopped it into tiny slivers, burnt them to ashes, collected the ashes in an urn, and on a short Thames journey scattered them to the winds and water, to start them on their way to the bottom or out to sea. I would, I had decided, live a pole-free life henceforth.

Reggie's pole, though, must have been designed by the Ministry of Morality, and designed so very well that even when the pole was temporarily removed, Reggie felt bereft and utterly at a loss by its absence. So much so that when each of his lewd, et cetera, acts was done, he could only be comfortable again with the pole in place once more.

He *was* propriety. And from the fear in his voice he was very afraid that without propriety he was nothing. That without his reputation as a pillar of propriety, should our... *escapades* become known... he had nothing, was nothing, could not survive.

Bloody hell.

And bloody hell yet again.

Still, I had to try.

"What if he does? On the one hand, there are the accusing words of a man who regularly breaks multiple laws, probably far more than just those relating to the creation and dissemination of obscenity and operating something fairly like a molly house. On the other hand, there are the aghast, shocked, and horrified words of two fine, upstanding scions of society, astonished that they have been so falsely accused."

"Damn it, Harry, you know bloody well that truth has very little to do with anything where the ton is concerned. All he has to do is set a whisper in motion, plant a story in some scurrilous rag that is not so scurrilous that the entire ton does not read it, and that will be sufficient. We can't fight whispers and innuendo by loudly, and falsely, proclaiming our innocence; we'd just get that whole 'doth protest too much' business started, and thereby prove the rumors right."

"Damn."

"Indeed."

"You do realize how it pains me to admit you are right."

"Considering how often it has happened over the years, you should, by now, have acquired a hide so thick you feel no pain at all."

"I concede that. So... then what?"

"Then what, *what*?"

"Then... what are we to do? If we are afraid of his disclosures, do we simply stop? Never go back there again? Go back to the way we were before I came across—and don't you bloody dare mock me right now, Reggie—those pictures of Bentley's? Deny our friendship with Edward? Be precisely what we were back then, or rather, *act* precisely as we did, but knowing all the while that that is not what... or more importantly, *who*... we really are?"

I bloody well knew I wasn't going to go backwards, even though I wasn't quite certain how to go forward from where we were at that moment. I just had to devise a way to get him committed to joining me in that forward movement, and then we could devise a direction.

I rushed forward.

Over the river and through the woods, and over a cliff I went.

"Do you expect me to go back to pretending I have a cunt *du jour* every Wednesday night? Or you go back to pretending you have a mistress named Marie in your house on Falmouth Lane?"

Oh, hell.

Bloody hell.

Bloody, bloody, *fucking hell!*

I wasn't supposed to know that. Harry-the-ever-blurting, in action yet again. Perhaps if I rushed forward quickly, we could...

Alas, no.

"You knew." Reggie-the-stern, Reggie-the-righteous, Reggie-the somewhat-but-not-fully-furious, all joined together in a miniature Mount Tambourine moment.

Too late.

I nodded.

"How long?"

"A while."

"How *long* a while?"

"Ummm. A year?"

"You don't know how long you've known? *Really?*"

"Oh, all right! A year. Slightly more. Binky, Holmes, Danwell, and Fenwick, all our most particular friends, were wondering, one evening right after you left to go to Marie, right before I was to leave to visit the cunt I had selected for that *jour*, whether she was as fine a mistress as you claimed. I was, well, a bit bosky, so I said I would follow you and find out. And then we could have great fun ragging you, regardless of what I learned. So I did. I followed you."

"I didn't know anyone was following me."

"Of course not. What with your 'no one would dare' attitude, you wouldn't have believed someone *would* dare even if you were told. In fact, I am rather astonished that you believe—"

"No, Harry. Finish this particular digression, this *last* digression, *so that we can get back to the whole bloody damned point of my asking you to come here!*" It was a veritable shout by the time he was done.

Asked? Asked?

"You didn't bloody ask me anything, Reggie. You tol—"

"On point, Harry, on point."

When one has a champagne mind of the finest kind, one could not possibly *not* think of me, dressed as I was, *en pointe*. An absurd little image that almost made me laugh, but I knew I didn't dare. "I followed you to Falmouth Lane. Number one twenty-one. A rather neat—"

I held up my hand to let him know I was reverting to the point. "You arrived. The servants, all two of them, departed. Which I found rather odd. Shortly thereafter, the only room with any light in it was on the first floor, which also struck me as odd, since bedrooms would most likely be on the second story. So I waited and no one arrived. And, well, really, Reggie, if you don't want anyone watching, you should close the drapes and not have a tree quite so handy and quite so easy to get up."

Enter Reggie-the-long-suffering. "You climbed a tree? No, no, don't say anything. Of *course* you climbed the bloody tree. And what did you see from the tree?"

"Ummm, nothing. Well, you had something to eat, and you read, and you did some staring off into space, which was fortunately not directed out the windows, and you might have fallen asleep for a bit, I couldn't be quite sure, and then at eleven o'clock, you left. I followed you back home."

"And what did you tell our good chums when next you saw them?"

"Reggie! Really! I lied, of course. Told them I got a glimpse of her when she arrived, and she was everything you had said she was, though, of course, you never were very precise about her. So, I, um, perhaps, I might have, ah, *embellished* just the slightest bit."

If Reggie-the-even-longer-suffering suffered any more, he'd be a corpse. "When have you ever *not* embellished a simple lie out of all recognition? Ah, ah, ah!" He waggled his finger at me to prevent me from responding to that vile calumny upon my character.

He then waved that finger at me, to indicate I was to go on, much in the manner of whoever it was that conducted that D'oyly Carte performance of *Penzance* we saw last week at the Savoy.

"Very well. I, ah, brightened the blond of her hair, plumped her figure a little to provide some nice curvature, gave her a speaking glance, and pouty lips, and, and... that was all."

"All? *All*? That was more than bloody enough. What if I had decided to describe her in more detail myself?"

"Embellish a figment of your imagination?"

He waved that away. "I might have."

I couldn't help letting a little laugh escape. "Reginald, the ever reticent, going back to add additional details to a tale once told? Not bloody likely. I just did it so they would know what a fine fellow you are, fully capable of capturing and keeping the interest of a beautiful woman. Despite being, well, the staid and stodgy Reggie that you are."

"I suppose I should thank you for that, but I won't. Instead, I want to know why you assumed she didn't exist just because you saw me on one occas..." His voice trailed away as he fixed me with one of his sword-through-the-gut-pin-you-to-the-wall stares. Or glares.

"You didn't... Oh, but of course, of bloody bugging of course, you followed me again. How often?"

"The following three weeks. It was quite easy. When one is perpetrating a fraud about where one is going, one must... Oh, very well, on point, on point."

I couldn't help myself. I really couldn't. As I said the words, I lifted my legs, held them straight out, and pointed my toes. And refrained from snickering, though I am certain my lips were a bit wiggly and wobbly.

Reggie's eyes widened. He looked down at my feet, up at me, started down but came immediately back up. And got it. "You would fall flat on your arse, you know, if you didn't hit the floor face first, first."

"I would not! Why, I'll have you know I am exceedingly grace—"

"Yes, Harry, you are graceful, but you aren't *that* graceful. And with that arse of yours you would not be able to maintain that kind of balance."

"What do you... *my arse*? What about my arse? I have a nice arse. A good arse. A most excellent arse, as any arse connoisseur would attest. I—" was having so much fun I really didn't mind his interruption.

"Harry." Stern, stern, stern, despite the almost-smile twitching at the edge of his mouth.

"Reggie." Mocking-stern, mocking-stern, mocking stern.

He ignored my mocking. "You will now come back on point, but not, most assuredly *not, en pointe*."

I sighed my acquiescence to his diktat.

"When each of your visits to Falmouth Lane was a repetition of the first, though I admit I only climbed the tree once more, and with you leaving precisely at eleven each time, I knew Marie had no more existence than my own fictitious women. And I said nothing to our friends, except for that first time."

"I suppose I should thank you for that, as well, but I won't. Damn it, Harry, how can you make a simple conversation about a serious matter so bloody complicated?"

I opened my mouth to reply to *that* gross calumny, but he had the grace to flush, which was admission enough that he might have had, perhaps, *something* to do with the complexities of our conversation.

We sat in silence for a moment, watching each other, and then sighed simultaneously.

He slumped, and a great deal of his fear came back. But he shook his head, visibly made a decision, sat upright again, and said, "You're right."

Given the nature, the wide-ranging nature, of our conversation, I waited for him to clarify the exact nature of my rightness.

"I don't want to go back, Harry. I'm not sure I could. But I don't know how to go on from here."

"Onward, Reggie, onward. Like one of those bloody Christian soldiers in Mr. Sullivan's hymn."

Oh.

I paused, and went away, not *far* away, just the tiniest fragment of a modest modicum of a little bit of time, and came back and, well, unmanly as it was, I giggled.

"Haaaarrrryyy?" He stretched out my name again, though not to the length of a prick, his or mine.

So I sang at him. In a rather fine tenor.

Onward, Edward's soldiers!

Marching as to war,

With the pricks of his friends

Going on before.

"Oh, Harry, my dear friend!" This time his leaning back was no fearful slump, and he tossed his head back as well, and laughed. It was a genuine, unfrightened laugh. When he stopped, he smiled at me, and finally, finally, after all of our digressions and disagreements and diversions, we were back together and truly right with each other.

"So, General Lord Fotherby, Supreme Commander of the First Bramwell Brigade of Her Majesty's Most Edwardian Army, what is your plan? What is your strategy? What tactics will you employ in our battle against the fearsome Felcher armies?"

I blinked. Reggie was expecting *me* to *think* of a way out? As opposed to just leaping before I looked, in hopes of landing without damage to myself or anyone nearby?

I peered at him suspiciously, thinking he was making a game of me, but he peered right back, letting me know he was truly asking me.

Well.

I thought. Reggie was patient with me, not even interrupting my cogitations to point out how infrequently I cogitated.

"Do you think this might be a prelude to blackmail, Reggie?"

"It might."

"Then it's simple. We pay the blackmail and refuse to pay the blackmail."

He cocked his head and said nothing, just gave me one of his long-established, often-used, "Did you really just say that, Harry?" looks. When I did

not immediately respond, he gave me the follow-up look: "Do you think you might enlighten me?"

I did so.

"If Felcher does try blackmail, on either or both of us, demanding money for his silence about our adventures at the Emporium, we refuse to pay. We stand firm about that. We tell him that if he tells anyone anything, if we learn of so much as a hint of anything adverse to our interests in any way, no matter how remote, relating to the fine art of gentlemanly portraiture, or his establishment, even if he is in fact not responsible for the disclosure or the pure fantasy someone conjured up, we will destroy him. He will then either back away, or he will not."

"And if he does not?"

"Then, yes, all the things you said earlier are true, and we might, indeed, be ruined in the ton. But we won't be in prison." I chuckled. "Indeed, we won't. In, what, two hundred and twenty some odd years, the Church and the republican faction in the Commons *still* have not succeeded in making our recent prick-in-arse, plunging adventures a hanging offense once more? Felcher's offenses are not hanging ones, either, but I am confident that between us we can muster enough resources to see he goes to prison."

He nodded, not as if considering, but in agreement. "But if we refuse to pay, why would we then pay?"

I twinkled at him. This was, indeed, quite brilliant. If I couldn't entice him into admitting it, I would simply have to say so myself. One must, after all, always be honest. Within limits. Attesting to one's own, quite customary, brilliance, was naturally well within those limits.

"Did you like the examples of the fine art of gentlemanly portraiture you perused while in the reading room?"

He coughed and flushed. "Well, ah, I didn't exactly look at that many. There wasn't, ah, all that much time."

"You mean before you were presented with first a Felcherian mouth and then a Felcherian arse—I assume that was the sequence—at a glorious hole, and your attention was quite, quite distracted away from reading?"

"Exactly."

Smug bastard.

"But still, you *liked* the pictures you saw, and the ones we so briefly saw on our first visit, before we both became distracted by the living version of a series of pictures."

"Ah, yes."

He clearly did not see where this was going. I was really quite good at this questioning thing. I would probably have made a most excellent barrister, perhaps even, no, no "perhaps" at all, most *assuredly* a Queen's Counsel, had I not been a spare with plenty of money and no need of a career, in the law courts or otherwise.

"And if you purchased pictures of your very own, you could have them available for perusing and wanking whenever you wished?"

"Harry!"

"Hell-*oh*! What is all this 'Harrying' me about?"

He flushed.

"Really, Reggie? *Seriously*? We wanked side by side, watching two men suck and finger fuck each other. We somewhat lost our arse virginities when we fucked those men on the second visit. We wanked *watching* each other while we shared our tales of adventures in photography. So don't act so bloody shocked by my saying what we both know: we wank.

"Conjugate with me, since we don't conjugate with anyone else all that often: I wank, you wank, he wanks, we, you and they all bloody wank! As often as we can or need to if we aren't putting our pricks in a real hole, and you know damned well neither of us has been doing any real prick-into-hole plunging for years, other than a sort of hole made by a hand. So do you, or do you not, want a set of pictures for yourself?"

"I, well, I do."

"Then that's the 'blackmail' we pay. We don't pay him if he demands money, but if he is sensible enough not to make the effort, we pay him in a different way, with the amount he receives entirely up to us. He will be making a profit from our portraiture purchasing, and while not as much, perhaps, as any theoretical, *actual* blackmail, that should forestall any future attempt."

"And if we someday decide to stop buying? If we reach a point where our investments are not producing any returns?"

"You mean if we stop getting erect and become incapable of gloriously, or somewhat so, seeding from picture perusal?" I couldn't help but laugh. "I don't know about you, *old man*, but since I am unlikely to have all that many seeding opportunities with other men, except through the Emporium, and since I do not intend to live there so as to have multiple opportunities multiple times a day, I fully expect I will be gloriously seeding to my regularly expanding picture collection for years to, ah, come."

He carefully paused as if he needed to think this over, which was utter nonsense. I had him at "Hello."

"Do you know, Harry, that's rather brilliant. Really."

Ha! I didn't need to say it after all. He admitted it!

"However, I didn't—"

"No, Reggie, not another damned word. If you say anything whatsoever to detract from that compliment, teasing or otherwise, I shall well and truly thump you. Seriously."

"Well and truly?"

"Indeed."

"Then I have nothing more to say, except, what next, your generalship?"

"You gather up £130, put it in an envelope with a note expressing our most gracious acceptance of his kind offer, and take it outside to dear 'arry the 'orse." I looked at my watch. "In five minutes. You'll just have time."

"As you wish."

"Ah, Reggie, if only that were all you ever said to me. I could be eternally happy."

We smiled.

When he came back from delivering the first of our blackmail payments, we adjourned to White's for a late lunch, and some billiards.

Reggie

22 October 1882, 11:18 p.m.

The Pig and Whistle

London

We participated in the private showing.

Participated!

In the private showing!

If Harry ever again accuses me of having a propriety pole up my arse, I shall thump him. Severely. Up one side, down the other, and round about several times, at least. I shall ensure *that* thumping is a far, far better thumping than I have ever done, and afterwards I shall go home to a far, far better rest than I have ever known, post-thumping.

And so I shall tell him when I am done thumping.

Ha! That will show him he is not the only one who can turn a quotation to his own use.

I would say what was I... what were *we*... thinking, but... Ah, ha! It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good erection, must be in want of a seeding. And leaking bell ends are notoriously known to be capable of thinking only four words: "How soon? How well?" So we were well and truly not thinking at all.

I glanced over at him, to find that he was looking at me, his ale at his lips. He blinked, and sipped, and looked away. Which was fine with me, as I had no immediate desire to discuss what happened. Perhaps later, when I am calm enough to converse quietly. That would most likely be quite some time off, mayhap in the late 1920's, when roaring would be considerably less.

We ended where we began, at the Pig and Whistle, as my reply had changed the destinations. Though this was not quite an ending, as we had yet to go home.

At the appointed time, we were outside the tavern, unhappily in the cold, unhappy that the decision to attend this private showing still felt more forced than freely made, even though we both knew that in the absence of the implicit

threat we would nevertheless have agreed. A plain, somewhat dreary carriage pulled up in front of us. A plain, somewhat dreary driver looked down and asked, "You be Tom 'n' Jerry?"

Harry opened his mouth to blurt out the truth, so I elbowed him sharply in the ribs, and told the driver, "Yes."

A grunt sufficed as a reply, and it took a moment, fortunately a very short moment, to remember yet again that in this venue we were not noblemen to whom cabbies catered, clambering down, opening doors, closing doors, kissing arses, but two neatly dressed gentlemen of no particular distinction.

As I was closest to the door, it fell to me to open it, figure out how to let down the steps, follow Harry inside, figure out how to get the damned steps up again, and get the door closed so we could leave. It will be Harry's turn the next time... I stopped at that, and then went right on, realizing our decision to pay and not pay blackmail would involve multiple visits to the Emporium beyond tonight.

Undoubtedly involving consummations both devoutly and profanely to be wished.

The ride was silent. I didn't know what Harry was contemplating, but I was contemplating the look on Harry's face when I demanded repayment of every pound, shilling and pence I spent on this private showing, as he had yet to reimburse me for what he unquestionably knew was merely a *loan* of £65, and not a gift. And I would definitely make that demand, if this entertainment did not turn out to be worth a sum equal to or greater than what I had expended.

When the carriage stopped, I reversed the entry process, started to get out, and stopped part way. The street was even more dimly lit than the one I expected. This was not the entrance to the Emporium. Holding onto the door frame I leaned out and looked up. "Driver—"

His voice was bored, the tone saying he was tired of having to repeat this speech again and again. "It's the right place. Jes' knock on that door... twice, 'n' then once, 'n' they'll let yer in."

I wasn't sure I trusted him, but another carriage was pulling up behind us and I decided valor was the better part of discretion and got out. Harry followed. I strode confidently the few steps to the door, lifted my hand and didn't knock. Harry's "Um, uh... Tom..." stopped me.

I dropped my hand, turned to my right to look at him, and then on to the man beyond him, obviously the passenger from the other carriage.

I refused to let my jaw drop. My jaw most eagerly wished to do so, arguing most persuasively that the gesture was appropriate, perhaps even utterly correct, for the moment. I have, however, extraordinary control over my body parts and their from time to time tendencies to be intemperate in their operation, mode, manner and movement. I had achieved my deserved reputation for staid and stodgy stolidity by dint of years of rigorous training, curbing that intemperance, making sure they knew in no uncertain terms who was master.

I was, perhaps, losing some degree of control over my prick in recent times, but that was a thought for another day.

The proper thought for then and there was to show no surprise about the identity of that passenger.

So, the story we were told at the first showing was true. We had not really doubted it, but then we also made no effort to ascertain the veracity of that particular teller of tales. It was not as if the knowledge, even if truthful, had anything to do with us.

The gossiping young man, whose loose tongue Felcher would not appreciate, was, as it happened, a veritable font of veraciousness. And that truth had, if not everything, then *something* to do with us. We just neither knew the dimensions of that something.

Lord Crenshaw.

He of the souped-up wife, and the obsessed prick. Unquestionably a man of our fathers' generation, as he was well past fifty, and there was no question of him being perceived as anything younger. A bit taller than us. Large, but not fat. Even more plainly dressed than we. And smiling.

It was the gleeful smile of a steel trap that had just clamped its jaws down on unexpected prey.

"I'm Jack," he said.

"I'm Tom," I replied, as coolly as possible, though not into the ice range that I could command when needed. "My friend, Jerry."

He acknowledged the pseudonyms with an approving nod.

"Delighted, gentlemen, delighted." He paused before going on. "Do you know, I was certain of Jerry, but Tom, my dear fellow, I am utterly surprised my ned-sense went so very much astray. *You* I did not expect at all. Well, I did not actually *expect* either of you here, but if a friend of Edward's had asked me

whether *you* were a friend of Edward's as well, I would have assured him that you could not be. Yet here so you are, and so you must be."

I had no dictionary definition of what a "ned-sense" might be, but I rather thought I knew. Harry, of course, simply displayed our ignorance and blurted, "What's a 'ned-sense'?"

Crenshaw... *Jack*... laughed. "How delightfully virginal, young man." There was a little jab there, but not enough of one to allow you to take sufficient offense to justify a right hook to the man's jaw. "How long have you known?"

"Uh, known what?"

"Why, that you were a friend of Edward's."

Harry furrowed his brow, seriously calculating, and, knowing him, deciding on whether the date I was sure he was about to announce was going to be our first visit to the Emporium, or when he had an earlier sign from on high as he came across Bentley's photographs. He opted for the latter.

"A fortnight, and a bit."

Crenshaw looked at me, plainly asking the question again. If I said, "I am not yet certain," which was the blurt I stopped, thanks to that excellent control, I would, I thought, possibly offend, more likely *hurt* Harry, as he would perceive it to be some sort of rejection of him, and even of our adventures. I could not do that, so, as it ever is or was, and God willing, as they say, so it shall ever more be, I gave Crenshaw a reasoned response. "Slightly less."

Another nod and he looked again to Harry. "Well, lad, a 'ned-sense,' is something all friends of Edward's are born with. It tells us when another man is a friend of Edward's, too. Not infallible, like that pope fellow off in Rome claims, but generally fairly accurate. You've looked at another man, and wondered, haven't you?"

"Not before."

"But *since* your 'fortnight and a bit?'"

Harry had an endearing, almost boyish grin, that was yet thoroughly adult and masculine. I found I did not like it being given to anyone other than me. "A great deal."

"And you've come to some conclusions?"

Harry nodded.

"Some were, some weren't, and some you weren't certain about at all."

"Precisely."

"Well, lad, like any other muscle, that one needs to be frequently exercised, if you wish to improve your accuracy. Hmmm. Do you know, I rather think I should take you in hand... take you *both* in hand..."

That first pause was enough to make it clear to me, though perhaps not to Harry, that his real focus was on Harry, and I was merely an afterthought he thought might gain him an advantage.

The second pause was long enough for us to appreciate, if that was our goal, the lewd and lascivious meaning he intended for that expression. And that little lip-lick said far better than words that he was quite serious about the offer, though the education he had in mind was neither linguistic, nor did it involve the exercise of any *mental* muscle of Harry's. Nor would the education require very much use of Harry's hands.

I broke the pause. Smashed it, actually. "I thank you, Jack... no, *we* thank you, but you see, our hands are fairly full just now, quite full, you see, so we don't have any to spare for you. Perhaps another time?"

That last was said in a way I intended would leave him wondering whether I meant that another time would happen only over my dead body, or whether the offer was genuine. Harry knew, though, and shot me a glance.

And Crenshaw understood me quite well, as well, from the chill that afflicted his eyes and face just then. So I kicked the pieces of the pause far and wide with my boot. "Are you here..."

It was my turn to allow my voice to trail off, and thereby ask a question: "Are you here for the same reason we are?"

"For this bloody expensive private showing?" Crenshaw asked. "Yes."

"Then let us see if this is, indeed, the right entrance." I turned away from them and briskly knocked twice, and then once.

The door behind the small, metal-barred window popped open and someone looked out at us. Instead of the greater door opening, he said, "You are?"

What with the difficulties of even deciding to do this, this ridiculous shite about secret knocks, and Crenshaw's damned presence, and his even more damned interest in doing things with Harry, enough was bloody fucking enough.

"We are the men who each paid sixty-five pounds to be here tonight. We are also the men who are about to ask your employer for a full refund, as well as ask him to discharge you without a reference for refusing to let us in. You are?"

The unseen man's voice was somewhat shaky. "A man who is opening the door? With apologies?"

We heard several locks being undone and then the door opened inward. I stepped aside, allowed the others to precede me, and once inside, paused while the door was shut again and locked. The guardian of this particular Emporium gate nervously avoided looking at me.

He had to, however, when I spoke to him. "You are, I assume, Reginald?"

"Uh, yes, uh, sir."

"Well, then, Reginald, please accept my apology."

He gawped at me. It was unlikely that someone of a higher station had ever apologized to him, even when the higher station existed merely because of money, as he would presume us to be merchants of some sort, undoubtedly ones who had learned to speak as well as their noble betters in order to ape them and garner more profit.

"My annoyance is directed at your employer, Reginald. We were not made aware in advance of all this shite, nor told of any passwords or coded phrases to gain admission. You were simply doing what your employer required, and therefore none of us will make any complaint of you." I turned to look at Harry and Crenshaw. "Correct?"

Kind-hearted Harry agreed instantly. Arrogant Crenshaw looked briefly as if he might balk. He looked at me and apparently received the message. He nodded as well.

The tension visibly drained from this particular Reginald's body. He turned away, and yanked a bell pull twice.

As with the entrance we had previously used, we were in a small room with two other doors. One opened and a new man entered. Somewhere above Harry's age and mine, though not so far as Crenshaw. Of ordinary build, light brown hair, glasses, neatly dressed. Of course, in this establishment, "neatly" took on a meaning that included being sure your trousers were tight enough to display every vein in your prick, whilst the fabric attempted to choke off your helmet. I doubted he was wearing undergarments.

He was, of course, as quickly examining us as I had examined him.

I decided to take charge of this expedition, as I was quite sure I did not wish to go where Crenshaw would take it. I didn't... *quite*... brush Crenshaw aside as I stepped forward, extending my hand, and saying, "Mr. Reginald, I presume?"

This Reginald mocked me right back, but gave my hand a firm shake. "Indeed, sir. Mr. Stanley, I presume?"

"Actually, I'm Tom, this"—a gesture to Harry—"is Jerry. This"—a gesture to Crenshaw that might, in certain circles, have been perceived as somewhat dismissive—"is Jack."

Ah. From the look Crenshaw flicked towards me, he was a member of those particular circles.

From the quickly removed expression on the new Reginald's face, he was a member of those circles as well. He did not, of course, understand the underlying hostility, but then he didn't need to, so long as he did nothing to aggravate either the situation or me. He acknowledged the introductions with a wide-ranging, "Gentlemen," followed by, "if you will follow me?"

We did so, and went through a labyrinth of corridors and stairs that led me to regret I was not Hansel, with a pocket full of bread crumbs to leave behind me so that Harry and I could find our way out again. Our route met all the requirements of Goosey Gander's wandering but one. We certainly went up stairs and down stairs, but there was definitely no "lady's chamber" in this building.

Crenshaw had decided that as he had seniority over us in everything, rank, wealth, age, height, weight, probably prick size as far as he was concerned, he should be first. It did not trouble me to bring up the rear, and certainly not because it gave me a fine chance to observe Harry's fine rear, he having removed his long outer coat and hooked it over an arm. Which, of course, I was *not* doing.

The chamber we were led to, when the present Reginald opened the final door, was a brightly lit room that was similar to the one in which the other private showing had been, but significantly smaller. And nowhere were there any of those *private* viewing rooms for watching the showing. The room was arranged, instead, in a different manner. A *far* different manner.

I paused only briefly to take it in, as Crenshaw had stepped to one side and that blockage was removed, and then I moved two quick steps forward so my left hand could grab Harry's right shoulder and stop his forward motion. As he

turned to look at me, and undoubtedly to ask what I was doing, I spoke softly enough that hopefully only he could hear, "Just wait, please. Something's wrong."

We trusted each other, so he didn't argue. For now. Harry's store of patience has a strictly limited supply. The shelves where it is kept rather quickly become barren, and he is slow to replenish.

Both Crenshaw and Reginald were well into the room when the latter realized Harry and I were not following. He came back to us. "Is there a problem?"

"Possibly," I replied. *Definitely* was the more accurate, emphatic term.

"Do you mind, Reginald, if I look about for a moment or two?"

"Uh, no, sir, I suppose not. But why..."

He didn't finish the sentence because I had turned to Harry. "Jerry, walk with me just a bit?"

He shrugged and then followed along as I made a circle of the "arrangement" in the middle of the room. Our doing so naturally attracted attention. A great deal of it, as there were, it turned out, fifteen other men in the room besides Harry, me and Reginald. None of them were Felcher.

The apparent oddity of what we were doing meant that the clumps and clusters of men in the middle sort of rotated with us to observe, turning in almost a full circle themselves, though in a much smaller orbit.

Those clumps and clusters had kept me from seeing the entirety of the layout, though I was fairly certain my extrapolation was correct. But still, we walked in order to verify. When we arrived at our starting point, I started to speak to Harry, but Crenshaw's booming, arrogant voice interrupted me before the first sound could get out.

"You coming or not, Tom?"

The "coming" got the intended snickers from a number of the men in the center. The mocking tone of "Tom" was tantamount to saying it was a false name. The taunt was pointless, and certainly had no effect on me. I was certain that none of the men were there under their lawful names, any more than the three of us were.

Very well. *Public* rather than private. I am not certain whether, were I on the stage at Covent Garden, I had the lung capacity and volume control to be

heard in the farthest reaches of the balconies all those stories above. Here, however, with a deliberately deepened voice, I had no problem being heard by anyone as I loudly said, "No!"

Not everyone had been paying attention, but that silenced them all, and they all turned to look at me. Reginald quite properly stepped back, disassociating himself from the entire business. Harry—if I truly believed in God, I would have asked for a blessing on him just then—took a step *closer*. And lifted a bloody eyebrow in eyebrow-speak I had no difficulty in deciphering.

In the center of the room there was a large circle comprised of twelve ample armchairs, leather covered, carved legs and all, set at each hour of the clock, but well separated from one another, with more than sufficient space for a man to pass between. Beside each one was a small table with a stack of linen cloths, and undoubtedly there were vials of oil readily accessible in the table drawer. In the center of that circle was a circular carpet of some thickness, with scattered blankets and pillows heaped on it. Plus two more linen-and-oil tables at three o'clock and nine o'clock, but set towards the center of the clock. A man at three or nine would have to have unusually long legs for any movement of them to affect those tables.

If you liked to watch sex, and enjoyed being watched while you watched, it was an appropriate venue. Twelve seated men, watching four, possibly five, men having sex in the center, with, I was sure, all the permutations possible amongst that many men. Twelve men, all undoubtedly wanking, as what friend of Edward's could possibly refrain in such circumstances? Twelve men who could, and would, from time to time, divert their attentions from the center by turning their heads in slightly more than a half circle to see eight, perhaps nine, men having sex with themselves.

Harry and I had already admitted to Felcher, and to each other, that being watched by strangers while having sex was incredibly arousing, even if we were not perfectly sure, from our prior Emporium experiences that that had fully happened. And that was when the strangers were entirely unknown to us, anonymous men looking through a glorious hole, being used through a glorious hole. Here, we would know who they were, not by true name, and unlikely even by false. But know we would, by face and body and cock, and they would know us as well. A definitely prick-hardening, prick-leaking atmosphere.

Well done, Felcher!

But not so "well done!" was the reason for my vehement "no!" and dragging Harry along with me in taking a walk round the outside of the ring of

armchairs. But for that reason, we would already have selected seats, as far as possible from Crenshaw—you didn't *have* to look at every other man in the circle—and made ourselves comfortable and ready for the show to begin. Perhaps not opening our trousers entirely, but merely a button or two. Just to be prepared.

The silence stood, and then Crenshaw anointed himself spokesman. "Too good for the rest of us, you two?"

Our position helped create that impression, as we were standing alone, back from the circle of chairs, as if we had just paused in our great circle route and were about to resume our way towards the door through which we had just entered.

"Not at all, Jack," I replied, using the same taunting name tone. I looked around at the other men. "Jerry and I would have enjoyed looking at your cocks and your bodies and your faces while you wanked, and watched us, and watched *them*." I didn't need to point for those looking at us to understand I was referring to the four... or five... men who would be in the middle. Doing obscene things for our amusement and arousal. "Of course, we could all be selective, *very* selective, about who we looked at."

There was a kind of grunt of almost-laughter, as most of them understood I was in all likelihood referring only to Crenshaw/Jack.

"But that's not the point. I just prefer not to be blackmailed."

If silence has magnitudes, the one that fell then was several orders greater than the initial one engendered by my "No!" It was broken by the voice of someone I couldn't see. "Nothin' illegal here. So no way to blackmail anyone."

True. Neither wanking watchers of sodomy, nor middle-of-the-circle sodomites joyfully sodomizing one another, were against the law. And so I said. "But taking photographs of all that... activity... *is*. And I don't want my face and my cock, hard or soft, on film."

Did they know *Penzance*? I found I didn't really care and said it anyway. "I am *not* the very *model*... of a modern major masturbator."

Some did, as my play on words got a smattering of laughter. None from Crenshaw. But it led the nine inside the circle, who were most likely the others who had paid the entrance fee, to twist and turn, and look at the six cameras, all inward-pointing, set up at varying locations around the circle.

And then at the four men who had moved together outside the circle to stand, not surprisingly, by one of the cameras, and who were likely photographers. Which was affirmed by the first voice. "*He* said we wouldn't be in the photographs. Just... *them*."

There must have been an unseen arm pointing at the "he" of the sentence, because one of the photographers winced. "Uh, absolutely not, sir. None of you... Strict orders, uh..." He faded away.

Some of our fellow purchasers looked somewhat uneasy. But not enough to say anything.

Ah, well.

"If you're all willing to take that risk on a photographer's say-so..." I shrugged.

"And what about my word?" Trust Felcher to make an entrance. This latest Reginald had apparently scarpered off to find him, and then he'd waited to join the conversation until his entry was more dramatic. If there were royalty in the theatre, he would certainly rank as a drama queen.

"Certainly. *If* you were the photographer, and if Jerry and I were behind the camera, but still with an unobstructed view of the, ah, posing."

I shrugged again. "With this arrangement, however, well, accidents happen. *Purely* by accident, I happen to be photographed full-cocked, such as it is, and all. By sheer chance, that negative is lost. By sheer chance, of course, the negative is found by someone, naturally not anyone in your employ, who is less than scrupulous. It is only happenstance, in no way associated with the Emporium, that I am most politely requested to pay a sum of money for the return of the negative. If it ever is returned, and the payments do not stretch out into the foreseeable future."

I paused, looked at the buyers and the photographers, and briefly glanced at Harry. His face, expressive as always, applauded me.

"Mr. Felcher, I... *we*... are sorry, but we'll just withdraw and you all can get on with the showing."

I made as if to move towards the door, and Felcher held up a hand to stop me.

I would wager a modest sum that he was not a man accustomed to leashing his temper. He was not happy with me. At all. He became less so when the

other purchasers began murmuring among themselves and there was a mounting sense those murmurings were leading them both to my viewpoint and possibly a departure as well.

There was no way he could proceed with the photography, at this juncture, and if he didn't act swiftly, he might also lose some or all of his private showing profits when some or all of us demanded refunds. I suspected he was a man who did not like to give refunds. He made the only choice he could make. "Very well, gentlemen, since you are unwilling to trust my word, the cameras will be removed."

Time to throw the dog a bone. Though not the one with my balls nearby. If his mouth got near my prick in his present mood, I probably would not have a prick soon after.

I raised my voice again. "Thank you, Mr. Felcher. It truly was not a matter of trust, just... accident prevention. But since cameras lead to the thought of pictures, I think that after all the... well, let's just be honest... after all the fucking and sucking and wanking and whatever else you have in store for us is done, Jerry and I would be interested in purchasing some of your fine examples of gentlemanly portraiture. Could you have someone available afterwards to show us... what is available?"

The Felcherian temper receded, especially since the mood in the room seemed amenable to the idea of spending not only seed, but cash to ensure improved future spendings, whether here or wherever else seed might be spent while looking at portraits. Felcher would also know that the finer the seeding provided by the men who were being privately shown, the wider the wallets would open afterwards.

With a nod that was undoubtedly far less curt than it would have been had I not made the suggestion, Mr. Felcher departed. The cameras quickly followed. There was an awkward moment when the door shut on the final camera, but Crenshaw moved to reassert himself. Let him. I'd gotten what I wanted.

Crenshaw simply directed all of us to select a chair immediately, because the private showing would certainly not begin before we were all seated.

As we walked towards the chairs, Harry moved close, leaned in and whispered, "Thanks, um, Tom. I wouldn't have thought of all that."

I whispered back, "You're welcome, um-Jerry. So... have you decided which ones you're going to watch? Or better yet, if you're going to be the first to unpack your prick?"

He feigned shock. "That would be the height of ostentatiousness, and I have never ascended to such a height."

With that and a grin, he moved a little ahead of me. I wasn't sure if the little extra wiggle in his walk was intentional or not.

When we reached the chairs, we faced our own dilemma because of that together but not together whatever-it-was that was going on. Did we sit side by side, as best friends might be expected to do? Or on opposite sides in case we wanted to watch each other as well as the others, and thus have a fairly clear view?

There was still no rush to be seated. Some men glanced at others almost furtively, some openly, but all with a goal of deciding which man might have the best prick for wank watching. I already knew the answer to that. There would have to be a truly extraordinary cock amongst the wankers for me to change that opinion.

I decided that the chair closest to the camera-exit door was twelve o'clock. I moved us behind nine o'clock. I tapped the back. "Nine o'clock for you, Jerry, and three for me?"

"But it's already past... Oh."

Now *that* was a deliberate bit of silliness. Just another something about Harry to... to be fond of. Harry took his seat, I took mine, and that seemed to be the impetus to make final seating choices. Crenshaw—rather foolishly, I thought—rushed to ten o'clock. He would have had a much better view of Harry at two or four, but I assumed he didn't wish to be that close to me.

In that lull that always occurs before some planned action begins, I called out, "Jerry, old friend, do you know how to say, 'We who are about to seed, salute you?'"

"Of course!"

"In Latin?"

He gave me a "you bloody bastard" grin as he said, "Of course." And then kept silent.

Having done whatever it is you do in American poker to add more money to the table, he could not expect me to let it go. "And?"

He mangled it perfectly. "*Qui seedituri te salutant.*"

That got a reluctant smile from Crenshaw.

And then the camera-exit door opened.

Damn.

And damn.

And damn again.

Of the *good*... oh, the most *excellently* good variety of damn.

Harry

22 October 1882, 11:23 p.m.

The Pig and Whistle

London

I peeked at Reggie and knew that although we weren't talking about tonight, at least not yet, we were definitely thinking about it. I was reasonably certain, from the expression on his face, he was thinking about the start of all that led up to our participation... *participation!* ...in the portrait, ah, exhibition.

And then there was the moment when the doors opened. When they walked in. All five of them.

Oh my.

Oh my, indeed.

And then...

I should have resisted. I knew that. But as Reggie would attest, a "should" so rarely stands in my way for very long. If I even notice it.

I at least noticed this one, and like a come-from-behind Ascot winner, went right past it and crossed the line.

Several weeks ago, at a music hall, we'd seen some American performers who had, they said, taken a somewhat solemn hymn and given it a faster rhythm. "Ragtime" perhaps? A most hummable, most singable song.

What else could I do but sing a bit of it? With champagne-mind modifications, of course.

I had intended to sing only to myself, perhaps just barely loud enough to be heard by the men in the chairs beside me, but the road to hell has long since been paved over with my good intentions. I would have to check with Reggie, but I believe we are on the fifth, possibly the sixth, repaving.

I had just finished the first line when it happened.

The marching men, very well, not really marching, but striding along towards the center of our circle, all five of them, with their pricks pointing in the direction they were going, just stopped.

And stared at me.

So did everyone in the armchairs.

In silence.

Silence and staring are not unusual responses to one of my blurts, so I could only assume that singing loud enough to be heard by everyone constituted a blurt.

And once everyone who heard or saw the blurt was looking at me, each and every one of them had that “Oh, Harry, I can’t believe you really said (did) that” look on their faces. Sometimes, as then, Reggie’s response was a “Harry, Harry, Harry” headshake.

Although, of course, “Jerry” was being substituted for “Harry” in those looks, since they didn’t know who “Harry” was. Well, except for Reggie and Lord Crenshaw, who may or may not have been making the name change.

My blurts often cause silence. Usually of only a few people. This was the first to silence an entire room. Granted, sixteen men were probably not the largest number of people I had blurt-silenced, but still... a whole room? That has to be a noteworthy feat, worthy of recording in the annals of Harry’s blurts.

So, really, I had no choice. When one finds oneself being regarded by sixteen men—probably only fifteen as I avoided looking at Reggie, in case he was, or, perhaps, was not, regarding me back, since I wasn’t sure I wanted to see how he was regarding me, or not, just then... I lost myself in that convolution, as sometimes happens. But I found my way back to... Ah. Yes. That was it.

Well, when the looks are ones that one is positive indicate expectation—along with puzzlement, perhaps, but most certainly not the beginnings of disapprobation—really, does not one have an obligation to fulfill their expectations? And what else could they be expecting but enlightenment as to the lyrics? At least the first verse.

So that’s what I sang. In a fine tenor, as I would not hesitate to remind Reggie when he later remonstrated with me.

*Oh, when the pricks go marching in
Oh, when the pricks go marching in
Lord, I want to be pricked by that big one
When the pricks go marching in*

Can silence get *more* silent?

Apparently it can, because it did.

Then Reggie-the-ever-bastardly broke it by saying, "If you're done auditioning for the next Emporium music hall revue, Jerry, do you think we might get back to, ah, the business *at hand*?"

I waived my hand airily, even, perhaps, regally. As Her Majesty does on state occasions when she rides in a ceremonial carriage through the city. I was, however, not quite as insouciant as I wished to appear. My bit of musical blurt had indeed brought everything to a halt.

Whatever had been planned for and immediately following the entrance of the five men, the *naked* men, the naked men with very erect pricks, had been as effectively stopped as a production of *Penzance* would have been, had Ko-Ko from *Mikado* walked onstage and begun singing about his little list.

And the stopping stayed that way. Whatever improvisational skills the five men might have had once the sex was started—though I rather suspected they were carefully taught, and had it drummed in their dear little heads, of both the northern and southern varieties, whose prick went where and in what sequence, as Felcher struck me as a man desirous of and exercising that degree of control—they were utterly lacking once they had been knocked off script.

As Reggie would certainly remind me, this was another fine mess I had gotten us into.

Well, I certainly knew what to do with messes. I had been carefully taught from an early age that when one causes a mess, one cleans it up.

Immediately.

Without so much as a single dilly or a small dally.

Unless, of course, one has servants who can do it for you. Then or later.

Unfortunately, I was bereft of servants just then. And help from Reggie-the-suddenly-quiet, as well. And ideas.

Well, no, I actually wasn't. This was brilliant!

But I couldn't... Really, I *couldn't*. It was far too bold; it might cause Reggie to faint dead away.

Which was, of course, the perfect justification for proceeding.

I relaxed back into my chair, my legs a bit sprawled, almost as if I was inviting one and all to observe my prick and balls, my hands resting loosely on the carvings at the ends of the chair arms.

"Reginald!" I called out, not quite shouting.

That got everyone's attention again. And not in a good way, more of in a "what the bloody hell are you going to fuck up now" kind of way. Except Reggie. He was wearing his customary stolid, stodgy face, but I knew that beneath it he was wishing he knew how to help, but didn't have a clue how he could. All while planning just how terribly I would get thumped when we were in private.

That was quite all right. I had given myself a clue. Quite a good one, as they would all soon see.

Besides the solemn stares and near glares of most of the portrait purchasers, my near shout had elicited three of five possible head turns from the men we were supposed to watch.

I clarified my words. "Big Reginald." One of the three shrugged, clearly indicating he did not qualify as "big." The remaining two just stared at me.

Bastards. Very well, then. "Very well, then. *Giant-Reginald.*"

Giant bloody Reginald, who had been the guardian of Emporium's gate on our very first visit, and could hardly have forgotten us, given Reggie's most odoriferous entrance, looked back with a coy glance and a remarkably *faux* innocence. "Me, sir?"

"You, sir."

"*I*, sir?"

"*You*, sir. Here, sir."

"Where, sir?" he asked, but he had already started padding across to nine o'clock. In all his naked magnificence.

Giant tall, indeed. Far over six feet. Broad shoulders, broad chest. I thought for a moment that if I could stand beside myself two of me wouldn't be as wide as just one of him. Thick, thick, thick hair curling wildly from his armpits, merely thick, thick dark brown hair curling across his chest and down in a wide column, to meet up only thick groin hair that was more wavy than curly. Powerful, muscular thighs and calves, and long, broad feet, with long toes, and more of that delicious hair on feet and legs. The highlight of his magnificence was, not surprisingly, his prick.

Thick was the only acceptable word to describe it, an uncut perhaps five or six inches, with a very long foreskin, not quite deflated from the stern pole that had preceded him in his entrance, as it swung from side to side with his almost-strutting walk to me. Large ballocks that were low hanging and swaying themselves with his movement.

I made no secret of what I was watching as he walked, and then he stopped in front of me. Between my legs. So close that if he moved a fraction of an inch forward my thighs would be touching his legs.

"Here, sir?" he said, a glint in his eye—which I saw when I finally made it all that way up—saying he was enjoying himself. Although the glint also said he was just a little puzzled.

"Yes, sir." I smiled broadly to let him know I was enjoying all, and indeed, there was so very much *all*, that I was seeing. I hoped those from noon to six were enjoying the rear view as much as I was the front, though I rather suspected most would prefer a prick view to an arse view.

"Why, sir?"

I didn't really have to do what I did just then. I simply decided that as the temporary director of this play, it would be an effective bit of business to move the action forward. That I was going to thoroughly enjoy the results of my audacity was entirely beside the point. Entirely.

Though really, if one is going to be audacious, shouldn't one just grab the fruits of his audacity and hold them tight? Or... it tight? No, it had to be *them*.

Despite a momentary twinge of wondering whether Reggie would be disgusted with me, I let my right hand grasp his prick, fingers curled under, thumb lightly stroking the top. My left hand cupped his balls and rolled them just slightly.

He began to plump up. Rapidly. I helped him along with some stroking and squeezing. When he was fully erect I began to wank him with a firm stroke, pulling the skin back to reveal a long, narrow knob, all purple and shiny.

"What are you doing, sir?"

That wasn't what one could call a real question, since any man whose prick is being wanked, and whose ballocks are being fondled, by another man, bloody well knows what that man is doing. Giant-Reginald was one of the actors in the temporarily stalled play, however, and it behooved him to let the

rest of the audience know that the play, in all senses of the word, had resumed. Or would resume in the littlest of little whiles.

When I briefly lifted my eyes from important matters at hand, he gave me an almost wink of a look, which was good as, "Well, you had best get this going and make it right."

I spoke to my unseen audience, and to the men at seven, eight, ten, and eleven, who were twisted in their chairs to watch.

"Wanking, sir. Getting a prick to leak, sir."

"Mine, sir?"

"Yours, sir."

He moaned as I swirled around his knob. "Please, sir."

"What, sir?"

"My tits, sir."

I nearly bugged things all to hell yet again when I almost blurted out a "*What?*" before I realized he was referring to his nipples. One obtains new knowledge in the oddest of times and places.

"What about them, sir?"

"I need them... *hurt*, sir."

Yet another barely stopped blurt. *Hurting* one's nipples? Especially since they were barely there on a man, unlike a woman, and manipulating them would certainly have no effect on one's sexual pleasure. And why would one want to cause one's self pain? It took no more than part of a second to decide. "Do it, sir."

I continued my stroking and fondling as he lifted his arms, elbows out, and with wide, strong fingers and thumbs, breached the barrier of his hair, grabbed his nipples... his *tits*... and twisted, and *hurt* them, and groaned loudly as he did. He began leaking in earnest.

He did it again and again, and when he was gasping, he stopped and said, "Oh, thank you, sir."

He stood panting, his legs spread wide enough now to heat my legs with their touch.

"Over there," and we both, we *all*, knew I meant in the center of the clocked armchairs, "when your prick was hard and leaking, when your... *tits* were being hurt, what were you going to do?"

"I was going to get fucked, sir."

"You, sir?"

"Me, sir."

This mountain of a man, who exuded a manliness few could match, was going to be fucked? Liked being fucked? Looked forward, eagerly, to being fucked?

"Who, sir?"

"All, sir."

My hand stilled on that fat, leaking prick, while my mind raced. Inside my head I was emulating Felcher's fine photographers, posing the four men I had paid so little attention to before my musical blurt. If I paid much more attention to those internal photographs I was going to seed my trousers.

I stroked again, but more lightly. "Do you think they're hard again and ready, sir?"

"Don't know, sir."

"Turn, sir."

"Yes, sir."

I let him and he turned around to face the rest of the clock and the four men I assumed had gathered in the center. I could have seen them, but only by making a fool of myself through a contortion and peering around giant-Reginald's hip.

"Hard, sir?" I asked him.

"Yes, sir."

"Ready, sir?"

"Yes, sir."

"*You*, sir?"

He sighed. "No, sir."

"Why, sir?"

Wordless, he bent forward, one hand bracing himself on his knee, the other reaching around to grab his arse cheek and provide me a very close and personal view of his hole. It was ridged, and thick like the rest of him, and a brownish purple that glistened.

"Oiled, sir?" I asked him.

"Aye, sir."

I hesitantly touched a fingertip to the outermost rim, circled it, around and around, moving over the bumps and dips until I reached the center, and pressed a little, only a little. He pushed back and my finger slid in smoothly, easily. One might almost say his arse sucked it in.

He made a little sound, but it wasn't a satisfied sound.

"More, sir?"

"Please, sir."

"Two, sir?"

"*Three*, sir."

Bloody hell. I gave him two, middle finger atop forefinger, shoving both into that slick heat. A stroke, two, three, and then the three he wanted, my fingers instinctively moving into a triangular shape for easier penetration, pushing all the way, spreading out to stretch him, finger fucking him, finding that lump inside that made him shiver and whine, until he finally pulled away.

"Ready, sir?"

"Yes, sir," he said, straightening and twisting a bit so he could look back and down at me. "*So* ready, sir."

"Get fucked, sir."

With a huge grin and a final, "Yes, sir," he strutted away to the center of the clocked chairs.

I risked a glance at my fellow watchers and wankers to see if I had redeemed myself. If the flushed faces, the bulging crotches, and the few no-longer-imprisoned pricks were any evidence, I had indeed done so.

But Reggie... What would Reggie think of my, well, my *vulgar* display? We paid to watch, not participate. Was he disgusted? Was he...

He wasn't.

At that moment the five were a little on the twelve o'clock side of the line between nine and three. We saw each other clearly. Reggie was doing his damndest to maintain his stoic, stolid façade, but I knew better. He was aroused. Damned aroused. The fact he had his right hand between his legs, grasping his prick and balls, told its own story.

I started to follow suit, to imitate him as we had done when we wanked together, only to have him glare at me and mouth a single word, which was unquestionably, "Idiot!"

I glared back and then paused just before my hand touched my trousers. Idiot, indeed. My right hand was more than a little greasy from where it had so recently been.

I smiled back and gave him a slight nod to acknowledge the accuracy of his assessment of my idiocy.

I twisted a bit, picked up a linen cloth from the side table, and looked down as I cleaned my hand as best I could. The cleaning was in all likelihood an exercise in futility, as I was reasonably certain I was going to let myself enjoy the pleasure of an oiled wank in the very near future, either permitting my trousers to stain anyway, or moving trousers and drawers to knees or ankles to minimize the risk.

And maximize the exposure. There were as many as sixteen men who might watch me wank from time to time during all the other goings on. Sixteen men whom I might watch as well. Though it would take far more arrogance than I possessed to believe that watching me would be anything other than a passing glance, not with the variety of glorious men in the middle of our clock, each possessing a pair of very public glorious holes, who were starting to do all sorts of probably wondrous-to-behold things with those holes, and cocks and hands, and other body parts.

When I finished wiping and looked up again, I found my view of Reggie interrupted by the tall naked man of Italianate appearance, with a gleaming olive cock jutting up against his smooth, hairless belly, which matched the base of his prick and his ballocks as well. Oddly enough—or perhaps, not so odd at all, *or*, I merely wanted it *not* to be odd—when the Italian stepped away, I found Reggie still watching me. Had he not been distracted by the elegance of that flesh?

He had not.

We looked at each for a bit, though the bit could only be a tiny one lest we draw the kind of attention to ourselves we did not desire. Looking at our displayed pricks, once they were released for display, admiring them and how we wanked, was desired attention. Most desirable attention. Attention drawn to us watching each other to the exclusion of all else was not. So to end that tiny bit, I put my right hand in a position matching Reggie's, began squeezing and

caressing my cock, and then had to stop and start again since I found myself locked into the same rhythm Reggie was using. Once I found my own rhythm, I turned my head towards where the fucking was starting, as if I were leading with a trump, and Reggie dutifully followed suit.

Reggie

22 October 1882, 11:31 p.m.

The Pig and Whistle

London

I tried to sip a bit more ale but found the mug inexplicably empty.

When had that happened? Was Harry's empty as well?

No matter. I looked for Jane, who had brought us the first round. She was a rather full-breasted, full-hipped woman who had quickly learned on a previous occasion that while we were neither of us going to avail ourselves of any of the outside-of-the-taproom services she initially offered, we were nevertheless generous customers. At just that moment, though, she was seated on the lap of one of her other customers. Her back was to us, but given the way her head lolled, and her shoulders lifted and fell rapidly, his hand was undoubtedly up her skirt, pleasuring her and pleasuring her well.

Ah, well.

The proprietor would have to do. As he never objected to what Jane was doing, I suspect the arrangement was that he took a percentage of whatever she earned. He was behind the bar, washing something, although I doubted that whatever it was, was likely to be all that much cleaner when he was done.

"Lemuel!" I shouted.

Lemuel was really his name. I had ascertained on an earlier visit that he was neither a Gulliver nor well traveled. He looked over at me; I lifted two fingers, and he nodded.

When he set the two mugs down, with enough of a bang that a bit sloshed out to join the rest on the tabletop, I poked Harry's arm. "Pay the man."

He looked up at me with a slight degree of belligerence. "Why?"

"Because it's your turn."

It wasn't, actually, and he knew it, which should have led to him challenging me, and then to a lively discussion of payment sequences, which would distract me and him from our thoughts. Instead, he merely nodded, pulled out some coins and dropped them on the rough wood. More than enough

for the two drinks. Lemuel quickly snatched them up and darted them away, lest we ask for change.

I wanted to be where I was, there in my three o'clock chair. Of course I did. It would be inconceivable for any friend of Edward's not to want to be there to watch a giant of a man, who should, by all logic, and by the attestations of the numerous photographs of large, muscled men in Felcher's books, be the fucker, but was, instead, going to be the fuckee.

If there was such a word, and if not, then I had just coined it, and by coining, joining the rarified heights of word-coiners for the Queen's English. As a coiner, I should certainly be rewarded, though I rather doubted I would be mentioned in *The New Dictionary of the English Language*, which the Philological Society has been working on since 1856 and began publishing earlier this year. I was more likely to be praised by a carefully carved entry on some privy wall.

Any good friend of Edward's would be hard and leaking over the thoughts about, and the sights of, giant-Reginald being repeatedly impaled by four of Felcher's finest fuckers. Perhaps more than once?

Which was an odd thought for me to have, as in all my days, or more frequently nights, of wanking I had never seeded more than once in a single day. Nor even contemplated it. But I found myself both contemplating serial seeding and being aroused by it.

I wondered if Harry...

No. I wouldn't look. I would focus instead on the center of our wankers' clock.

Or on the wankers in the chairs that made it up.

Any good friend of Edward's would become harder and leak harder at the wide variety of men and pricks there were to watch in the eleven other chairs.

I was determined to learn to be the best friend of Edward's I could possibly be, as if the quality of my experiences—the best, and only the best—would make up for the quantity I had missed over all the years of being so stupid as not to know who and what I really was. Who and what we, Harry and I, really were.

So of course I wanted to be where I was. So of course I was watching the start of the fucking in the center of the clock.

But still...

I enjoyed what Harry had done, and the freedom of spirit which let him do it. Admired him for what he had and I did not, without even a ha'penny's worth of jealousy.

Enjoyed catching him out when he would have smeared his trousers with his oily hand, as even though I could not see it, we all could tell from words, and the expression of near rapture on giant-Reginald's face, just how well he had been one- and two- and three-finger fucked by Harry. Which meant oiled fingers, which meant Harry would not, in the midst of all the fun he was having, pay attention to so slight a detail as that. Though he would have been horrified had the trouser staining happened, and I would have been roundly berated for failing in my best friend duties and not preventing it. So of course I did.

I enjoyed the tentative look on his face when he looked at me as giant-Reginald moved to the center, knowing he was uncertain of my approval of what he had done, when anyone with a bloody ounce of sense in his head—but then, this was, after all, Harry—would applaud such a prick-hardening display of words and deeds.

Enjoyed the wide-eyed spurt of joy in his eyes when he saw, despite my best efforts to tease and retain my stodgy, immobile face, that I did not disapprove at all.

Enjoyed the way his hand instinctively began squeezing and caressing himself in just the same rhythm as mine. Enjoyed the way he caught himself, and his face showed his mind giving him a good scolding with, "Damn it, Jerry-Harry, you bloody well can't be engaged in rhythm wanking with your best friend, or someone will notice, so stop!"

Enjoyed it all, and when Harry turned to the less-than-impromptu orgy in the center, I turned my head with his, removed my prick from durance vile, as I knew Harry was similarly releasing his, and began wanking to those images.

Perhaps I should have been less of an imperious, and paranoid, arse, and let Felcher photograph.

Giant-Reginald was on all fours, head towards noon. He reminded me of one of Felcher's photographs. Yes. The two men from our first visit, the one with the garters and nearly over-the-calf stockings in that same position on a rectangular rug, the other with the shorter socks and higher-sided half-boots,

kneeling behind him, cock half inside arse, arms stretched and fingers curled around shoulders for a proper bracing for a proper buggering.

That was where the similarities between that gentlemanly portrait and clock reality ended, though there were no shoes or boots or stockings here, either.

There were four fuckers for the lone fuckee, as I doubted any of the four would find themselves on the floor taking giant-Reginald's place. They, too, looked like the pictured men who were always doing the ploughing, rather than the softer, slighter, slenderer ones whose fields were always furrowed.

Felcher had selected the fuckers for that very reason: these are the men who *fuck*! Just as he had selected the giant-Reginald in his employ for a different reason: shock value. The arousal value of watching an inordinately powerful and manly man as giant-Reginald, get repeatedly fucked, and be fucked without lessening in any perceptible degree the perception of power exuded by him, whether naked or clothed, whether upright, or on all fours, waiting.

I looked at the other three, looked at the way they watched their Italian comrade slide his prick into the large, muscular arse, looked at the way they watched each other whilst wanking over the scene.

I reached the conclusion, which I firmly believed to be valid, though in no way based on the kind and depth of data I required for a business decision, that almost any man could be pricked for pay, if the pay were enough and he had need of it enough. Each of these men could find himself pricked the next time there was a similar private showing, and something in their eyes said they knew it.

Two were not happy with the idea, though if asked, I could not have defined why I was so certain.

One was the Asian man, small and golden skinned; cropped, shiny black hair; groin hair that was thick and rampant and not curly at all. And a cock unusually large for his size, the kind of prick you would see and wonder to yourself how he could remain standing when the blood went south. Yes, despite his fuckee size, that prick would put him in the ranks of the photographed fuckers.

The other was the Swedish or Norwegian contingent for this international festival of fucking. A few inches over six feet, though not as tall as giant-Reginald. Nor nearly as massive. He had thick, brightly blond hair falling nearly to his shoulders. The cynical me... me? cynical? ...said that length of hair, and the way it was artfully disheveled to enhance the Viking look that

went with his blue eyes and craggy features, was a Felcher requirement for his gentlemanly portraiture employment.

His arms were thick, his chest massive, his thighs and calves bulged. His arms and legs were covered in a golden-brown fur, and on his chest it made a wide column that went straight down to the cock that was... *less?* than you might want, or expect, or hope for, in the Viking you were going to have sex with. Massive, yes, though in every respect, every dimension, not as massive as giant-Reginald. Although his cock was impressive, considered in the context of all of the rest of him, when considered alone, it was not all that much thicker or longer than mine or Harry's. And thus nowhere near the prick size of giant-Reginald, nor even that of the Asian.

I found myself conducting business analyses at the oddest times. Though I remained hard, though I watched and wanked, I came to the conclusion that it was not cock size alone that put a man on Felcher's fucker list. A large cock on a small man—Asian—or an ordinary cock on a large, manly man—a Viking, say—made a primary fucker.

What would Felcher do with a smaller prick? If there were friends of Edward's who enjoyed activities far more hurting than giant-Reginald's tit-twisting, and the tied up men and the floggings in a few of the photographs attested there were, then logically there were men who were aroused by small or smaller-than-whatever-normal-really-is pricks.

Felcher would, I thought, put a small or ordinary-sized man with a small prick in his fuckee column. He would do the same, I finally decided, for a large man with a small prick. Setting aside the difficulties of photographing a small prick entering or leaving a large arse, the large, small-cocked man getting fucked, getting forcefully face-fucked, would enhance the fantasy for ordinary men, whose pricks were larger, even if not by all that much; enhance their wanking dream of dominating such a rugged man.

Bloody hell. I had done a Harry "going away." Though at least it was for a sound business reason. Well, sound if I were suddenly to find myself a Bedlamite desirous of investing money in the fine art of gentlemanly portraiture. I would, should I do so wild a thing, make a vast amount of money, of course. But that was beside the point. Or a point to be considered, prick in hand, late at night, after having consumed a great deal of wine and ale.

Ah.

The Italian fucker had seeded giant-Reginald's arse while I was musing on prick- and photography-related investment requirements. And in doing so they had all moved clockwise, so that the fuckee's head was more between one and two o'clock. The Asian had already plunged his own cock into what was hopefully, for the sake of his own skin, and giant-Reginald's enjoyment, a thoroughly seeded arse.

The Asian began a steady stroke, much like the pounding of a piston in a train engine, I imagine. Or did he have a metronome in his head to establish a rhythm so precise? The Italian was kneeling in front of giant-Reginald, using the giant's mouth to clean his oily, arse-slimed, seed-slimed prick. Just as Felcher had done for me.

And then...

I almost shouted my shock. I had a clear view of what the Italian was doing.

Pissing.

In giant-Reginald's mouth.

And giant-Reginald was, by-fucking-God-and-all-His-cocksucking-angels, swallowing! Bulging cheeks, a gulp; bulging cheeks, a gulp. Had the man not pissed in the last decade?

I could not stop myself from looking at Harry, who was, I was not at all surprised to find, already looking at me. With a fucking lifted eyebrow that was undoubtedly asking me an incredibly detailed question about the shock I hoped only he could discern.

"Piss," I mouthed at him, being somewhat daring and hoping... bloody fucking shit damn hell.

Crenshaw saw the word and understood, and his head jerked back to the trio on the floor. He licked his lips and wanked his cock even more furiously, though he was not in a position to see what I saw, only to imagine it.

Once I saw the way the room was set up, and realized what was likely to happen once we were seated, I had firmly decided, with the same firmness I use in declining an investment offered by an importunate would-be entrepreneur whose dreams and avarice far exceed his business acumen, that I would under no circumstances inspect Crenshaw's cock, were it to be visible for my viewing.

When it comes to prick inspections, friends of Edward's are innate and inveterate liars.

I looked.

Oh, bloody very well, I *inspected*. Though from a distance.

Crenshaw had discarded his coat, dropping it on the floor, mostly behind his ten o'clock chair. His waistcoat was open. And his trousers and drawers were at his ankles, his knees spread wide, so that anyone who cared to, could see large thighs whose musculature had begun to sag, pale white flesh with prominent blue veins, large balls resting on the chair seat, and a fat cock, a very fat cock if the knob was any sign, about as long, perhaps, as Harry's or mine. I could not quite tell, as he was fisting it slowly, carefully, not wanting to seed too soon and waste both seed and the pounds he'd paid to be here.

An impressive prick, if you wanted to be objective about prick impressivity.

In that moment, I learned another lesson about friends of Edward's. You may despise the man, but never the cock.

Cocks are, after all, the be-all and end-all of Edwardian existence. Oh, yes, there are arses and mouths and hands to consider, but arses are for shitting, and mouths for eating and drinking, and hands for writing, or driving, or wielding a blade in days gone by, *unless* a cock is involved with one or all. It is then, and only then, that they have any bearing on anything Edwardian.

Which meant that unless your head, the upper one, the logical... *usually* logical... one, overrode the rampant desires of your cock, you could loathe the man and love the prick—not from afar, but directly, closely, personally, with your hand, your mouth, your arse. Your upper head might suggest you were worthy of being despised for your lack of good breeding, once all the seeding was done, whether his or yours or both, but your bell end would likely ignore all that yammering.

I hardened... and damn that word... my resolve and looked away from Crenshaw's cock. Quite naturally, indeed, it was as if I had no choice in the matter, I looked at Harry instead of the fucking going on before me, although I had noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that during my Crenshaw cock inspection, Italy's finest piss was finished, and the Asian was still hammering at giant-Reginald's arse, who was now facing three o'clock and me.

In my dislike-the-man-like-the-cock distraction, I had missed Harry's reaction to the knowledge that men pissed in one another's mouths, and swallowed, and liked being both pisser and pissee. Ah, ha! Another word coined!

I was not so fortunate as to miss his amusement at where my attention had been. I gave him the silent equivalent of a *huff!* or perhaps even a *harrumph!* and then focused downward at the scene in front of me. I paid no attention to the Italian who was nearby, idly stroking his cock, and watching. Nor to the other two who stood back a little, to watch and wank, but positioned so that a fair number of the armchair wankers would have a clear view of each prick and ballocks and moving hand.

I looked down the broad, hairy, muscled back of giant-Reginald, the fuck-lover. I had glimpses of the wide Asian prick moving in and out, but only glimpses. I heard the fuckee's happy moans. And then the bastard looked up at me. First at my prick, with the skin drawn back, the knob all dark purple with lust, the slit steadily weeping, weeping, weeping. Then at my face. And then he said, "Hurt my tits, sir?"

My reply was inevitable. It was the result of the thentofore unknown Eleventh Commandment, which was indeed engraved on the second tablet, making an uneven, rather than symmetrical, display, which was somewhat awkward, much like having one too few men at table. Harry had informed me, with a most Archbishop of Canterbury tone in his eleven-year-old voice, on his eleventh birthday, of course, of this Commandment, which he felt he could finally share with me. God had said, he said, "Thou shalt follow Harry's lead in all things."

"Me, sir?"

"You, sir." He forbore a grin, but it was in his eyes.

I pondered, but not for very long. The moving arse gets fucked at three, and having gotten fucked, moves on. To four and five and beyond. Now or never.

Felcher had not forbidden interaction between the armchair occupants and the gentlemen whose portraits of tonight would never be portrayed on film, thanks to me. But it was, perhaps, implicit in the arrangement, in the five who fucked, the dozen who watched. But Harry and I had already buggered Felcher's careful arrangements.

So bugger it all. It wasn't as if I'd be actually fucking his mouth.

Though, bloody hell, I wanted to once I'd gotten up, accompanied by a gasp or three from the armchairs as I walked the few steps over to this *tableau vivant* come to life, and knelt in front of him, my prick standing as tall as it could, straining to be all it could be, and perhaps a fraction of an inch more.

Giant-Reginald looked down at my prick, and up at me, and licked his lips. A blatant invitation for me to become number five, and use his mouth. "No, sir," I whispered, though I thought his fellow fuckers might have heard.

"Yes, sir," he said.

To mangle Macbeth, as Harry might have done, if it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done well. And quickly, lest some Felcher minion appear and demand that I, we, stop.

Giant-Reginald spread his arms a little wider, planting his palms on the floor, elbows bent, bracing himself. I was kneeling before him, and my head and neck and chest would be uncomfortably... most arousingly, yet still uncomfortably... close as I leaned forward, reached my arms down and under and began to hunt for the tits that were so in need.

Hunt I said, and hunt I meant. On another man's body, a body you have only seen from afar, you cannot unerringly go for the tits and get them on your first try, particularly when the chest to which they are attached is hidden from your view. They were located somewhere at the peaks of the massive hills that were his pectorals, but still hidden in a forest of fur. An explorer in uncharted, though hardly virgin, territory must move carefully.

My palms and fingers enjoyed the fur and the flesh beneath. His additional sighs and whimpers said he did, too, but just before he might have given me a subtle hint—of the "Will you just get the bloody fuck on with it, grab my tits, and hurt them?" variety—I reached my goal.

I grabbed his tits in thumb and forefinger, and *hurt* them.

Hurt them royally, regally, powerfully, well. Made him moan and whimper and cry out, though no tears fell. I told the Asian to fuck him harder, to seed his bloody arse while I hurt his damned tits.

Were there whimpers and moans from the other men in the room? Were there words, some depraved, some not, all encouraging and jealous?

Of course. They were friends of Edward's and I was doing something they were not, and probably did not have the ballocks to do in the first place.

Giant-Reginald began babbling as I hurt his tits, as I twisted and turned and pulled them, knowing I was creating bruises that would not go immediately away. A part of me was shocked that I could do any or all of this. A part of me was satisfied that I could and had, and could do so again at need. My cock was

the only part of me angry, but then only because he knew he would get nothing out of this but pain, and vast leakage, but no relief at all.

The giant-Reginald babbling deteriorated into incoherent noises that grew ever louder until it became obvious that the Asian was seeding his arse, and then with a shout that shook the room, seeming to make the walls balloon out and fall back, giant-Reginald seeded the floor explosively, with no one touching his prick.

I had not known that was possible.

I was impressed.

In the immediate aftermath, as my rigidity of entirely the wrong kind reasserted itself, I found myself appalled at what I had done, or caused or contributed to be done. The Asian collapsed, panting, on giant-Reginald's sweat-streaming back, and he in turn, on slightly trembling arms, fought off his own collapse, and the preferable rapid lapse into sleep, that a seeding of that magnitude normally led to.

Christ! Who was probably offended by that quasi-prayer or invocation of His name, but still, it was the first word that came to mind. Had I ended the night's entertainments in the manner of a premature seeding, where you only stroked a few times down and up and you were suddenly bloody done?

Apparently I had not.

The Asian slid his prick out, and giant-Reginald raised himself up, sat back on his haunches. I wondered if the two sets of seed were seeping out of his gut, or just drooling onto the floor. I couldn't see past his open thighs, and almost floor-touching ballocks, to find out. His prick had not gone entirely down, however, so perhaps all was not yet lost.

"*Bloody* well done, sir," he half whispered, though we were in such close proximity to the other chairs, they probably heard.

"Me, sir?"

"You, sir."

And with that he shifted to face partway between four o'clock and five, both of whom glared at me for having had a more personal view, while they had to share.

It could have been awkward, extremely so, to rise and go back to my chair after my forwardness. But I recalled Harry's Eleventh-and-a-Half Commandment: "When in doubt, always think, 'What would Harry do?'"

What would bloody Harry bloody do, if he'd done what I had bloody done? He'd stand up straight, make sure his prick stayed hard and on display, and would damned well strut back to his chair. I did all that, but satisfied myself with a stride instead of a strut.

I seated myself carefully, not allowing the reaction to show to anyone. I had gone beyond the watching and wanking and seeding expected of me, for which I had paid, if not dearly, at least in close proximity. It was totally unlike the me I believed myself to be. Despite the Eleventh Commandment, which I had really not obeyed... well, not very much... in all these years, when and where and how had I suddenly acquired the Harry-like audaciousness to do something so... so... audacious?

Or was flaunting one's self, taking the center stage and demanding the attention be focused on you and only you, an inherent part of being a friend of Edward's?

I naturally looked across at Harry as the Viking knelt behind giant-Reginald, and rudely thrust his prick in, balls deep.

Harry winked at me. And then he made sure I saw he had pulled back the skin around his marvelously flushed-red bell end, swiped his hand around and over his slit, and then lifted his hand to his mouth and lewdly, *loudly* and lasciviously licked the clear juice clean.

Damn him.

I grinned a "damn you" grin at him, and then we both looked at the next stage of the saga.

The Italian and Asian made sure they were not truly blocking anyone's view of the Viking fucking giant-Reginald. It was a fuck that would have been extremely brutal had he had the prick to match the power of the thrusts he intended to be punishing, but were, in all reality, probably not. But reality had little to do with anything just then, not in that room at that time.

The little bit of reality was how arousing it was to watch four men take turns fucking a giant of a man whom you would never expect to enjoy it, much less be addicted to it. The fantasies were vastly more important. I wasn't fantasizing. I was reasonably certain Harry was not, but when it came to fantastical things I could never be sure unless he actually told me.

I looked at the other ten men, my right hand only idling stroking, just enough to keep me interested, but far from enough to get me close to seeding, much less tip me over that precipice.

Crenshaw was fantasizing, without question. Imagining himself pounding giant-Reginald, and then in an excess of seeding vigor only possible in our fantasies, I am sure he saw himself breeding each of the other four as well.

Eleven o'clock was a man I dubbed Dock Worker, with rough, unshaven looks and even rougher clothing. I assumed he had gotten in on some sort of discount. Or perhaps Felcher just liked his prick, which was long and slender with a fat mushroom knob. His shirt was wet with stains that could only be seed, but he was still wanking.

Noon or midnight: Old Merchant. Silver-haired everywhere, including around his Harry-size prick, which was visible since trousers and drawers were at his ankles, his shirt tucked up and out of the way of his hand, but all else above in as neat order as when he arrived.

One o'clock: Merchant's Son. Square face, square body, dark hair with tiny flecks of grey. A me-sized prick, perhaps an inch, but no more, longer, on display through the fly of his trousers, his ballocks still hidden.

Two o'clock: Merchant's Grandson. Younger than Harry and me, though probably not by a lot. Thin face, close-set eyes, slightly protruding ears. Avaricious in all things, given his greedy looks about, both at the fucking in the clock center, and the rest of us. Though he tried to hide that greed by quickly looking away when he made eye contact with any of us, as if by doing so, the looking had never happened. Of us all, only he did not... yet... have his cock on display, though his hand was vigorously working whatever length and thickness his trousers hid.

The thought, given my naming decisions, was as inexorable as an avalanche finishing once started. Surely they could not in truth be grandfather, son, grandson? I could not be certain whether that thought was disgusting, or arousing. My prick wished to vote, but I refused to allow him to enter the polling place.

Four o'clock: Dissolute Unknown Lesser Nobility. Enough income, or luck in gambling, to dress relatively well, to live relatively well, but never live nor dress well enough to be accepted in the highest circles, in which Harry and I moved. His eyes, the lines in his face, said he was not nearly as old as he looked. A proud prick, though, showing well with his clothes at his knees.

Five o'clock: Degenerate Unknown Lesser Nobility. There was an air of vast cynicism about him, as if he had viewed the world and found it entirely wanting, with nothing redeeming. An air of depravity, as if he lived most of his

life so far beyond, and so far below, the bounds of what the rest of the world might account as minimally acceptable behavior. An air of one who knows drugs, and knows them well, though he had—so far, and I would not care to wager on the future—avoided finding himself wasting away in an opium den. An intense focus on giant-Reginald's Viking fuck... with a prick that was not quite hard, and was not, apparently, cooperating at all with his desires.

Six o'clock: Barrister. Oh, yes, most certainly a barrister. Perhaps even a Queen's Counsel. He had all the arrogance of the breed, the clothes as fine and precise as if he were about to shed them, and don robe and wig to appear in court. His face ignored the fact of ankled clothes; if he did not acknowledge a fact, then the fact could not possibly exist. And his prick displayed all the arrogance of his owner. Short. Wide. Apple-knobbed. Too big, overall, to ever be called small, not even in jest. And who would dare to jest with a barrister's prick? Or the prick of a barrister himself?

Seven o'clock: Clerk. A clerk, a clerk, a most palpable clerk. Prim glasses, beyond our age, in his middle thirties, thinning hair. Dressed in a suit more suitable for an office, a dull office, than here for sex. A wedding band, plain as plain could be, entirely visible. Did he not care, or could he not get it off? Had he embezzled from his employer for a night of frolic he might never experience again? The stolen funds would have been better spent on multiple visits to the reading rooms. A dull prick, an ordinary prick, fully shown, though he did not spread his legs as wide as the others with ankled trousers.

Eight o'clock: At first I could not quite decide between police or military, but then concluded Soldier it was. Civilian clothes, but somehow with a military air, as if they needed to fit well enough that he could, at any moment, leap up and stand at attention, or launch himself into actions that would result in pain for others. Close-cropped hair, stern jaw. The eyes of a man who may well have seen death, or given it, though I had never before seen such a man. A military prick, erect as if he were saluting. A most magnificent military prick. If not quite as large as giant-Reginald's, whose cock out-lengthened, out-girthed all the rest in the room, it was, nevertheless, a proud prick. A prick that demanded a salute, or obeisance... and if the latter, of the mouth or arse type.

Nine o'clock: Back to Harry, wonderful Harry, though wonderful only in the sense that a best friend might be considered wonderful, and not in any other sense.

Of course not.

As my eyes passed Harry, intending to turn my attention back to the clock center, I noticed something else.

Someone else.

Felcher. He was standing well away from us, but since the center was so well lit, there were no truly dark areas of shadow in which he could hide. Although hiding he seemed to be. The elegant clothes he had worn earlier were gone, and in their place was a long robe, with long sleeves that came nearly to his fingertips, and a short, upstanding collar. Some dark fabric, blue or black, most likely, with what might be intricate silver designs along the edge, that I could not quite make out. He might, or might not, have been barefoot.

He saw me see him, he could not have avoided it, but he did not in any way acknowledge he had done so. So I in turn swept my eyes past him, and back to the last man of the clock-center five.

The one who yearned, I was sure, to be where giant-Reginald was, though he'd undoubtedly see himself eternally damned before he ever admitted it. Or rather, the admission would be stayed until it was forced from him, on the day or night when Felcher made him an offer he could not refuse, and he found himself being fucked and fucked and fucked by a series of men. And enjoying it so much he could not possibly conceal how much.

An immense black man, taller than us, shorter than giant-Reginald, almost as wide as the latter. A belly that had no ridges but was a mass of muscle. And below all that, a prick that could not possibly be hidden even by a hand as large as his. When his little finger rested on his belly at the base of his prick, there was plenty of shaft protruding.

And since he could not *be* giant-Reginald, nor admit how much he wanted to be, he had to be, had to become, someone else. Someone who could *take* giant-Reginald. Use him roughly and with far greater thoroughness than anyone else thus far, thereby effectively hiding his own desires.

Like an African king. King of a tribe of warrior friends of Edward's, of whom he was the finest, and strongest, and most powerful. A man whose cock any of his subjects would willingly take, in whatever way he chose.

It was no mere black man, hired off the streets of London, who stalked over to where the Viking was collapsed over giant-Reginald's now-wet back, panting. The African King stepped up, and tapped the Viking's shoulder. When that gained no response, he bent over, grabbed the Viking by both shoulders, and pulled him rudely and crudely and roughly backwards. The Viking prick

slid out of the three-seeded arse, and the man partially flew backwards to land on his own arse.

My clock cock review had made me miss the movement of the fucking clock hand, so to speak, into a just past six o'clock position.

Once the Viking was gone, the African King sharply told giant-Reginald to move. I did not have to see giant-Reginald's face to know he would have preferred to move to face nine and Harry, Harry of the fantastically fucking fingers, as giant-Reginald had faced me at three, but that would not have been fair to the men at seven and eight o'clock. So he positioned his head between those two times, his arse pointed to the same space between one and two.

Giant-Reginald did not howl... quite... when the African King plunged in fast and hard and all the way, the way a king had the right to do. But still, it was a howl that Kronos might have howled when Zeus first began the clash with the Titans.

There was no gentleness, only a ruthless train-engine pummeling of giant-Reginald's arse. Giant-Reginald lowered his head to the floor, braced himself on his forearms, and worked his arse as well as he could, to give the black the best fuck he had ever had, would ever have. The African King repaid the eager hole by leaning forward, resting his own sweat-slick, hairless chest on giant-Reginald's back, and then reaching around his sides, and under his arms, so his enormous hands began to hurt not only giant-Reginald's tits, but the mounds of muscle around them.

Giant-Reginald squirmed and grunted, and babbled once more, and whined and pleaded and shouted to the beat of an arse-pounding he would surely never forget. If he survived it.

He managed. But only just.

Giant-Reginald seeded the floor again, with no hand on his prick, to the tune of a loud and unquestionably fervent, triumphant prayer: "Jesus fucking God, I'm seeding!"

The African King had followed him. Though not immediately. A demonstration of not *noblesse oblige*, but of the arrogance of *droit du seigneur*, though no virgins were involved. He piston-fucked poor giant-Reginald's three-fucked arse, with the increasing speed of an out-of-control train careening down the rails of a steep mountain side. We watched, we could not *not* watch, until with his own roar—a sound that echoed the roar of the king of all the lions that

were, or had been or ever would be, on a distant veldt—he at last seeded giant-Reginald's arse.

They were motionless, the two giants, chests heaving, and then they collapsed to the floor, African King cock still clasped inside giant-Reginald's arse.

Well... bloody hell.

The private showing was over. With a climax in all senses of the word, that could not possibly be equaled or exceeded. All four men had fucked giant-Reginald, just as planned. A quick look around let me see that while some of us had seeded, a fair number of us had not. Harry, for one, was in the not-seeded column. As was I. And perhaps even Crenshaw.

Resentment at having spent all that money and not achieved a decent seeding might have arisen just then, but Felcher's voice from the not-quite-shadow stopped any incipient rebellion.

"There's more. Or rather, there's more if you wish." All twelve heads turned to look at him, as he made his way to the center of the clock. The robe was rich, well made, dark blue, and as I'd thought, with silver threads along the edges in some sort of pattern I could not decipher. He was, in fact, barefoot. And erect. The appropriate point on his robe pushed outward so that no one could ignore that simple fact.

He turned in a slow circle to look at each of us, before ending, for whatever reason, looking at me.

"This showing was... somewhat different than I had planned."

Ah. He wished to chide me and be seen chiding me. Fuck him if he cannot take a joke, or two, from the merry music hall revue jokesters of Tom and Jerry. I continued my foray into Harry-like audacity by briefly scratching my scalp, just in front of my hairline. With my middle finger.

Felcher's face darkened, but he didn't respond to the provocation.

Bloody hell, now I was just making this worse simply to be perverse. Which meant I would have to make this embarrassment up to him by purchasing more when the showing was over. I would also be forced to ask Harry to thump me to drive home the lesson.

And how the bloody hell does the man maintain an erection while all this conversing and thinking is going on?

"As I was about to say—" *before I was so rudely interrupted*, we all heard—"I was going to suggest to you all that if you were not yet entirely exhausted, perhaps only somewhat so, from the viewing, you might like me to join you. Or rather, *them*." His gesture encompassed the five fucking stars.

That offer certainly perked up ears and pricks. Harry and I had not been friends of Edward's and visitors to the Emporium long enough to know whether this offer was customary or not.

Ah. From a few of the expressions of the armchair men, presumably those with far more familiarity with the Emporium and its owner, the answer was "not."

"And the price?"

The words that were on my lips, but which I bound and gagged and would not let loose. Let some other cynic offend the man. Except there was no offense, just the smile of a fond father for a son who had gotten something right. Finally.

It was, oddly enough, the Clerk who asked. Worrying that his stolen money was nearly gone and he might not be able to afford to stay around?

There was no question in my mind, nor, I was sure, in anyone else's mind, that he who could not pay would not stay.

Before answering, Felcher gave us all an additional reason to pay to stay.

He undid the few clasps, and the robe dropped, puddling at his feet.

We now saw why his robe had protruded so very far from his skin. The prodigious banger I had noticed, could not possibly not have noticed, running down his thigh on our first meeting, was unabashedly all the way erect. And while its width was partially prodigious, its length was fully so. Eleven inches? Twelve?

How could any friend of Edward's possibly get all of that in his throat, or up his arse, without overwhelming pain? From the looks on the faces of my fellow armchair wankers, however, including bloody Harry, most of them were most eager to try. And equally determined to succeed.

He turned slowly to give everyone an equal opportunity to see what he appeared to be offering, though he had not been at all precise about what we would be paying for. Were we each to fuck him? Get sucked by him? I fondly remembered his prodigious oral skills. And even more prodigious arse skills. Yes, he could satisfy every one of us quite well, quite fast, two at a time.

His wanking of himself was slow and sensuous, and he was oozing copiously. He swiped a fingertip across his slit, and then pushed all of that slender finger into his mouth and sucked it clean, pulled it out and the end of an agile tongue took a swipe at that tip.

Looking at me again, he said, "Twenty pounds to stay if you've seeded already, ten pounds if you haven't. Whether you have seeded or not will be up to your own honor, unless, of course, there is evidence to the contrary." With that he pointedly glanced at two o'clock Merchant's Grandson with seed spattered on his chest, and four o'clock Dissolute Nobleman, with drying seed on his hand.

Silence, until Harry, dear Harry, *of course* Harry, spoke up and said, "I'll stay but I'm not scrambling around for a ten-pound note right now. You'll just have to take my word I'll pay you when all is said, or sucked and fucked, and done."

The rest of the clocked chairs agreed, me included.

Felcher smiled, and bent to pick up his robe, giving those in the right position an admirable view of his lean, muscular arse, and low-hanging ballocks. He walked to six o'clock, tossed the robe out of the ring, and padded back to the center, where the fuckers and fuckee waited.

Each and every one of them hard again.

"Fuck him again. Fast and hard."

There were no looks of shock at the command, so it may well have been an expected part of the earlier, perhaps not entirely all-agley plan. He looked to giant-Reginald. "You. Pick a time for each fuck."

I think what giant-Reginald did just then exceeded whatever orders he might have been given before all this began. Instead of remaining in the center, he grabbed up one of the thick blankets, rapidly folded it and laid it on the wooden floor in front of Harry, to protect his knees and hands, and the knees of his fucker.

As giant-Reginald had literally obeyed the command, Felcher would have looked foolish countermanding it and moving him. So he did not.

By some unspoken agreement among the fuckers, the sequence was the same. Italy mounted giant-Reginald in front of Harry with no finesse, no gentleness, no preparation. Whether there was any facial reaction the rest of us could not see, but no sound came from his lips. Italy did what he was told to do, wordless, soundless, shuddering when he seeded. He yanked his prick free.

We all could see how much Harry had enjoyed the fuck, from the bright flushed flesh of his prick and the copious, drooling liquid.

Giant-Reginald would not crawl to the next time he chose, I thought, and I thought right. He took a deep breath, stood, his prick hard but not leaking, picked up the blanket, and moved to midnight and Old Merchant. It was Asia's turn, and the fuck was as soundless and as rough as the first. Old Merchant was gasping for air when the fuck was finished.

Nine o'clock and me for the Viking fuck. Giant-Reginald stared at me and my hurting prick. He had to be hurting, was hurting, but he endured, and in enduring, somewhat enjoyed. But he did not seed.

And then it was Barrister at six for the final fuck. African King, who still wanted to be where giant-Reginald was, who still wanted the seven fucks giant-Reginald had taken, was even more merciless than he was the first time around.

When it was clear Africa had done its international duty, Felcher called giant-Reginald back to the center of the circle, made him get on all fours, and to our astonishment, proceeded to fuck him as well.

Bloody hell. Nine hard fucks in whatever the short amount of time there was since the first fuck began.

Bloody hell. How could he do it? Not a mental question about moral principles. Friends of Edward's have little to no morals when it comes to fucking. No, it was a purely physical thought. And I had no idea how giant-Reginald managed. I repressed the shudder at the thought of me undergoing such an ordeal. Or Harry.

Or would he... would he *like* that? Being fucked? Once his first was done? Perhaps not nine, or eight, but... more than one? And what would I feel if he did?

Nothing. I would feel nothing, because whoever he fucked, how many, how long, had nothing to do with me.

Nothing. I paid attention to what I had *paid* to pay attention to.

When Felcher was finished, he pulled out, telling giant-Reginald to "stay," much as he would a dog. I didn't care for that, but had no control and so said nothing.

He stood between giant-Reginald's still wide-splayed legs. His prick, not wilting at all, was shiny with seed and other juices. Another complete circle to

show himself. An amused smile as he said, "We might as well continue the disarray, as no battle plan survives contact with the enemy."

His smile became a bit more amused, a bit more biting. "Though there are, of course, no enemies here. Just fine friends of Edward's with hard and leaking pricks and a vast amount of lust to fill the air. Which of you friends would care to clean my cock? Sample the seed that has been deposited, and churned and blended and mixed?"

I glared a glare of the most magnificent kind at Harry to make sure he understood he would not under any circumstances be the volunteer voice and subsequent mouth. The first time I saw Harry suck a prick, and I knew I would, though not precisely where or when, was most definitely not going to be in the there and then, in a room filled with strangers, or casual acquaintances, and at least one perhaps budding enemy in Crenshaw.

He blinked, and grinned, and opened his mouth in pretend defiance, but shut it when Barrister said, "I will."

Felcher turned and walked to him, stopping a short distance in front of the chair. "On your knees."

A man who had at his command all the majesty of Her Majesty's law, dropped to his knees with no demurrer. Opened his mouth, as well. Felcher stepped forward until his toes touched Barrister's knees, and then he slightly bent, wound his fingers in Barrister's hair, messing it most nicely, and pulled. Barrister swallowed the entire cock in one gulp with not a gag in sight or sound.

His head bobbed up and down, guided by Felcher's hands, though only Degenerate Nobleman to his right and Clerk to his left could see the actual cleaning. We all heard the moans, and they were definitely not from Felcher. When he was satisfied, he forced Barrister's head away, and by the motion of his hand patted or caressed Barrister's face. He also softly murmured, "Slut!"—but not so softly we did not all hear.

There was no sign of embarrassment on Barrister's face as he somewhat awkwardly, prick still outward pointing, got back in his armchair. There was some smug satisfaction there, though.

"And now you get your money's worth, and more, if I do say so myself," Felcher bragged, as he walked back to giant-Reginald, knelt behind him, used his thumbs in the crack of his arse to pull his cheeks apart and then leaned in.

And licked giant-Reginald's arse.

Licked. Giant-Reginald's. Arse.

Yes, Ralph and Alex, at that very first showing, had licked each other's arses, but those were clean arses, and only a few rapid licks. Giant-Reginald's was a nine-fucked arse, not clean at all, leaking seed and other liquids, and the licks Felcher bestowed were far from rapid. He almost seemed to be burying his face between those muscular, hairy cheeks.

When he lifted his head and looked about, his face was flushed, and his lips and the flesh about his mouth were shiny and gleaming with more than sweat.

"Perhaps you all would care to observe... more intimately?" His look was a full-fledged, lusty leer.

No one declined, with, "Thank you very much, sir, but I'm comfortable watching from where I am."

What a non-surprise.

Getting twelve men in various stages of undress into position to watch Felcher's mouth and arse work was not an easy affair, especially considering those with ankled trousers and drawers who could only waddle, instead of stride, even if they tugged the clothes up somewhat nearer to the knees and held them there. Eagerness to get to the best place for viewing eliminated anyone going so far as to take the time to pull his clothes all the way up, before dropping them again.

I had no such limitations, and set aside any staid and stodgy reluctance to appear forward, so that the offer had hardly left his mouth before I was up and long-striding to the center, to take a space at a right angle to where Felcher's face would be planted in giant-Reginald's arse. I looked across the room to locate Harry amongst the moving men, slightly surprised that he had not been quicker off the mark, but then, slow and steady often wins the race. Especially when you have a friend, of the best friend forever category, who was at the finish line and ready to ensure that you won a proper space.

There was some jostling and grumbling and elbowing and shoving, but we fairly soon settled into a somewhat ragged... something that you could not really call a circle... around Felcher and giant-Reginald. Harry was closely to my right, and to my displeasure, Crenshaw managed to be next to him.

Harry was breathing a little heavily, which could have been accounted for by all that had gone before, but truly, that was unlikely. Our breathing had been restored to normalcy, or near normalcy, after the gone-before was done, before

this was begun. Breathing normalcy retreated swiftly at the start, indeed, at the very first lick of that very long tongue.

Into giant-Reginald's held-open arsehole.

Not, of course, that I have any expertise in the length of tongues.

Prick lengths, somewhat more so.

It is a normal manly thing to do to compare prick lengths when they happen to be on display, as in several of you stopping to piss while tramping through the woods hunting, or an equal or greater number being briefly naked in a changing room. If the pricks are, for the most part, smaller than your own in their soft state, you feel rightfully smug. If larger, and you are a nice man, you will silently admire the gift he was given. If you are a customary man, there will be a large measure of resentment mixed in, as it is a well-known fact that when it comes to pricks, bigger is better, and biggest is best of all. And no man wants to be less than the best at anything.

It is even acceptable, upon the sighting of one unusually large in length or girth or both, to blurt what the rest of the comparing men are thinking. Several years back, Harry blurted a "bloody hell that's huge!" in a crowded changing room.

It is impolite for the recipient of such a blurt to agree, no matter how accurate the assessment. He may choose not to give a visible response, even though all know the blurt was heard and inside he is very smug, indeed. More often, there is a shrug, or a slight smile, or to be honest, occasionally a smile which is, in its way, as large as the prick.

On that day, Longworth—and we all agreed what a fortuitous family name that was for him to have—took it a step further. As there could be no possible dissent as to Harry's accuracy, we visibly or silently indicated our agreement, and then went on about our business of dressing or undressing. Admittedly, that business was suddenly conducted far more slowly, again by unanimous consent of all present, than was customary, each of us adding or removing a garment with remarkable care. And all the while, Longworth, who had undoubtedly been quite dry for quite some minutes, continued to dry himself, with twists and turns and bends and stretches that gave everyone nearly equal opportunity to observe. The finale was when, unnecessarily naked, he walked the length of the room and back again, for no discernible *good* reason, other than, perhaps, flaunting. Had any of the rest of us had that much reason to flaunt I suspect we might have done the same.

But those observations and admirations have nothing whatsoever to do with friendship with Edward. A man's unclothed prick is simply there, readily available for viewing for however long it is visible, and customarily, for most men who are not flaunting, that time is as short as possible.

Tongues are an entirely different matter. They are not usually visible, and if so, with a yawn, perhaps, or open-mouthed laughter, they are more quickly gone than any prick, what with the requisite cock tucking and adjusting and buttoning and buckling. The only way to compare would be to furtively peer at the mouths of your male friends whenever you have an opportunity to see a tongue. The idea of any such peering at a woman was close to vomit-inducing.

Yet even with the limited amount of information available to me, given I had not known there was a need to gather it, I was utterly certain that Felcher's tongue was indeed not only unusually long, but unusually agile. Tongue length, like prick length, clearly had to be a matter of you either have it or you do not.

But agility... Did you do exercises in front of a mirror, perhaps, to accomplish that agility and build strength? Not, of course, that I would ever ask. Though Harry might. No, there was a high order of probability that while Felcher was working that tongue up inside giant-Reginald's arse, Harry-the-ever-inquisitive would just inquire. As quickly and unobtrusively as possible, I pivoted my right foot on the heel of my shoe, and then pressed the sole down on the top of Harry's foot. Firmly.

I looked at him, and he at me. Message given, message understood: Watch and wank without commentary or questions.

We all watched and wanked, every prick hard. Even Degenerate Nobleman's cock was cooperating. Felcher licked and slurped, deliberate noises when he might have been quiet, pulling back and tilting his head and looking about so all could see how shiny and slimy his face below his eyes had become. So all could see his open mouth and tongue and teeth dotted with drops and blobs of seed. So all could watch him gleefully swallow, and smack his lips, and lick his lips and more, with a tongue that went up nearly to his nose and down towards his chin. And then he plunged in again.

All the while giant-Reginald was moaning. Genuine moans, not the paid-for kind he might have given had Felcher not been so bloody good at what he was doing.

He lifted his head again, repeated the display and the swallow, then sat back, and after spreading those cheeks as wide as he could, said, "Let go."

Those of us who could actually see were kind enough to describe what we saw, so that our comrades at giant-Reginald's other end did not crush us in a stampede to get in place to see what we saw. One of us said, quite clearly in the silent-but-for-ragged-breathing room—Harry later said it was me, but of course I denied it, as stodgy men don't do such things—"Jesus Christ! He's *drooling* seed."

He was. We could see the bright red flesh inside his gaping arse, a first for me, likely for everyone else as well, and then the brownish-pink, ridged flesh squeezed tight, and relaxed, and squeezed and relaxed, the kind of pushing we all did daily, only now he was expelling a steady stream of white liquid. The seed of nine fucks.

And Felcher leaned forward and began lapping it up as a kitten might lap milk... a starving kitten who hadn't had milk for weeks, days, months, years.

We moaned and wanked and watched and damned Crenshaw... not precisely broke, but bent, the mood.

"I want to fuck him."

That brought silence, and even a pause, perhaps for half of a half of a half of a second, in our wanking.

Felcher sat back again, and regretfully, giant-Reginald clamped his hole shut. Felcher looked up and to his right. Crenshaw was crowded entirely too close to Harry, but I could not object. Not even when Harry's body became entirely still, and his face became a stone I rarely saw. Bloody Crenshaw was doing something to Harry with his hidden left hand and I could do nothing about it.

"That is not the entertainment for which you paid a subscription fee," Felcher said, in a business tone so at odds with a seed-slimy face. He carefully omitted honorifics, but since he knew who we were, he undoubtedly knew who Crenshaw was, as well.

If that bastard was fingering Harry's arse, I was going to find a way to kill him. Slowly. Unpleasantly.

I needed to get Crenshaw's *entire* attention on his fucking goal. "But perhaps... if a further fee were paid?"

Felcher's head turned towards me, passing—and pausing—over Harry, as if he knew something was happening there. He faked a look of pleasant surprise,

as if the idea of making money off the idea would not have occurred to him anyway. "Why... yes, I think that would be appropriate."

"And shouldn't part of that fee, whatever it might be, go to..." I did not know his real name, so I went with the name in my head, and finished with, "giant-Reginald here?"

Felcher laughed, and not in an unpleasant way. I would have been willing to swear that for a moment, giant-Reginald's arse blushed.

"Indeed... Tom. What share do you recommend?"

As one hundred percent would offend, I went for half, hoping to persuade him down to fifteen or twenty. He agreed!

It only took me a moment to figure out why. If I'd proposed a greater percentage, he would generously have offered half. If lower, he probably would have raised it. Allowing an employee to earn fifty percent of a fee the employee was generating was unheard of, and by doing so he portrayed himself as not merely a good employer, but a generous one. Everyone tends to buy more, or buy more frequently, from a purveyor of goods who is perceived to be... good.

Impatient Crenshaw, whose right hand was wanking, whose left was still hidden behind Harry, snapped, "The price?"

I spoke before Felcher could name whatever he had decided. "Perhaps an auction for the right to sample such a talented, and fuckable arse? Indeed, an arse with a splendidly glorious hole?"

There was a smattering of laughter and definite understanding from all the armchair men. No Emporium virgins in the lot.

Giant-Reginald's arse was definitely blushing, but then, so was the rest of him. He was not protesting the sale of his arsehole. I imagined he was hoping he might take home a pound, or by some miracle, perhaps two.

I had something better than that planned. "What's your bid, sir?"

Crenshaw's glare was only in his eyes, and only for me to see. "Five."

"Pennies? Shillings? Perhaps... pounds?" Felcher was content, at least for a while, to let me deal with this.

Crenshaw, even for men who did not know him as noble, who did not know of his great wealth, would still perceive him as a man of some wealth, since he could afford not only the subscription fee to this event, but the additional fee to

stay when Felcher joined the action. His ego would not allow him to appear paltry.

"Pounds, of course," he said with a "what else could I possibly have meant?" tone.

"Anyone else?"

Barrister offered six. Old Merchant offered eight. Dissolute Nobleman offered nine. Clerk offered a timid ten. Crenshaw came back with fifteen.

I entered the fray. I didn't want to win, but would give giant-Reginald the best damned not-much-experience fuck of which I was capable if I did. "And five more."

Barrister, from his place by giant-Reginald's left shoulder, tilted his head just a little, as if he had just discovered a witness's weakness and was about to use it against him. By the flicker of his eyes to his left, it was Crenshaw's weakness he had discerned. "And one more," he said.

It was clear we were the only players left.

Twenty-five from Crenshaw. "And five more" from me. "And one more" from Barrister.

Crenshaw's weakness: A desire to win at almost any cost. From the looks he covertly threw in my direction, the visual equivalent of lobbing a hand grenade, he was not happy with me for a number of reasons. One of which was most likely my guard dog imitation, even though I was not standing between him and Harry.

"Forty," Crenshaw said, heading the progression into heights he probably understood Barrister could not achieve, and ones he hoped I would not be willing to ascend.

Barrister and I repeated our "five more" and "one more"—to Crenshaw's not-yet-visible annoyance.

Crenshaw jumped to sixty. Barrister spread his hands—he'd stopped wanking while bidding—to indicate he had gone as far as he could.

I looked at the other men. Apparently watching an auction to decide who would fuck a man who had already been fucked nine times was as prick-hardening as watching those fucks, or Felcher's agile tongue at work. For most.

Barrister's cock rose to the challenge immediately. Mine drooped because I never found money, whether spending or acquiring, erotic. Crenshaw was in

that half-staff state where your prick can't make up its mind. Harry... stood rigidly still and his prick had gone entirely soft. Nor was his hand moving to coax it back to even a modicum of interest in the goings-on.

Damn Crenshaw. I would have to decide on something more than what I was doing just then.

And damn again. This time at myself, for letting my attention wander, and the silence—the non-bidding silence—extend. It gave Crenshaw an opportunity to curl his lip and sneer at me. “Too rich for your blood, Tom?”

I gave him a look back that I hoped would suggest to him and the rest a man who felt himself insulted and was about to bid more than he could really afford. So I said in my best imitation of a Harryish blurt, if Harry ever stuttered, “S-seventy-five.”

There were variations on a gasp all round at that. Seventy-five was what I had paid to get in and stay. A vast sum of money to most. An incomprehensible sum to anyone with little or none. Crenshaw took the bait.

“Ninety!” he proclaimed.

I hesitated, let them see me hesitate, let them see the uncertainty, let them see the desire to not be beaten. Let them see the knowledge that I had probably gone too far, if not as far as those who lost their family's fortune at the gaming tables. “A-a-and one more.”

Crenshaw's silent “Ha!” was implicit in his triumphant, “One hundred!”

I let them see my face fall, my shoulders droop, the sadness, despair, *something*, at losing.

It was ridiculous to do what I did then, considering how closely we were all pressed together, with the naked, sweating men nearby, and the well-fucked one on the floor, and the arse-licking connoisseur kneeling on the floor, and all the pricks that were dangling or not. Nevertheless, I backed up, my right hand grabbing Harry's left wrist, and tugged him out of Crenshaw's reach.

Ostensibly, I was giving the winner access to the glorious hole he had just purchased for a single seeding. In reality, I was getting Harry away from the bastard's hand, and giving him a bow as he turned and thrust himself forward, plump prick leading the way. A bow far deeper than I ever would have accorded him amongst the ton, and he knew it.

My face showed no mockery as I began the bow, and it was only when my face was out of his sight that I relaxed enough to wickedly grin where no one

could see, and then recover myself and stand up. Harry was still to my right, but part of his left side was behind me. We couldn't stay that way for long, but he had time enough for his left hand to reach up, gently squeeze my arm and fall away, and to murmur so only I could hear, "Conniving bastard."

The fuck was not as impressive as Crenshaw thought it would be. Felcher easily folded himself backward, and stood up with all the smoothness of an acrobat, and stepped away. That he had allowed his prick to fall to nearly soft, and I was sure it was *allowed*, was a statement in and of itself. I wondered if Crenshaw was even aware of it, but most likely not.

He stood behind giant-Reginald, fully undid his trousers and managed to get them to the floor with minimal wriggling, and then stood a moment more to be sure everyone who wanted to had a chance to see his hard, oozing prick. Harry and I had moved back into position, only now the naked Felcher was to my left.

Crenshaw's prick was indeed as fat as I thought it was when viewed from across the clock. The same with his somewhere between lemon and orange ballocks. It was only logical that with all the time elapsed since giant-Reginald's last fuck, and his last arse licking and seed swallowing, that his hole might have been somewhat dry. A caring man—in other words, any of the other men in the room, the international contingent of fuckers included—would have lubricated giant-Reginald's arse. Perhaps not a lot, but at least some.

Crenshaw knelt, used his palms to push giant-Reginald's arse lower, to a more comfortable but certainly more difficult position to maintain, seated his knob, and then with a bruising grasp on giant-Reginald's waist, just shoved his cock inside. All the bloody way.

The sound giant-Reginald made was more than a grunt, less than a shout of pain, though we all knew which way the scale was tilting. Crenshaw gave him no time to adjust to a rod that was as wide, if perhaps not a little wider, than any of the pricks which had preceded his, though it was definitely nowhere near as long as the longest. Instead, he began rapid, almost full-length plunges, his heavy hips giving him enough force that we could hear flesh slapping against flesh.

After that first sound, giant-Reginald remained silent, but those who were concerned could see a kind of tension in his muscles that had not been present with the earlier fucks. Remembering how fine Felcher's arse was when I was fucking it, how well he had used his muscles to increase my pleasure, I hoped giant-Reginald's insides were equally talented. And being used for a somewhat

different purpose: enhancing Crenshaw's pleasure so much that he seeded far sooner than he wanted.

I turned out to be an excellent hoper. Were awards given for hoping, I would have outpaced all the other contestants for 1882. Perhaps even the most extraordinary hoper ever, throughout all of Her Majesty's most marvelous reign. I would normally have said glorious, but my brain shied away from that.

It was, I estimated, within not more than two minutes of that first vicious thrust, and with a dismay he could not quite hide, that Crenshaw was seeding his hundred-pound's worth of glorious hole.

Edwardian manliness in the arse-fucking stakes does not award first prize to he who finishes first, but rather to the man who finishes last. And a fast first is humiliating.

Crenshaw was humiliated.

Though there was no crack in his façade, we knew, for no more reason than that was what we would have felt, had we owned the fast-seeding cock.

Crenshaw yanked himself out, braced himself with one hand on giant-Reginald's arse cheek, and stood. A quick bend to pull his trousers far enough up to prevent most of that awkward waddle, and then he moved back to his place. Only to find himself beside me, instead of Harry. He let his clothes drop again, began stroking himself, determined, it was obvious, to demonstrate that even at his age, and after that fuck, he could seed again.

"Your turn," he said, pulling attention away from where Felcher had gotten back in place and was just starting to lean forward, his mouth open and his tongue moving in not those mysterious ways the religious ones go on about, but lascivious ways, ways lewd enough to give you a cock stand just at the sight. And the thought of what that tongue might do to you, for you, were you on the receiving end... and width and depth... of it.

I shook my head. "Above my touch, sir. *Far* above it. I could not hope to have the funds for such a, ah, glorious deed."

I lied. He knew I lied. But while he could challenge the lie from Lord Smythe, he could not challenge the stranger commoner known as Tom Katt.

Which was part of his second humiliation. Lord Smythe could easily have afforded the same price he had paid. Afford more, too. Only I had never intended to win. Only to raise the bidding until it was far greater than he would

have willingly paid any of the finest man whores in the city, a far greater fee than Felcher would ever have proposed.

Harry is mine. Not, of course, *mine* mine, any more than we are *together* together on our adventures. Mine as a friend. And friends look out for each other, protect them, if necessary, from even themselves.

Friends do not let friends drive drunk. They might hurt the horses or crash the carriage. They might... surely there was something else they might? Oh, yes. They might do some damage to themselves. So I would make sure Crenshaw did not damage Harry, and that Harry did not hurt himself just because he is at times—most times—too bloody nice to know when he is in danger.

And I had repaid him for his recent offenses against Harry in this room. At least in part.

There was the additional, but not quite separate, issue of Crenshaw wanting Harry. It was obvious to me, though not to my oblivious best friend. That was not going to happen.

I stared at Crenshaw, and he met my eyes to stare and glare back, both of us forgetting where we were and that some or all about us might be watching this byplay of ours. We curled our lips in matching snarls, and then... The sound I made was, dear God, a bloody growl. A snarl in truth as if I were some deranged wolf or other predator.

It startled Crenshaw, startled me. So much so we broke off our challenges and turned back to what we were missing.

And found we had not been missed at all. The rest of our armchair colleagues, Harry included, were prick-stroking, hard-breathing, mesmerized watchers of Felcher devouring giant-Reginald's arse, exploring halfway to his stomach with a curling tongue that laved the sides of the tunnel, scooped up the seed, and brought it down so he could show it to us, taunting us with a treat we never knew we wanted, but desired with a frantic need just then, and knew we could not have it.

Yes, indeed. Naked Felcher, he of the powerful prick and talented tongue, was providing us with a finale worth every pound we'd paid to see it.

He stopped, though, after an especially large swallow. "Up," he said, and giant-Reginald moved, standing up somewhat gingerly at first because even a man as strong as he would have some difficulty from being on all fours for so

very *fucking* long. He stepped to the side and we moved with him. Inhaling the smells of man, of *men*, and sweat and oils and seed and colognes that had not quite died in their losing battle. Wanking as we inhaled.

Felcher stretched out on his back, his prick towering straight up as if some invisible rope were attached to a pulley in the ceiling and kept it that way.

I assumed we were going to enjoy the sights and sounds and smells of giant-Reginald and Felcher simultaneously sucking each other's cock.

Ass, you, me, yet again. I did not assume in business deals; I would have to learn not to assume in sex.

Once Felcher was in place, he gestured and giant-Reginald stood over him, feet planted next to his shoulders, facing his feet. Giant-Reginald slowly went to his knees, his massive arse lowering over Felcher. He adjusted his position, apparently directed in some way by Felcher's hands on the outside of his thighs.

He was going to sit on Felcher's face!

Ass, you, me. Again.

He lowered his arse, and with extraordinary control, held it there a few inches above Felcher's head. His hole a few inches above Felcher's mouth.

We were about to get a most arousing lesson in the nature of gravity. I would have enjoyed a science class at university had we been taught about this, rather than the bloody apple.

Harry and I were first on the floor, lying flat, so that our heads were pressed together, and we were looking up at that bruised, used, so enjoyably abused, thick-edged hole. He relaxed, and it opened, and gravity did at least some of its work, though I was sure there was some strenuous pushing involved.

It could not legitimately have been called a river. Technically, only a trickle if compared to the flowing of other liquids. But for what it was, that heavy white stream making its way down and out, sticking slightly to some of the thick hair matted around the point of departure, it was a veritable flood, steadily flowing, large drops falling into Felcher's open mouth, again and again and again.

Smashed as it was against the wooden floor, my prick was still imperious and demanding. It wanted to seed, and seed bloody goddamned *then*!

I obeyed.

I wiggled and scrabbled my way back and away and up on my knees, Harry somehow instinctively doing the same, then bruising our knees to get back to the seed-drooling, seed-swallowing pair.

I could hardly breathe with the fisting I was giving my prick, even less so when giant-Reginald sat his arse completely down on Felcher's face. I could only imagine... and I discovered I had a fertile, perverted, filthy imagination just then... what they were each feeling, one tongue-fucking, the other being tongued.

Felcher's right hand tapped giant-Reginald's right cheek and his thighs powered him up until he was straight again. A lifted right knee to place his foot flat on the floor, a bend to brace himself with fingertips and then he stood. And turned, and knelt again, this time facing Felcher, and straddling his thighs, sitting on his haunches, stroking his own cock.

Before that move I was planning on seeding my hand, perhaps boldly licking my palm clean in the presence of all these men, but I knew I wanted something more.

Was Felcher perverse enough to allow it?

He was.

I knee-walked to him, Harry doing the same. The other watchers and wankers, including the original four fuckers, had all moved in, pressing close to each other, ignoring the class distinctions that would have offended them anywhere else, wanking almost furiously, but not just yet. Watching me and Harry and giant-Reginald.

As Felcher was watching me. With a look that said I was right about what he wanted, what he would most thoroughly enjoy.

"Face, sir?" I asked him, and his eyes lit with accuracy of my guess... my considered conclusion based on all the known facts.

He went along. "You, sir?"

"Me, sir." And with only a beat of silence, I said, "Them, sir?"

"Aye, sir." In his head he was already seeding at what was about to be done.

I scooted in closer, wanking furiously, forcing myself close to seeding, close enough that he could have turned his head and sucked in at least the knob of my prick. He tried, but I stopped him with, "No, sir."

"Aye, sir."

The grin was only in his eyes, and then that vanished in a flare of lust as I thrust my prick at him and spewed bullets all over his face, with a loud, "Seeding, sir!"

Harry's "Seeding, sir!" was not quite as loud as mine, but bloody hell, he was copious as he spattered Felcher's face and hair.

In a rapid, overlapping, ragged chorus of sex-struck voices, the armchair guests, the paid fuckers, the more-than-well-paid fuckee, said "Seeding, sir!" both loud and soft, smooth and rough, aristocratic and slum, until Felcher's face and neck and chest and belly and prick were covered, or so it seemed, in a solid layer of white and ivory seed.

We gasped and panted and sat or stood back to look at our handiwork and snigger at the pun in our heads. And then giant-Reginald moved back, bent, and swallowed every long damned inch of Felcher's prick. He started a fast bobbing up and down, and with his left hand he smeared his first two fingers with seed, reached between the legs Felcher had so obligingly spread, and shoved them up his arse.

Felcher joined our litany of praise and shouted "Seeding, sirs!" as he unquestionably, and at great length, perhaps to match that of his cock, seeded giant-Reginald's mouth and throat. Giant-Reginald consumed every drop.

And then it was done.

Or... not quite done, just yet.

There was the matter of the well-seeded Felcher on the floor. Hell, not merely well seeded, but as close to being covered in seed as fifteen frantically wanking friends of Edward's, or friends for pounds, could achieve. Who amongst the immobile, not fully in control of themselves, men was going to get him enough large cloths and water to clean himself off.

That was not an issue with which I need have concerned myself.

Degenerate Nobleman was first to move to the floor, first to set his tongue to lapping up the seed on Felcher's right nipple. Barrister, and Clerk were next, licking the other nipple, and the small pool in the man's deep navel. Had the rest of them, save the two of us, Crenshaw and giant-Reginald, been vultures, Felcher's bones would have been picked clean in minutes. As it was, his body was bare of seed in those same minutes, and Felcher's face was equally seed-free, having first used his marvelous tongue to get as much as he could, and then gathering it up with his fingers to lick those clean in turn.

Then it was done.

And we were... for a little while more... still "one." But now the sex was done, the seed removal done, we became again only men. Separate men. Men who did not deal well with the aftermath of incredible sex and the emotions... those damned pesky, interfering things... engendered by it.

Almost simultaneously we each retreated into our walled-off selves. Separated so that we were not close to one another as we gathered ourselves up, and put ourselves together, because closeness felt like intimacy and what we had just felt and done was not, could not have been, intimacy. It was just sex.

Though not quite all separated. Harry and I were... what we were. And we were still going to have words about what he had done to the adventure we had initially embarked on.

Crenshaw was separate, but not the walled-off way the others were. His eyes were avid as he admired Harry's prick from afar as it was tucked away. Just not far enough. Some room in some other city block would not have been far enough. He was not aware I saw him and I did not make him aware. I would simply be alert, should we, in some unlikely set of circumstances, find ourselves in his presence outside of the Emporium.

The four fuckers were, with some degree of envy, congratulating giant-Reginald on his good fortune, and telling him what a lucky arse he was, and had. As if he knew, or at least suspected, what I had done, he looked at me, and when he was sure I was looking back, respectfully nodded a thank you.

I nodded back.

Damn. Now that all was said and fucked and sucked and licked and slurped and done, I needed a drink. Some of the Pig and Whistle's excellent ale.

So I said to Harry, and so he agreed.

Harry

22 October 1882, 11:42 p.m.

The Pig and Whistle

London

"Are you back?"

Reggie started, put his mug down, elegantly wiped some of the wetness from his mustache with a finger, flicked the moisture on the floor, and said, with all the precision he assumes when he has had a surfeit of ale or other alcohol, coupling it with just a hint of indignation, "I have never been away."

"The shit of a bull."

He blinked at me, and I refrained from grinning. "What?"

"You heard me. The shit of a bull. The shit of several bulls. The shit of several bulls and each of the cows in the herds of cows they are servicing."

"I... *What?*"

I do not usually get to befuddle Reggie. Not in the slightest. I had to grab my enjoyment wherever I could.

"I was simply assessing the truthfulness of your statement, and then candidly stating my conclusion."

He looked down at his mug as if it might contain all the secrets of the world, if only he could devise a way to get them out. Upending the mug to release them all did not occur to him.

"You *were* back there, were you not? Inside your head?" A tilt of my head indicated the Emporium, regardless of the directional accuracy of my tilt.

"Um... yes."

"As we both have been this while. Remembering, but not talking about it all."

"Um... yes."

"Don't you think we should?"

"To what end?"

"Well, hell, Reggie, so many things happened."

"Do you really wish to engage in a detailed discussion of who did what to whom in what position and where? Here and now?"

Of course I did not, any more than he did. And so I said. "But still, there are the other things."

"Such as?"

I didn't much want to say, but I did anyway. "Crenshaw."

His face smoothed out, the drunken glaze went away, perhaps only for a short while, and his eyes hardened.

"What about him?"

"You... *growled* at him, Reggie."

"You must have misheard some odd noise among all the other odd noises of tonight."

I shook my head emphatically, somewhat too emphatically, as it felt as if all the emotions of tonight and all the ale were just sloshing around my brain box.

"You did. You know you did. Don't try to say you didn't." Could I have sounded any more childlike? "It was like some... huge dog."

He smiled at that, a... *pleased* smile. "Not some silly, yapping, tiny lap dog, then?"

I knew what was expected of a best friend. More importantly, however, I knew what I expected of myself just then: truth. Though it could, of course, be truth in a teasing tone.

"Of course not. A big dog. A really big dog." And I let my face show a look of amazement at how big that big dog was.

"Just so." I was not at all surprised at how smug those two words were.

"But why?"

"He was... annoying you."

I flushed at the truth of that. Remembered that damnable hand on my arse, even though it was through my trousers. Remembered the squeezing and the finger pressing my hole. The two fingers pressing my hole. And being able to do nothing about it without causing a row and embarrassing not only myself but Reggie.

"You still didn't have to..." I trailed off, unable to articulate just what it was he had done, and why he hadn't had to.

Reggie gave me one of his stern looks. The kind he does not give me very often, and then only on those occasions when he wanted me to understand how very serious he was. Despite tonight, and ale, and all, how very serious he was.

"Harry, you're m—" He stopped, blinked, went on. "My best friend. Friends protect one another, even if one of them doesn't quite realize protection is necessary."

I shrugged, doing my best to appear both casual and in control. "Really, Reggie. It was nothing. Oh, very well, I didn't like what he did as we stood there, but he was just... caught up in the heat of the moment. It's over and done now."

"And if it isn't?"

"My big dog will protect my delicate self. My very, very, very big dog." And I tilted my head to give him my very best fluttering of eyelashes, and big-dog-loving look.

He grinned back. "You realize, do you not, Harry, that if you attempt to pet my hair, or scratch me behind either ear, or rub me elsewhere to see if you can get my leg to thump, I will have to thump you. The finest thump in all the history of English thumps. You know I will."

"Oh, yes, Reggie," I said, giving him the full effect of my most adoring voice. "I know you would, which is why I won't."

I paused and then went on, becoming all giddy with amazed admiration. "Why, you are the finest thumper in all of England. In all the world. In all the history of the world. Indeed, if the test had been thumping instead of that stupid sword in the stone, you could have been King of Camelot!"

Reggie reached across the table and gave me the thump I would readily have admitted I deserved, had sufficient torturous torture techniques of a somewhat vague variety been perpetrated on my person beforehand. It was a quite manly thump, appropriate for the time and place: a straight-armed thrust so that his right fist connected with my left shoulder. Just the kind of thump that says to any other customers or proprietors who might have been watching, that this was just two manly friends being manly with each other, and not at all starting a fight which would require the intervention of others' fists, boots, truncheons or the like, or calls for the police.

I naturally did not rub my shoulder. Manly men who have just been thumped did not rub the thumped body part, or otherwise indicate pain or

discomfort. Nothing in the manly code, however, so far as I knew, prevented me from lifting an “Ouch! That hurt, damn you” eyebrow at him.

The bastard smirked a “Doesn’t it just?” smirk at me.

I looked down at my own mug, cradled it with my hands, fingers intertwined. Stared, my thumbs circling on the sides.

Reggie inhaled and exhaled slowly. It wasn’t really a sigh. “Just spit it out, Harry.”

Reggie

22 October 1882, 11:46 p.m.

The Pig and Whistle

London

He wasn't quite ready to ask whatever it was he wanted, or to say whatever it was he needed to say. My first directive having failed, I realized I needed to bring out the largest gun in my armory, giving him the strongest encouragement possible to unburden himself.

So I used the phrase we learned several years ago watching auditions for the next music hall revue with several of our more than a little drunk friends. Though no more so than we. She was young, barely past being a girl, if that, and a singer. But only of sorts, as she could barely be heard past the first few rows. And from somewhere in the back of the house came a possibly feminine voice that only a daughter could love, screeching what became "our" phrase of encouragement.

I sternly said, "Sing out, Thelma! Sing out!"

And destroyed the sternness by snickering.

He smiled and lifted his head, and then he looked about the room, all too furtively.

"Are you *trying* to draw attention to yourself, to us?" I asked him.

"What?" He actually sounded offended.

"You are peering about, your eyes darting in the direction of every possible hither, thither or yon, quite clearly to discern whether we are being observed or overheard."

"I was doing no such thing."

I stared at him in lieu of the eyebrow lift I lacked.

"Oh, very well, I was. But you only knew why because you know me. I was being, I will have you know, *subtle*. Why, 'subtle' might as well be my middle name. Or one of them, since I have several."

I chuckled, and while I sipped my ale, he looked offended yet again. "Harry, you are indeed my best friend, and as *your* best friend it is my duty to tell you

the truth in all things.” *Nearly all things*, I amended in my head. There were some truths I was not yet ready to share with him, and perhaps never would. But *this* truth... why, yes, that I could easily do.

“I regret to inform you that you are not subtle. In anything. Subtle is *not* your middle name. If there were ever such a thing as an illustrated dictionary, for which the phrases “not subtle,” or “utterly incapable of being subtle in any circumstance,” required a definition, all the publisher would have to do is supply a photograph of you beside the phrase, and even the rudest of intelligences would immediately understand.”

He blushed, or flushed. I wasn’t quite sure which I would call it. Either way, since we began our adventures and have seen so much of each other, though not all I wanted to see was entirely physical, some of which I was most unlikely ever to see, his blushes and flushes had acquired a quality of adorableness. Perhaps they had always been so, but I had never before noticed? Cared to notice?

I would never dare describe them so outside of my own head. They were of the kind that made you... that made me... want to lift your *my* hand and fondly caress his cheek—upper, rather than lower, though, now that I thought of it, no, I wasn’t going to think that—and murmur something affectionate.

I firmly squeezed the mug instead, lifted it, nearly drained it, and set it back on the table with only the slightest *thump*. “Well?”

“I... I just wanted to, to ask something and I didn’t want...”

“Harry, we have been here often enough that we are no longer objects of curiosity. Or at least, not to the regulars. There are many men here, all of whom have secrets of their own. No one is paying us the least bit of attention. So as long as you do not shout... or blurt...”

He smiled, his neck muscles tensed as if he was going to look around again, and then relaxed.

“I say,” he said, turning his head to me and unconsciously licking his lips, making them glisten in the dim light. “Are... are all friends of Edward’s required to do that?”

I played the imbecile, a most difficult role for me, though I knew precisely what he was asking. “What do you mean?”

His shoulders tensed. “You know bloody well what I mean.”

I paused to annoy him. “Oh. That.”

"Yes, that." Yes, he was annoyed with me. This was most enjoyable.

He became even more annoyed when I said nothing. He was flinging eye-daggers at me with all the speed of that knife-throwing man at the circus, neither of the throwers causing any physical damage.

I relented. "You have precisely the same period of experience in Edwardian ways, as I do. And since no one has seen fit to provide us with the rules, regulations, policies, procedures and protocols of being a friend of Edward's, I have no bloody idea. Why? Do you want to do it? Have it done?"

A brief image of Harry on his knees, devouring... someone's... arse. A brief image of Harry squatting over... someone's... mouth and having his own arse devoured. I shoved the images, the images that ridiculously put me in the place of that "someone," away. He had made it clear that while we were together on this journey of Edwardian exploration, we were not *together* together. He had made it clear that while he was mine, he was not *mine*, no matter how grateful he might be for my damnably doglike devotion and protection.

I could see the answer in his eyes, before he nodded. "Do you know what it's called?"

"What? Why?"

"So you can properly request it," he said. The "don't you understand anything, you silly arse?" was silently understood.

He lowered his voice, though he did nothing else to draw unwanted attention to us. "You can ask to have your cock sucked, or your arse fucked, or vice versa, but really, wouldn't it be a bit of much too much to have to say, 'My dear sir, after your arse has been fucked by one or more men with the result of copious deposits of seed, would you be so kind as to permit me to get down behind you and use my tongue to lick and slurp the seed deposits out, for our mutual enjoyment?'"

I chuckled. "I quite agree. It should be as easy to ask for that as for a sucking of your cock or a fucking of your arse."

I considered a bit, and said, "Do you know, discoverers of new species of animals, or plants, or things, frequently name the new thing after themselves. He is probably not the discoverer, per se, but we could name it after him. We could call it... felchering."

Harry considered the word. Tried it out. One might almost say he submitted it to a taste test. Quite, quite softly, of course. "May I felcher you, sir? Would you be so kind as to felcher me? Fancy a felcher, do you, Dickins?"

He frowned... the smiling kind of frown. "That doesn't sound quite right, does it?"

"Indeed. Perhaps... shortening it? Felching?"

He twinkled at me. "Excellent! If there were a school for friends of Edward's, young men, about to embark upon an Edwardian career, could be taught the proper grammar. I felch; you felch; he felches. We felch, you felch, they felch."

He paused, then: "Felch me! I'm going to felch you!" He grinned. "Yes, that will work quite well. Should the, uh, occasion arise."

I think I might felch you, Harry, should you ask, but that occasion will never arise. What I said aloud was, "I wonder if our word will ever be included in a dictionary?"

Harry snickered. "Of course it will! Although it would have to be a dictionary of cant and slang terms, with a history of the words, and of course recognition of our perspicacity in coining this one." He sighed. "Alas, our dear Queen would undoubtedly not permit its public publication, and so it would have to be privately published and copies secretly sold and then kept hidden. A chambers dictionary of slang, one might say."

At that, I laughed aloud, and Harry joined me. We were loud enough, in fact, to draw some brief attention from several men in our direction, but when that attention disclosed it must have been words that caused the laughter, rather than something so vastly humorous as a customer slipping on the slick floor and falling painfully flat on his arse, the attention shifted back to their own business.

We quieted and I said, "Shall we?"

Harry nodded. "I do think we are quite talked out."

"More thought out, don't you think?"

"Ah. Probably so. Let's."

We stood, gathered our coats from the backs of the chairs, and put them on. Lemuel knew we would not decamp without paying so he did not rush over. We instead made a side trip to the bar en route to the door, where I settled up and dropped the coins that would get the cab there in fairly short order.

In quite short order, and after I gave the driver directions, we sat back. I said, "Do you think matters would have gone differently if you'd just said something simple, like, oh, perhaps, 'Is anyone going to start the fucking I paid for?'"

He just looked at me in the darkness, and I knew it was with wide eyes, and a somewhat stunned expression on his face. "I never thought of that."

"Oh, Harry, of course you didn't."

Which set us off again in laughter, the subject of which no one else would likely have found humorous. We repeated the "fucking paid for" with several bouts of laughing, until suddenly Harry sat up, very straight.

"Fucking paid for, Reggie?"

I almost went on laughing, but the tone, the serious, "oh my God, what the bloody hell?" tone stopped me.

And then, as the saying went, dawn came up and thund'rously hit me on the head. With a huge damned cudgel. Oh, bloody hell, indeed.

We'd... *I'd*... promised Felcher that when our entertainment was done we would buy gentlemanly portraits from him. An implicitly large number of photographs, or a small number of photographs for an implicitly large price.

And we hadn't. We'd simply walked out as most... all? ...of the rest of the men had, with not a single gentlemanly portrait purchasing word.

"We have to go back, Reggie."

No, we didn't. I wasn't going to turn a... marvelous, even outstanding, evening—for the most part—with a friendly, delightful aftermath over ale, into an orgy of apologies and recriminations and even more, an orgy of obscene expenditures, both in money and content. I'd promised Felcher purchases after the entertainment was done. Tomorrow was, if not equally after, close enough.

I explained why we didn't have to, weren't going to, and how Felcher would just have to be grateful we were in fact men of honor—unlike a good many of his customers, I suspected—even if it was slightly belated honor.

"It will, however, have to be first thing in the morning, Harry."

"*First* thing?" he said, his voice suddenly frail.

"Quite."

"Uh, just how *first* are we speaking?"

I leaned close and in a whisper told him the time.

“You bastard. You bloody bastard.”

“Quite.”

And so we sat, side by side in the dark, contemplating the firstness of the morning, all the way home.

Harry

23 October 1882, 10:15 a.m.

A hansom cab

37 Preston Lane

London

"Do you think we have enough?"

Reggie looked at me askance, something he has done—with good reason, though not, of course, that I would ever admit that to be so—with a moderate, and *only* moderate, degree of frequency over the years.

"Where were we, just now, Harry?"

Ah, bloody hell. Catechism time. I should have kept my uncertainty to myself. And once started, he doesn't give up. Perhaps if I start off sullen, instead of working into it, that might cut it off early.

"Bank of England," I muttered so he could barely hear me over the sounds of the morning city, which seemed unusually loud, though I had little experience with which to compare the noises. I was not normally a person who was in the business center of the City at any time, much less this ungodly time, so how could I possibly know? "At an entirely *unnatural* hour."

There, that sounded suitably sullen, though I wondered if, perhaps, I had strayed a bit into the territory of *childish* sullenness, when I was striving for the *manly* version.

"Say, rather, an entirely *natural* hour for those who are not slugabed noblemen indulging themselves at night, all night, in all manner of vice and depravity—"

"In which you most vigorously participated, if you will recall."

He ignored my interruption as being not worthy of a counter. "As I was saying, all manner of late night vices and depravities, generally not conducive to rising early, and attending to business matters. The world, my dear Harry, does not, as hard as it may be to believe, revolve around the vagaries of the ton."

"But really, Reggie, just because the banks open at nine does not mean one must necessarily rise to be there at the ceremonial opening of the doors. After all, the money in the vaults will still be there later in the day."

"But *why* were we at the bank, Harry?"

Ah, hell. Back to the catechism.

"Because we needed cash."

"Because *we* needed cash?"

"Because *I* needed cash." I had no need to work at sullenness for that sentence. It came quite naturally.

It really wasn't my fault. The waistcoat simply *called* to me from the window of that small tailor's shop we happened upon three days earlier. Three buttons only, low-cut, which would show off the blazingly white shirt and tie with which I would wear it. And it was the most stunning shade of red.

I would, I immediately decided, wear my new sartorial love only for the most special of occasions. I had no idea what that first occasion would be, other than that I would know it when it happened.

"I needed that waistcoat, Smythe," I said, being so very publicly proper, whilst peering through the hansom's window, which was not quite as clear as it might have been, in the vain hope we might be at our destination and thus bring an end to this quizzing.

"You *wanted* that waistcoat, Fotherby," Reggie replied, in a teasing voice. "While I would not claim to be entirely familiar with the scope of your wardrobe, my friend, certainly not on a level with Bentley, I *have* ventured into that warehouse you call a closet. What is it? Twenty? Twenty-five feet long? And ten? Fifteen wide?"

I rose to the bait as I tend to do when Reggie teases me. "It is *not* all that large, and you bloody well know it. Granted, there are probably not many—"

"Try *any*—"

"*Many* of our friends, or other men of the ton, and I said 'many' because neither of us has ventured into the bedrooms of enough of them to accurately assess... Why... Reggie, have you been deceiving me? How many bedrooms have you explored—"

"No more than you, as you bloody well know, since our adventures have not involved bedrooms thus far."

"Very well. I will accept that as truthful."

Reggie snorted a "you damned well better" at me.

I grinned. "As I was saying before I was so rudely and inaccurately interrupted, the closet in which I keep my garments is at most fifteen feet long by ten wide. Almost cozy, one might say."

"If, by 'cozy,' you mean nearly impassable because of the sheer volume of shirts, shoes, trousers, coats, waistcoats, and other paraphernalia, then I would agree. Do you and Bentley have a map, or do you simply drop breadcrumbs behind you when you venture in?"

Breadcrumbs? It is to laugh. So I did. Then I tried to regain the thread.

Bloody hell. Perhaps I should learn to drop mental breadcrumbs to find my way back to the point. Oh. There it is.

I opened my mouth, but shut it when I saw Reggie smirking at me. "Breadcrumbs?" he mouthed.

"Bastard." I did not bother to mouth it. "*As I said... I needed* that waistcoat. I do not have one approaching the excellence of that shade of red. A shade that will only go well with black evening wear."

"Of which you have how many sets?"

I realized an airy "what does that matter?" hand wave would not be effective, so I answered with absolute truth. "Nine. *But*, and this is most important, none of those are quite right... quite perfect enough for that waistcoat."

"Good Lord, Harry. Are there now *degrees* of perfection?"

The silly bugger knew *perfectly* well what I meant, but his feeble attempt at wit warranted the wave-away I bestowed on him, and a dismissive *harumph!*

"Only those with no sense of style or color, who *always* wear the same set of black evening clothes, black waistcoat, white shirt and tie, with onyx studs and cuff links, believe there is no perceptible difference between one black cloth and another, nor between the relationship of any particular black to any other color. And don't you dare tell me black is not a color. It is. Scientifically it may not be, but when it comes to fabric it is as much a color to be considered as any other color, when considering what a particular color can and cannot be paired with."

"And none of the nine could be 'paired' with your new waistcoat."

"Absolutely not."

"Which is why you 'needed' a new set of evening wear."

"Ah, yes."

"Made from a *particular* black fabric which the tailor just happened to have on display, with, by the sheerest happenstance, sufficient bolts of the stuff in stock for him to make you a tailed coat and trousers."

"Why, yes."

"Which necessitated your being... *measured*."

"Why... yes." I gave him a broad smile to ensure maximum annoyance. Really. One should not hold on to things that one should give up, for quite so long. Nothing happened, after all.

Though it might have.

"Monsieur Jacques" as he called himself—though he was likely no more French than either of us, but managed just enough of a French accent to make his name at least plausible—quite logically mentioned to me upon my decision to purchase the waistcoat that he had a rather stunning bolt of black cloth in the back which he had not yet displayed, as he was hoping to find just the right client for it, someone who would do it justice. He thought perhaps that might be me, and would I care to inspect it.

Reggie had snorted one of his "oh, please!" snorts at that, which I felt to be entirely unwarranted. Clearly, the tailor recognized in me a similarly artistic soul. I naturally agreed to view it.

And immediately became as addicted as any long-standing user of opium to not only the idea of owning enough for new evening wear, but also owning the rest, to ensure no one else could have it. It was perhaps my visible enthusiasm that led Monsieur Jacques to propose a price for the hundred yards in the bolt which was, for fabric, the equivalent of what Her Majesty might receive should she put the Kohinoor up for auction at Sotheby's.

I demurred, but made an offer. He reduced. I admitted to the possibility of paying perhaps a little more than I had first offered and named a figure. He most visibly reluctantly lowered, and we enjoyed a most delightful haggle to the tune of toe tapping from Reggie-the-often-impatient. I ended by paying more than I felt I should have, and he ended by accepting less than he believed he was entitled to. The best negotiations are those where neither is *entirely* happy with the result!

After Reggie had, with a minimum of muttering, augmented my cash in hand to the required amount, Monsieur Jacques quite naturally pointed out that in order to make the clothes he would need measurements.

Indeed.

And would I step just this way. Into the adjacent room.

I quite understood. Proper measurements would necessitate the removal of my coat and waistcoat, but doing so in the presence of someone else, even one's best friend, in the public area of a shop, visible to any passer-by, was simply not the done thing. Of course I could hardly have explained to the rather lissome Jacques that my best friend had already seen rather more of me than being sans coat and vest. Reggie was given every assurance we would only be a few minutes.

I would have removed my coat and vest myself, but Jacques insisted on assisting, with purely accidental touches and strokes, and a running murmured commentary about remarkable shoulders, a fine chest, trim waist, and other affirmations. I balked a bit when he undid my braces at the front, and tossed them over my shoulders so that they dangled below my arse. However, I did have to agree that if I truly wanted a fine evening coat and trousers to complement the extraordinary waistcoat I had just purchased, not the slightest bit of fabric, other than my shirt, should be against my body, lest that extra bit should interfere with the correct measurements.

What a marvelously attentive tailor he was. So concerned over his client's welfare, so desirous of everything being precisely right.

I lifted and extended my rather nicely muscled arms, as he described them, on his request, as he stood close to my front, rather more so than any of my regular tailors, and leaned in so he might reach around my back, and bring the measuring tape round to the center of my chest to ascertain the proper dimensions thereof. His breath was warm on my neck.

His purely accidental... of course... touches on my... nipples in that process brought no pain at all, for which I was naturally grateful. But they did cause a sensation... or two, or three... that suggested that perhaps a little more twisting, or turning or stroking, might bring about desirable sensations in my prick.

I had thought giant-Reginald's tit-hurting something of a personal aberration, but the sensations wrought by the touches from Monsieur Jacques suggested otherwise. Yet another Edwardian thing to explore? Would Reggie's nipples react the same way?

He proceeded to measure my waist. I was at first not quite sure why he needed to kneel on the floor to do so, but understood when he quietly

explained, as he unbuttoned the top button of my trousers, and then the first, and tugged them down, just a little, only a little, that he needed free rein for accurate measurements. And the best measurements were those made with one's eyes directly viewing the proper point on the tape, as opposed to looking down at some odd angle, and risking getting it wrong.

As he wrapped the tape around my waist, he murmured a comment I nearly had to bend forward to hear, about how a slight belly, especially one of just the right dimensions, such as mine, really made a man more manly.

Quite right. A most astute observation.

Which then left us with three more measurements. Around the buttocks. And then the seams. Outer seam, and the most important of all, the inseam.

These are crucial measurements if one's trousers are to fit correctly and enhance one's manly attributes, he assured me. He did not wish to pry, and asked only so that he might provide the best service possible, but he wondered whether I would be wearing my new trousers with drawers, or... somewhat daringly... *without*. I was, he assured me—he was a remarkably assuring man—quite well put together and would do the trousers justice if my decision were the latter.

Trousers without drawers?

Not something I had ever considered for myself, but still, I *had* seen it at the Emporium. Reginald-John-Reginald had not been wearing them. Looking back, it seemed likely that Felcher had not been, either, on our first meeting. And, yes, some of the men who had been moving about the reading room area, and using the reading rooms, surely had not had drawers on. This was clearly not something every friend of Edward's was *required* to do to be a member of the group in good standing, but something which many chose to do.

I decided. Without drawers.

Which led to a tailor's dilemma. The difficulty of ensuring *accurate* measurements whilst using the tape *over* woolen trousers and a pair of drawers. He did not wish to appear forward, or improper, but he did want me to understand that he could not guarantee the trousers would fit as they should, so as to display what really *should* be displayed—he somewhat diffidently assured me—if he had to measure as propriety, ah, dictated.

Strict propriety *versus* ill-fitting, not properly displaying, trousers?

There could be but one rational choice.

Upon hearing my decision, he warranted he could take care of my needs quite rapidly, and my, ah, friend and I could go on our way without undue delay.

One might almost think he had done this before, in and out of the tailoring context, given the efficiency with which he unbuttoned the rest of my trouser buttons, spread them wide, pulled them down to my knees, unbuttoned my drawers and did the same, tugging them all to my ankles.

He then rose up slightly, and passed the tape behind my behind, with the lightest of *warm* touches, and overlapped the end directly at the base of my prick, using his thumb to hold it in place. He must have been slightly nearsighted, as he had to lean in quite close to read the measurement.

Which, when he released the tape and sat back on his haunches, brought us to the final dilemma.

He sighed deeply, a breath that drifted across the intervening small space, and wafted quite nicely over my knob-end and ballocks... and regretted to inform me that it would be the merest speculation if he were, for example, to measure my inseam straight down to the top of my crumpled clothes and guess at the rest of the distance, rather than fully measure along the line of my leg to the proper point on my shoes.

Obviously, the clothes had to go. After all, a French tailor's motto certainly had to be, "*Des mesures précises, mesures toujours précises.*" He should probably have a plaque to that effect on display in the outer room, in French, and in English for those unenlightened souls who could not speak even a modicum of our nearest neighbor's language. "Accurate measurements—always, accurate measurements."

Well, truth be told, Scotland is our nearest neighbor, since our borders do touch, but I wouldn't call that a language.

Monsieur Jacques dropped down on his haunches to work my right shoe off, and when I wobbled in the process it was only logical that I leaned forward to brace my hands on his shoulders, while he began to lift my right leg to tug off that half of the drawers and trousers. My soft... *soft!* ...prick was accidentally touching the quite thick light brown hair on his bent head, when we heard a voice from the doorway.

"*What the bloody hell?*"

We both lifted our heads and turned them to look up at Reggie and simultaneously said, "Measurements!"

"Really?" Reggie's voice did for that single word what the finest of my eyebrow-lifts would have accomplished: regal disdain and disbelief.

When faced with disdain and disbelief when one has done nothing wrong... at least not yet... one must forcefully take the bull by the ballocks and get the job done.

"Do go on, Monsieur Jacques," I said. He hesitated to follow my instruction, given the glare in his direction from Reggie. Objectively speaking, Reggie has a particularly fine glare. Something about his mustache adds a certain *je ne sais quoi* to his best glares. This was a most excellent example of the genre.

"I have decided that I will wear these trousers without drawers, and thus *precise* measurements need to be made to ensure a proper fit."

Dear Reggie's eyes bulged at that. I didn't strive for that result, and it isn't often that something I say or do achieves it, but still, it is a pleasure to watch when it happens.

"Oh, do give over, Smythe. One would think you had a propriety pole up your arse or something." The glare increased in ferocity at that taunt. "I am quite sure other men do the same, though, of course, I will not be questioning them to ascertain the accuracy of my observation, or being so bold as to unbutton trousers, and shove my hand inside to verify it."

What a marvelously free moment that was. Three men alone, unacknowledged friends of Edward's all—one certainly did not need a ned-sense to know Monsieur Jacques's inclinations—and speaking of things they would never have dared to speak in any circumstances even remotely public. Especially with the *frisson* of danger from knowing that the door to the street was unlocked, just as Monsieur Jacques had neglected... purposefully? ...to lock the door to this room when we came in for our adventure in measurements.

"In or out, Smythe. In or out. If you wish to stay to, ah, protect my virtue—"

"Such as it is."

"Indeed, such as it is, then do so. Otherwise, hie yourself hither and shut the door behind you. Well, actually, either way, shut the door."

Reggie shut the door and stayed. When Reggie is in that kind of mood, he seems to fill a space more full than he otherwise would have done. The room suddenly seemed smaller and far more intimate than it was before the measurement *interruptus*.

I could not say with absolute certainty what *might* have happened had Reggie not barged in, but I was *reasonably* certain it would have involved a somewhat French mouth and my prick. Reggie's presence meant that I became fully naked below the waist with rather more efficiency and without any further pleasurable *inadvertent* touching at all. I rolled the tails of my shirt up above my waist and held them there, while Monsieur Jacques measured from waist to ankle bone. And then, with my hand holding my manly parts out of his way, he measured my intimate inseam.

Finished, he stood, advised us he would need to write down the measurements, and ushered Reggie into the shop, leaving me behind to redress myself. It was not nearly as much fun as the *pre-interruptus* undressing had been.

Before we departed, we set a date and time two days hence for my return. Monsieur Jacques also offered to measure Reggie, should he find himself in need of new clothes, whether outerwear or the most intimate of handsewn garments.

All that shopping fun had sorely depleted my available reserves of ready cash, between borrowing money from Reggie to finish making a substantial deposit on the clothes, and then returning two days later to pay the remainder. And have that fitting.

A most remarkable fitting it was. I learned that my prick did, indeed, fit his French mouth quite well, but I had to remove it, or nearly so, and reinsert it repeatedly, with increasing rapidity, though, to be certain the fit was proper. It fit as well as my new evening wear did.

I had not had my man of business replenish my funds prior to the invitation to the special showing, and our decision to pay the "blackmail" by purchasing pictures. Thus the shortfall which led to the unholy hour at which I arose this morning.

I sighed.

"You went away," Reggie said in his "yet again" tone.

"I did."

"And now you're back."

"I am."

"Recalling why *you* had insufficient funds for today's venture, perhaps?"

"I was."

"I forgot to inquire. How was the fitting?"

"Fine."

"Only that? Surely it was better than merely 'fine.' Did he measure your prick with his mouth or his arse?"

I sputtered a "Wha-wha-what?" at him.

The bastard laughed. "Well?"

I gave in, as he knew I would. "His mouth."

"I measured his arse."

"You *what*?"

Reggie was, just then, insufferably smug. "I of course knew the date and time of your, ah, 'fitting,' so I merely made sure to be in the vicinity at the time I estimated you would be finished. I turned out to be a most excellent judge of the speed with which you would complete both fitting and measuring, as you walked out the door—smiling quite broadly, by the way, and with a certain degree of self-satisfaction that necessarily comes with a good seeding—not less than five minutes after I arrived."

"But I didn't see you!"

"You weren't expecting to, and you really weren't paying attention to much of anything at all at that juncture. I walked in when you went around the corner, inquired whether Monsieur Jacques was still interested in taking my measure, and upon being assured, most enthusiastically, that he was, he was most agreeable to locking the front door and putting an "out to lunch" sign in the window.

"I measured his arse while he was bent over the cutting table in the work area, for at least fifteen minutes longer than your own measuring session. His arse and the table became quite messy in the process of finishing, so I suggested he wipe the messes with your fabric."

"Why, you bloody—"

His laughter cut me off. "Just the scraps, Harry, just the scraps. I thought it was most poetical."

I joined his laughter.

When we finished and were relaxing against the not-at-all comfortable cushions, Reggie said, "And yes, Harry, I do think that between us, we have enough flimsies to pay for a reasonable selection of gentlemanly portraits, even at the outrageous prices Felcher will charge for them. Especially to us after last night."

I knew I could always rely on Reggie's assurances, as he only gave them when he was, in fact, certain of what he said.

The silence for the remaining few minutes of the ride was pleasurable. We did not have the cab set us down before the Emporium but at a destination only a few blocks away. A brisk walk in somewhat nippy air, but as pleasant as the ride had been.

An equally brisk rapping on the door brought yet another undoubted Reginald to open the smaller viewing door, only to advise us in a voice not quite curt, "We ain't open."

"*Aren't* open," Reggie said in his most pedantic tone. "Nevertheless, we wish to come in. Please advise your employer two of his guests from the private showing last night are here to see him. If he inquires, you might mention a mustache and ginger hair. Now do be a good fellow, and go off to do as I asked. If you do the job well, you will, of course be rewarded."

That last was said in a way to leave no uncertainty that a job not well done would not go unpunished. It was therefore not surprising we were not invited to wait in the inner room.

In a surprisingly short time, given the size of the building, he returned and opened the door. "Mr. Felcher will see you."

Reggie pulled a couple of coins from his pocket and handed them to current-Reginald as we passed through. We journeyed into another quasi-maze in dire need of breadcrumbs before he ushered us into an office. I called it merely "an" office in my head, as it did not give off the air of being Felcher's actual office.

He was, I was sure, the type of man who, despite the apparent falling-apartness of his interlocked buildings, would have a sumptuous actual office. This was a somewhat subtle insult for our cash-free departure the previous evening.

We seated ourselves in the less-than-comfortable chairs in front of the bare desk, keeping our topcoats on, as the room was not exactly warm. As expected, Felcher made us wait.

Since we expected the wait we were not annoyed, but neither did we rise to greet him when he entered. Following along with the general briskness of the day, he went around the desk, sat, and asked why we wished to see him outside of business hours.

"For business, of course," Reggie said.

Felcher lifted an eyebrow. Reggie clenched his lips and then relaxed them. "As we indicated last night, we desire to make an investment in the fine art of gentlemanly portraiture. That investment will, we believe, be something out of the ordinary for an initial purchase"—there was an ever-so-slight emphasis on "initial" which Felcher clearly heard—"and therefore we wished to discuss with you, in private, an appropriate discount for volume. Cash volume, of course."

We wanted a discount? What a marvelous best friend. Always looking for ways to save money, without being a veritable Scrooge—pre-ghosts, of course—about it. And he was willing to save mine as well.

"I don't—"

Reggie cut him off with a gesture. "Please don't lock yourself into a position from which you might find it difficult to release yourself. Instead, I suggest you consider being, at least with *us*, as financially flexible as you are physically."

The room grew just a hint warmer with that. How could it not, when the three of us were recalling, either by personal experience or vigorous and detailed description, the flexibility of Felcher's mouth and arse when being used by Reggie's prick, the flexibility of his tongue when *felching* giant-Reginald's arse, the flexibility of all the rest of him, as he twisted and turned to ensure that all the men who were wanking above him last night rewarded him with as much seed on his face as he could possibly get, and if not on his face, then somewhere on his body, so that not a drop was wasted on the floor.

After a moment, he said, "Very well. I *might* be willing to consider such an arrangement, so long as it is something entirely between we three, and not made known to anyone else."

"But of course."

"What do propose?"

"An investment of three hundred fifty pounds... each. A discount of twenty-five percent."

He shook his head. "I have other customers who have purchased that much at a time, and they neither asked for, nor were they offered, a discount, much less one that high. But considering the somewhat *special* nature of our, ah, relationship, I could offer you... five percent."

It was Reggie's turn for a headshake. "I didn't really believe you would agree to twenty-five percent. But then, if you never inquire, you never acquire. Let me think a moment."

Which was a rather ridiculous statement, though Felcher was unlikely to know it. Reggie never had to pause in a conversation to think about what he needed or wanted to say next. He either already had the words in mind before the conversation began, or they simply appeared like Athena—full-blown, fully formed and appropriately dressed for the time and place—from his brow. Though he always, sometimes annoyingly so, proclaims how he has no way with words at all.

Reggie's entirely unnecessary thinking process apparently required him to relax back in the chair in a most un-Reggie sprawl, with his legs somewhat spread, as well as looking up towards the rather grimy ceiling, as if it might inspire him, while he casually *adjusted* himself.

What the bloody hell?

When I looked from the moving hand to Felcher's face, I *knew* what the bloody hell. Especially when Felcher licked his lips as Reggie's prick plumped a little. Why, after all the grief he had given me about my new evening clothes, the bastard was himself drawerless today. And flaunting it!

What a clever best friend I had. If Felcher believed Reggie was offering another round with Reggie's prick as part of this bargain, Reggie was certainly not responsible for what he chose to believe, when nothing had been said.

Reggie lowered his head, and sat up just a bit, but not enough to close his legs and hide the display.

"Let us not prolong this, Mr. Felcher. I propose five hundred from each of us, today, at a fifteen percent discount. And another five hundred apiece within the next six months."

He gave Felcher a smile that tended more into leering territory than I was truly comfortable with. Why he *shouldn't* be leering at Felcher, or at anyone he deemed leer-worthy was a question for which I had no answer.

"Of course, if we become, ah, bored with our choices, and they fail to inspire us to the same heights as they will at first, then we might well be

making that second purchase much sooner. My final offer, Mr. Felcher. Deal, or no deal?"

"Deal."

"Ah. Just one small additional point. But not a financial one. We take our purchases with us today."

"That is not my policy."

"An exception for special friends, special purchasers. We are hardly aligned with the police or any government or private agency purporting to rule morality. Your own driver will be taking us directly home. You are not at risk."

Felcher considered and then nodded agreement. "Now, then. I have two volumes of samples of our finest works. Shall I bring them here so that you might peruse them together and make your selections jointly?"

"Do you know, sir," Reggie said, "I think not. Surely you have duplicates in case you have more than one customer at a time wishing to browse for the purpose of purchasing, rather than for any other reason?"

"Of course."

"Well, then, provide us each with a set, and the privacy to review and decide. Though somewhere a little warmer and more comfortable than our present environs, wouldn't you say?"

Felcher laughed. "Agreed."

Shortly thereafter I found myself alone in a nearby, smallish room, with not a glorious hole in view, having in it a comfortable chair, decent lighting, and two thick volumes. Plus a functioning stove to stave off the chill. Reggie had been dropped off, as it were, in what I assumed to be a similar room two doors away. There was a pad of paper and a pencil, with which to write down the selections, and presumably for us to calculate the price to be sure we stayed within the bargained amount.

Which was all well and good, but did not, at least for me, take into account the inevitable effect of the images I was viewing on my prick and my ballocks, which were aching despite all the activity of last night. Wanking was a necessity to get through this process.

Reggie would, I was sure, be able to wank a little, jot down a code and an amount, wank some more, and repeat as necessary until he finished spending

his £500, and finished his own spending. I, on the other hand, found that impossible. Fortunately, the pictures were not pasted onto the pages, and I could remove the ones I wanted and set them aside until I reached an amount that seemed, in my head, to be close enough to my photographic budget for the day.

I closed the books and set them aside, spread the pictures out across the table and looked from one to one to one and back again and around and about, wanking furiously, until I finally exploded—but only into my hand, which I promptly licked clean.

I put myself back together, stacked my selections and returned to the original office. Felcher was there, so I handed him my selections and he went through them, making notes. When he was done, he advised me that my total was £545, after the discount. But he would, he said in the most gracious tone he could manage, not require me to pay the difference.

I thanked him with all the graciousness I could manage as well.

Reggie naturally made a point of lasting longer than me, and strolled in a few minutes after my bill was totted up. He handed Mr. Felcher a list. Unsurprisingly, it came to precisely £500 after the discount.

We waited in silence after handing him five hundred-pound notes each, and he left to get our purchases. When he returned it was with two carefully and tightly wrapped packages, which were far larger than one might expect a package containing photographs to be.

He showed us to another exit, where one of his carriages awaited. With mutual expressions of nearly believable friendship and appreciation for services rendered, all in the most vague of terms, we left.

We were perhaps halfway home when I asked, “Did you?”

He grinned rather wickedly. “I did. And you?”

“Me, too.”

“Well?”

“Bloody damned well.”

“Me, too,” he said, which led us to brief laughter.

As the driver let us off in front of Reggie’s house, I suspected we were both wondering the same thing.

How soon were we going to be able to find the privacy to make effective use of our purchases?

I suspected we were both saying to ourselves, "Soon. *Damned* soon."

THE FOURTH VISIT

Reggie

25 October 1882, 1:30 p.m.

The Pig and Whistle

London

Harry was dithering again. Wanting to say something, but wondering whether he should. And if he should actually figure out the words before speaking, or just let loose with the blurt that was hammering at the gates.

He at least appeared to have learned his earlier lesson, and did not make himself or us conspicuous by looking around to see if we were being overheard, or watched, though by the slightest twitch of the muscles in his neck, I knew he wanted to. We were, as usual, at a table off from the rest. As long as we behaved as tavern customers customarily behaved and spoke softly, no one would pay us a bit of attention. And no one was.

He finally inhaled and exhaled, and repeated the process, before saying, "Where do you, ah, keep them?"

That was what the agonizing had been about?

Them, of course, being the photographs we had purchased. I wondered what choices he had made. Could not help wondering if he sometimes wondered about mine, as well. "In a locked chest in my safe."

"Ah. I don't have a safe."

"I recall. When I installed mine and recommended you do the same, you said you had nothing at your home so valuable as to require storage in a safe."

"Well, I would not exactly call, uh, *them*, precisely valuable." He gave me a slight smile. "Though they were not precisely inexpensive, still..."

My hand wanted to reach out and give his shoulder a comforting squeeze. I slapped my hand's wantings right down with the stern admonition that there would be no squeezes and caresses of Harry's anything in the Pig and Whistle. When my hand proposed alternative venues for my consideration and selection, I sternly expanded the area of prohibition to include the entirety of London, then the British Isles themselves, and finally the length and breadth of the whole bloody Empire. My hand sullenly submitted, muttering things about my character and antecedents which were undoubtedly unpleasant, and which I

deemed better left unheard. My prick tossed in a mutter or two as well of apparent approbation for my hand's viewpoint.

"Do you want Bentley to see, ah, *them*?"

"Good Lord, no!" He looked appalled at the thought.

"But he has seen similar photographs. Has a collection of his own. He knows you know about his collection, what with you having, ah, *come across* some of them so well." I restrained myself and only slightly snickered at the slight.

"Are you *ever* going to stop going on at me about that?"

"Perhaps."

"When?"

"Oh, ask me in fifty years or so, when we're neither interested in nor capable of 'that,' and I'll consider stopping."

"Bastard." He took another swallow of his ale.

I was, indeed. I saluted him with my own mug. "So, why not?"

He must have been dropping breadcrumbs, as he immediately understood. "They're mine. They're private."

"Precisely so. They're valuable to you. And something you don't want anyone seeing without your permission. So they need to be in a safe place. Shall I contact Hansford & Sons and have them bring a small safe to you in the near future?"

That idea was apparently more appalling than the thought of Bentley coming across... Oh... I had not thought of that aspect before. I decided to save the remark for another time. "Again, why not?"

"Everyone would *know*."

"Know what?"

"That I had something to *hide*. Bentley would naturally guess what it was I had to hide, or I might wind up having to tell him. But the rest of the servants... Well, they know I have nothing small enough and valuable enough to warrant the installation of a safe. Which would lead to speculation. And watching me to figure out what I was putting in. Or watching to see when I went to the safe and took something... *them*... out. So what good would a bloody new safe be if I have no privacy in which to, ah, *use* the contents?"

He was quite right. I would ignore that. "Then where are they now?"

"In a box. A *locked* box, of course. Which is in the armoire beneath some boxes of shoes."

"And the key?"

"On my person. Always."

I snickered at the image of Harry in a tub full of suds, a tiny key on a chain around his neck. Or sitting on a commode, key clutched in one hand while he tried to manage the entire toilet paper process with the other. Upon his inquiry, I shared my mirth-making images. He was not amused.

"And the other key?"

He looked guilty but nonetheless managed an almost believable, "What other key?"

"The one you surely have somewhere, so that when you mislay the always-on-your-person key, as you know is as evitable as the sun rising wherever it rises, you will have an alternative."

"It's in a place where I know where to find it."

"Unless you forget."

"I won't! I really..." He did not finish, of course, because all too often he did precisely that.

"You do realize, don't you, that if your servants are as concerned as you believe about what you might be hiding from them, they are already gossiping about this mysterious new locked box?"

He looked slightly gobsmacked at that.

"Oh," he said.

"Oh, indeed. So the issue isn't really the safety of the contents, but their lack of immediate availability when you wish to, ah, peruse and use them. And the privacy to do so."

"Exactly right!"

At least Harry had one person in his household who knew he was a friend of Edward's, and who would not be shocked by Harry's possession of his new collection of gentlemanly portraits. I had no such person in my own home.

"Wanking is difficult, but possible, right? I mean, without having *them* around to cheer you on."

He gave me a rueful smile. "Exactly right, again. A fairly quick wank, too, lest your manservant walk in on you, or a servant needs something and comes rapping, rapping on the bloody damned door."

We had another set of shared experiences. A proper use of our collections required time. And space. Space to spread them out if you wanted, space for you to sprawl, or sit or stand or kneel, with each of them easily at your spare hand. Time to look at them all, eyes flicking from one to one to one; time to select the ones which made your prick flush even darker, your breath becoming more ragged, your hand start to move faster. Time to look back and forth between the chosen images, imagining yourself right there in the room where the portraits were made, eagerly watching the man, the men, doing what they were doing while their images were captured for purposes of artistic excellence, or right there in *your* room, imagining yourself as one or the other of the image-captured men, or both, doing and being done. Time to determine, instinctively, analytically, the precise image you wished to be staring at when you allowed yourself to seed... when you had no choice *but* to seed.

Time and space we lacked in our homes, as while we could achieve both by a simple series of commands to the staff, those commands would trigger the curiosity that might well be our undoing.

We lifted our mugs to signal a refill, and while we waited, thought our thoughts of had we but room enough, and ti...

Room enough?

Well, bloody hell.

I waited until the mugs were full and the barkeep gone before solemnly informing Harry, "I'm an arse, you know."

He saluted me with lifted mug, "I'll drink to that," and a long swallow. "In what *particular* way, your arse-ship? There are so very many past ones from which to choose, or have you devised an entirely new one?"

I gave him an only modestly fuzzy "I shall thump you later" look, as we had consumed several mugs of ale apiece while not yet ordering any of the food, which was, considering the environs, surprisingly good.

I then shared with him my thoughts about space and time... *wanking* space and *wanking* time, not any other concerns about the nature of the universe... and room enough. *Private* room enough.

He gave me an adorably fuzzy, not-quite-understanding look back, which necessitated me having to remind my prick and my hands about the prohibitions so recently set in granite.

Despite the ale, he caught on when I said, "Falmouth Lane," and brightened considerably. But then he sagged as the brightness went away. "You have servants there, too. It would be the same thing, with just a different set of them. And besides, I have no access there."

I hand-flicked that away. "A bagatelle, Harry, a bagatelle. Of course you'd have your own key." I stopped to contemplate my brilliance.

Harry cut through the contemplation with, "*Servants*, Reggie?"

"You don't know, do you? Even with all your stalking and spying and tree climbing. You never figured it out. Ha!"

"Oh, stop the smug shite, and get on with the point. If you actually have one."

"I do, Harry, I do. You see, the servants are never there when I am, well, when I am there because my mistress, who, for some inexplicable reason, I do not permit to live on the premises, is expected to visit me. Or if they are, it is only for a few minutes after my arrival, after which they depart by the rear garden gate. Amply armed with coins to spend at the local pub, or brothel, or wherever they choose, until the specified time for their return."

"Oh. What a brilliant idea."

"I rather thought so myself."

My "ouch!" when he gave me a manly kick on the shins was only partially feigned.

We grinned at each other.

"I shall simply tell them that I have decided to allow my best friend to use the house for his cunts *du jour*. They will be required to accept your commands as if they were mine, and you will also require of them the same degree of privacy I do. I shall also let them know I might even use the house more frequently than just Wednesday evenings."

"For which their pay will be appropriately increased."

"What?"

I started to explain they were already overly well compensated for the amount of work they actually had to do, but didn't get the chance.

Harry kicked me again! It would be a Lazarus miracle if I could walk when he was done.

"Really, Reggie? You were about to tell me they are already well compensated, and don't try to deny it. I can see quite clearly when your Scroogish tendencies come to the fore. You have just spent hundreds of pounds recently on... on various and sundry events and things, and you balk at this *actual* bagatelle? Of course, if you are truly short of the ready, perhaps even having to sell out of the Funds a bit, I am sure my man of business could help you raise the wind. Quite discreetly, of course."

Due to the insult to my financial acumen, or rather, to the combined acumen of Arbuthnot and me, my hand wanted to give him a good thump or three in return, since I had prohibited other types of touching. I agreed. My prick was uninterested. But we never got the chance.

He waggled his finger at me. "Ah, ah, ah! Thumping me would be a thump too far. It might draw unwanted attention, perhaps to the fact that the pair of us are possibly pixilated so early in the day."

I paused, considered myself, considered him. Oh, yes, we were indeed poised on the precipice of pixilation, and one sip more would probably push us over. I raised my mug. Harry followed suit.

"To pixies!" I softly said—unwanted attention and all that.

"Long may they pixilate!" he quietly agreed and clinked his mug to mine.

We took that one sip more.

And another.

And another.

I was relatively certain we sampled some stew, and chunks of bread with fresh butter, and some cold cheese. Some sort of dessert, as well. We certainly sampled more of the ale.

We of course implemented my brilliant idea by visiting Falmouth Lane, introducing Harry to the staff, and explaining to them that from time to time he would be, ah, making use of the premises, much in the same mode as I. And that his instructions were to be considered instructions from me. And I *would* have mentioned the rise in wages, even without the elbow jab to my side from Harry-the-never-subtle.

On the way back to Bramwell Road, Harry wondered whether I ever did anything to make them believe a woman had in truth been there. I had.

Rumpled bedclothes, the smell of seed, though it was from my wanking. A splash or three of that seed, generous all, on the sheets. A hint of the type of perfume a less-than-expensive mistress might wear. Sometimes only “her” scent, since she might well have been there, pleased me with her mouth, and gone on her way.

Harry, of course, cannot leave a plan alone. He must always be tinkering with it, even when, or perhaps especially when, the plan was mine.

“Don’t you think it would be a bit more believable, us having women there to sex, if, uh, ‘she’ perhaps left an article of clothing behind, er, from time to time?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A... garter belt, perhaps? We could certainly purchase one somewhere. I mean, men who are not friends of Edward’s must do that, must they not?”

“Or even if they *are* friends of Edward’s.”

“What?”

“*Particular* friends of Edward’s. Did your set of photographic offerings not have the ones with garter belts... and other items of intimate clothing?”

“Y-you mean the ones with that man in the garter belt, and the black lace stockings and those ridiculously high-heeled shoes, and, and”—he lowered his voice even in the privacy of the carriage “—his ballocks and prick showing, all hard and leaking, and some sort of tiny, flimsy drawers around his ankles?”

“Just so. But it would hardly do to just leave about a newly purchased item, one clearly unworn, especially not worn by one in the throes, or verging on the throes, of passion.”

He looked at me askance. With *extreme* askance. “Oh, no, you don’t. Get that ridiculous idea out of your head. I am not modeling... not wearing any of that just for a damned illusion.”

I hadn’t been serious. While I was shocked when I first saw the photographs, upon consideration I could understand the appeal to some men, both those who wore and those who watched. But I was not part of those “some men,” nor if I imagined Harry naked, or partly so, or *recalled* the “partly so” occasions I had seen, would I add such things to the thought. Not that I would ever imagine or recall him naked in the privacy of my mind, whether at home or off those premises.

I was merely joking, and should have laughed it off, with a "Good God, Harry, of course not!"

Instead, I said what I thought, though in as jesting a tone as possible. "But Harry, you have such marvelous legs!"

Not jesting enough. Not *nearly* enough. Damn.

My words only produced a very sudden, and awkward, silence.

Which I broke after far too long a wait. "Harry, you do realize, do you not, that I was merely jesting? I mean, I'm sure that your legs are, uh, appropriately fine, perhaps even marvelous, as the men at the Emporium would undoubtedly assure you, but, well, I've never, uh, I mean, I've had no occasion to assess..."

I cut off the babbling which was so very unlike me. I do not believe I have ever babbled before. I swore a mighty oath both to my self, and to the God I still didn't quite believe in, that I would never do so again.

In the silence which met my end-of-babbling, we both knew I was lying. At a minimum, about the "no occasion to assess." I had, in fact, numerous occasions on which to assess a half-naked Harry during our lifetimes, and somewhat more frequent occasions, in terms of the shortness of time *between* occasions, since our first visit to the Emporium. And then, of course, the most recent occurrence, however brief the assessment time had been, at the damned tailor's.

We stayed in silence the remainder of the ride. As the cab stopped in front of my house, Harry shifted a little towards me and patted me on the knee, in a commiserating sort of way.

"That's quite right, Reggie. I *do* have marvelous legs, don't I? And I'm sure that some day—" and his tone suggested that that day would be the twelfth day of never—"some man will say that about your legs. Truly. Hair and all."

I harrumphed at him, because it was expected of me. My legs are indeed hairy. *Quite* hairy. I restrained a shudder at the thought of those legs encased in the lace-like stockings from one of the photographs, and wiry brown hairs punching through the fabric and curling everywhere.

I opened the cab door and started to step out when Harry reminded me of something I would have preferred to forget. "Shall we dine at White's before going on to Ponsonby House?"

I let out a theatrical groan, as we both knew there was no escaping our fate. "Dinner, yes, but must we?"

"We must, as you bloody well know. Mama sent a note round this morning reminding me, and therefore you, of the time the ball is starting and her fond expectation of seeing us there if, of course, we had no conflicting engagement."

"Well, there you are. Your mama has given us an out. Send a note back right now to let her know of our conflicting engagement."

"Have you gone off your chump?"

"What?"

"You know Mama has at her fingertips detailed knowledge of *every* event hosted by anyone in the ton which starts between now and midnight. She can easily verify the truth should we be so foolish as to tell her we were invited to an event when we were not. And we can hardly tell her that we have decided to spend some hours of amusement looking for pricks and arses in and about the Emporium's reading rooms."

"Damn. You're right." Delightful woman that she is, you did *not* want Lady Fotherby upset with you for any reason. She made my own mother look positively calm by comparison, and on the right occasion, Lady Smythe can be a veritable Boadicea.

"Aren't I always?"

As we both knew the answer to that, we both forbore from answering. I stepped out and closed the door. With a tip of my finger to my hat, I stepped back, and the driver drove three houses down to let Harry out... and get paid.

I did not watch Harry go into his house. I simply went up the steps to mine, inordinately relieved that my blunder had not put things awry with us.

Reggie

25 October 1882 8:15 p.m.

Ponsonby House

London

I *do* love Harry's mama. At times more than my own, especially at the times when she was defending me to my parents, when I probably shouldn't have been defended at all. Of course, all that was long years ago, when Harry and I were young, and I was taking responsibility for one of the ideas... pranks, rather... that Harry had thought up.

Ah.

Perhaps those times were not as long gone as that thought suggested. We were, after all, involved in a not-quite-prank of rather massive proportions... I could picture Harry's grin at my choice of words, were I to voice them... which *Harry* had instigated yet again.

But then the internal grins died. Lady Fotherby would not be defending me, nor even her own son, I was fairly certain, were this particular "prank" to become known in the ton. And once the ton knew, the news would fly as far around the Empire as there were people interested in gossip about the goings-on of the "upper crust." Or the "upper heel" of the bloody loaf. Especially something so offensive as what we were. What we are.

I shook off those particular gloomy thoughts and went back to the not quite as gloomy consideration of why we were even here: the fruit of Lady Ponsonby's years-long, decades-long friendship with Harry's mama. The jaws of the trap had snapped shut with the five o'clock receipt of her notes advising us of the site of our pre-ball dining, as she was sure, she said, that as a good son, and a good son's best friend, we would be most agreeable to aiding *her* good friend, and had therefore taken the liberty of accepting for us.

But before the writing of the notes, there was undoubtedly Lady Ponsonby bemoaning to Lady Fotherby, most definitely with genteel malice aforethought, about her great need for two suitable men to round out her table at the dinner preceding her annual winter charity ball. Poor Sloane's gout had flared up and he could hardly move. Dear Feversham was feverish, and given he was eighty-two, after all, it was not surprising he had sent round a note of apology for his absence.

Both the dinner and the ball, but particularly the former, were events primarily attended by members of our parents' generation, and at least two generations prior to that. You would think that within the vast numbers of aging male members of the ton, suitable replacements could have been found. But Lady Ponsonby alluded to her interesting thought that perhaps it was time for the *next* generation to be brought along, and become interested in her great charitable works.

Lady Fotherby was most happy to volunteer us for so worthy an endeavor.

That we might have other plans, whether of a variety a fond mother could be told, or not, did not cross her mind. Lady Fotherby asked, as always—delicately *commanded*, as always—and her servants obeyed.

I do believe sometimes she forgot that Harry and I did not quite fall within the ranks of her servants. On the other hand, perhaps we did.

It was not that we were unfamiliar with the Ponsonby Ball. Since going out on our own, and purchasing our homes on Bramwell Road, we had made occasional, dutiful, albeit quite, quite brief, appearances there, given over cheques in reasonably acceptable amounts, and then escaped to revelries that actually contained *revels*, with members of *our* generation.

However, we had never been invited to the dinner, for the most obvious of reasons: age and a distinct lack of the level of wealth of the rest of the guests. And had an invitation been extended directly from Lady Ponsonby, without intercession on the part of our parents, we would have most sincerely and even believably expressed our deepest regrets for our inability to attend, as we had a prior engagement we could not, in all good conscience, break. Even if that engagement had to be invented on the spot, and then made into subsequent truth to avoid being caught in a lie.

As astute as Lady Ponsonby is, she undoubtedly reached that selfsame conclusion. She therefore sought the aid of Lady Fotherby in her hour of need.

There was, of course, no one now to help us in *our* hour of need. And half of that “us” was entirely unaware that we were in need, since Harry was at the far side of the room, deep in conversation with a woman old enough to be... ah, that *was* his grandmother. He had clearly not heard the fortunately less-than-stentorian announcement that created our need. A need I frankly considered far more dire than the social requirement that men and women be evenly balanced at dinners.

We had a need to get out of Ponsonby House immediately, if not sooner, and preferably before the butler stepped in to announce dinner. And I was

utterly at a loss as to how to accomplish that purpose. For a moment, I gave serious thought to accidentally tripping Harry and causing him to bend, break, strain or sprain *something* that would necessitate his departure, and as his closest friend, my departure as well, to get him the help and comfort he required.

A bottle of claret for him, a bottle of port for me, with seconds ready to be called upon if needed.

But I had no way to guarantee only temporarily serious harm to his person, and not permanently serious.

With no viable alternative, we were stuck. Crenshaw was here, and I doubted it was going to be pleasant.

We should have thought of that possibility when we got Lady Fotherby's notes. He was, after all, just a bit older than our fathers, a man of great wealth, and immense social standing despite the rumors which had swirled about for a while after the death by soup. The perfect candidate for Lady Ponsonby's charitable machinations. We *should* have thought of it, and having thought, forged ahead with offending both of these society matrons by backing out and accepting the consequences of doing so.

In all our years in the ton, we had seen Lord Crenshaw only rarely, and then from a distance. We had never even had occasion to be introduced, and as our circles were so vastly dissimilar that was not surprising.

That, of course, had all changed with our third visit to the Emporium, where, as it turned out, our circles and Crenshaw's circles had an astonishingly similar overlap. At least in terms of having a mutual friend in Edward. A fact I could have lived a long and full life without ever knowing with certainty, no matter what the gossip had been on our first visit. Or if we had to know that fact, we could have never spoken about it, and definitely should never have seen that friendship in action, so to speak. I was sure Harry felt the same way, though he did not seem as offended by Crenshaw's conduct at the private showing as I was.

Damn. He was making his way in my direction, though fortunately not easily, as he was being waylaid by *his* peers. I turned away, entirely willing to say I had not realized I was his goal, if challenged. *My* goal was Harry, and an urgent effort to get him free of his grandmother so that the coming confrontation might be slightly more private. If being in a crowd of precisely fifty people milling about, waiting for dinner to be announced, could be considered private.

I reached the pair, bowed over Lady Grant's hand—an old-fashioned courtesy she appreciated—and asked if I might borrow her rapsallion grandson for a moment or two. She twinkled at me and agreed she could do without him. She added, “I suspect the reason for the borrowing is something you fear I would either not understand, or if I did, might actively disapprove of?”

“But of course. Your daughter has for years regaled us with the tales of the delicacy of your mind, and the great care we must take not to overset it.”

She snorted in a most unladylike manner, rapped my arm with her fan, and then poked Harry. “Go on, you two. And make your escape from the ball as soon as you may, as staying around for as long as we are compelled to stay is tantamount to death by boredom.”

His grandmother turned in one direction and we turned in another. I would have preferred to just grab him by the arm and pull him along, but that was not quite appropriate conduct for this setting. There. An alcove decorated with an enormous plant, a straight back chair, and a small table. And empty. Hopefully it would stay that way until we arrived to fill it. Perhaps we could even step behind the plant and avoid Crenshaw entirely.

Thankfully, Harry went along with me and asked no questions as we walked. That would, of course, end at the alcove. He had no chance to say anything, however, as the moment we reached it, and turned to each other so I could alert him to what was going on, Crenshaw spoke from beside us.

I wondered if he had left any damaged elderly bodies strewn in his wake when he managed to change course, discern our goal, and arrive there nearly at the time we did.

“Fotherby.”

I noticed the slight stiffening of Harry's spine as he turned his head to his left, then let his body follow, so he was partially facing me and partially Crenshaw. With the smallest of acceptable bows, he said, “Lord Crenshaw.”

There was a blink at the formality, and perhaps a bit more studied blandness of expression. What did Crenshaw expect? Amongst the ton, he and we were in vastly different sets, and thus had no reason to adopt the informality prevalent among friends of varying degrees of closeness, of using just our last names.

He turned his head to me and let me see that I was an afterthought. “Smythe.”

I turned of necessity so that we formed something of a triangle, with Harry and me as the sides, and Crenshaw as the base. Definitely the *base*. I took my

cue from Harry. Polite. Formal. Minimal courtesies without stepping over into disrespect. A small bow acceptable for greeting an older nobleman of one's parents' generation. "Lord Crenshaw."

"I must say I was surprised to see you young lads at this dinner. Surely you have more entertaining things you might be doing? An engagement with intimate friends? Visiting a gallery to view fine art?"

Bastard.

I explained Lord Sloane's gout, Lord Feversham's fever and expressed my—entirely false—gratitude that he, that is to say, Lord Crenshaw and not Feversham, though I certainly wished no ill health on Feversham, had not succumbed to any similar ailments, which appeared to be so prevalent among men of... a certain age.

"On the contrary, Smythe, I think you would find... either or both of you... that I am rather, ah, vigorous for a man of my age. Indeed, often far more vigorous than most men with much fewer years on their plates than I."

Braggart. Any moment now, were we elsewhere, we would pull out our pricks and measure them to determine the winner.

There was nothing to say to his bragging, and so we said nothing at all. Which seemed to unnerve him, if only slightly.

He decided on a new topic, since we were clearly not going to assist him in prolonging this encounter. "My lords, I do believe I have recently, entirely by happenstance of the greatest good fortune, met two of your good friends. What were their names? Ah. Yes. Tom, I believe, and, ah, might it be Jerry?"

Bloody bastard.

I was extremely grateful at that moment for the stolid, stodgy, stiff-rumped reputation I bore, and the identical reality, or at least, the pre-Edwardian reality of my person and persona. I did not react to the names or to the undercurrents in his voice that hopefully only I, and perhaps Harry, could hear.

My voice was level, slightly puzzled. "I don't believe I know anyone with those names, my lord."

"Oh, but I do!" Harry piped up in one of his most enthusiastic tones.

I would have thumped him... vigorously! ...but for the stolid, et cetera. He was going to dest... no. He wasn't. Not with that look on his face—a look I was undoubtedly the only one present who could recognize.

Damn me for a buggering bastard myself, for doubting him even for a moment.

There was far more metal and mettle in Harry than all the mirth, and mockery, and merriment might lead anyone to believe.

And that metal was steel.

Damascene steel.

Crenshaw blinked. He had not been expecting any sort of agreement. It was far more likely he had anticipated, as Harry might have said, flusterosity all about.

Harry looked to me first. "Smythe, really? How you could you possibly not remember Tom and Jerry? Is age and faulty memory creeping upon you?"

I would shake him later. Or perhaps hug him. Depending on the outcome. But I did my part in following along. "Oh. *Tom*. And *Jerry*. Of course. Yes, Lord Crenshaw, we do have friends by those names."

Vague enough for you, Harry? Helpful at all?

Harry turned to Crenshaw. "I must admit, Lord Crenshaw, that I am puzzled, indeed, truly puzzled, about how you could have come across either of our friends. Do you loiter or lurk about in stables with any degree of regularity, my lord? Or, more particularly, the ones near Bramwell Road?"

What an *odd*, but oh so enjoyable, silence there was amongst the guests who by purest chance, or wicked intent, found themselves so close to an occupied alcove it might not be considered private at all.

"I... what?" He was so very offended, his dignity disputed.

Harry spoke rapidly, in the way that only Harry can.

"Well, my lord, it's just that Jerry, though, really, he does prefer to be called Gerald, now that he is twelve and, as he insists, is quite grown up, is a most excellent stable boy. He takes care of our horses. Ours, of course, meaning Smythe's and mine, as we share the costs of a single stable, rather than expending a far greater amount on separate stables. I mean, if one is merely a spare and not the heir, one most practice *some* economies so as to be able to better enjoy the, ah, better things of life. Such as—"

I coughed. The veriest hint of a cough. A louder version would have indicated quite strongly, "Quit blathering and get on with it." As it was, this was more along the lines of a kindly, "You might consider putting an end to the blathering, followed by moving right along."

Harry's glance occupied the merest moment of time. But more than enough to see him twinkle at me. I so enjoyed Harry's twinkling. Indeed, his mother and grandmother were most excellent twinklers themselves; they must be where he got it.

"Ah, well, yes. So... I digress, but I always return, don't I, Smythe?"

"Yes, Fotherby." I sighed a put-upon sigh. "Though I have, I admit, from time to time wished you would simply *stay* away, and not burden us with your returned presence. So far you have declined to oblige."

He smiled and then proceeded with the dissection of Crenshaw's dignity.

"I take it you haven't been, ah, mucking about in our stables, my lord, so you don't know young Gerald, ah, Jerry?"

He looked up at Crenshaw, all boyish eagerness to have his observations approved by his elder.

Crenshaw had that rather stunned look that some men, and women on occasion, acquire when first coming face to face with Harry in full spate. He shook his head and looked as though he might recover himself, but Harry merely bowled right along.

Never had a herd of buffalo thundering across the American plains, bringing all to a standstill, even a train, until they passed, been quite so effective as full-spate Harry.

Indeed, Crenshaw might have been a maiden tied on train tracks, struggling mightily to loosen the ropes, with the train rapidly bearing down on him... her? ...for all the control he had over what happened next.

"Well, of course, if you don't, you don't. As for Tom, do you mean my sister's husband's brother-in-law's nephew Thomas? He's twelve, too. I rather thought he hadn't been to London in ages, and certainly not to any venue in which you might normally appear. Although I do recall, and I believe correctly, that when he was here last, he was most fond of Astley's and the circus, and a sweet shop close by. Perhaps you met him then? Taking some young relative or other to enjoy the sights and candies? No?"

Harry paused and let us see that the pause was so that he could think about this puzzle. He let the silence stretch out until just before Crenshaw opened his mouth to try to wrest control away, and then said, "Well, my lord, those are the only Toms or Jerrys that either of us know, I believe. Have you racked your brain to figure out if there is anyone else we know with those names, Smythe?"

I gave a superb imitation of a man whose brain has just then been most thoroughly racked. "I regret, Fotherby... and my lord... that I can think of none other than those two."

What I wanted just then, truly, was to rip the bloody pole out and simply laugh out loud. *Loudly*. Even attempt a guffaw, perhaps. Shock the nobility, perhaps even frighten the horses.

"There," Harry said. "You see? I can only conclude you are mistaken, since you have not met the young Tom or young Jerry that *we* know, and indeed, given that you are of a... certain age... it would be most extraordinary had you met such young... uh... youths under any circumstances anyway. Especially since you are unacquainted with their families.

"And as for whoever these dishonest Toms and Jerrys were, apparently falsely representing themselves as our friends, I most sincerely hope you did not rely on them for anything, or bestow upon them some largesse in the mistaken belief that you were rendering a favor to either or both of us, since we clearly have no knowledge of who these prepos'strous imposters might be."

Harry suddenly blinked and stared over Crenshaw's shoulder. A bit difficult since Crenshaw was far taller and far more bulky than Harry, but Harry made at least a creditable showing. "Oh, dear, I am afraid we must away, my lord. My mother is beckoning, and if you knew Lady Fotherby as well as *I* know her, you would know that it behooves one to, ah, *hop to it!* when one is beckoned by her."

He gave Crenshaw the briefest of brief bows, and I did my best Harry-when-bowing imitation. We circled around him and made our way past the rest of the guests towards the imaginary mother-meeting.

Shaking.

With repressed laughter.

What a glorious, glorious, *glorious* best friend Harry is.

Harry

25 October 1882 10:55 p.m.

Ponsonby House

London

“Going so soon, my dear?”

It was not the done thing to glare at one's mama at a ball, or even elsewhere, so I did not. Though it was a near thing.

I made sure she saw I was gritting my teeth, before I spoke, so she would have an inkling of my forbearance. I pulled my pocket watch out, flicked it open. 10:56. Flicked it shut. “Just under three hours, Mama. Under the circumstances, I do not count that as ‘soon.’”

“Ah,” she sighed. One of her *faux*-to-the-nth-degree motherly sighs. “The sacrifices a dutiful son must make for his beloved mama, and his mama's nearest and dearest friends. And speaking of financial sacrifices, have you made yours?”

I gave her my best sullen-little-boy expression, followed by the much-put-upon-but-bearing-up-under-severe-hardship expression. “Yes. But I shouldn't have to, not after that dinner. Lady Gregson to my right—ninety if she's a day, deaf as a post, bellowing nonsense most of the time, and squeezing my knee the rest. And General Lord Aylward on my left, a youngster at merely seventy-something, who only wished to make sure I understood the vast and vital contributions of the quartermaster corps back here in London during the Crimean War. About which he informed me in intricate detail. If I had been listening I could now recite to you the number of men's drawers shipped to our troops abroad, on a quarterly basis, between March of eighteen fifty-four and February of eighteen fifty-six. Lady Ponsonby should have been paying me.”

Mama laughed and patted my cheek. “Well done, son, well done. Though do be sure if you repeat that, you do so where Lady Ponsonby is not going to find out about it.”

I shuddered at the thought. Both for the Ponsonby retribution and Mama's for ignoring her command.

“I assume you have other plans for the remainder of the night?”

"We do. Reggie and I—" I came to an abrupt verbal halt, so stunned by that slip that I couldn't ignore it or correct it as if it didn't matter and move on. Yes, we were always "Harry" and "Reggie" while growing up, but as adults we had done that whole putting away childish things thing, and addressed each other, and referred to each other in the presence of others, only with the utmost propriety.

Mama, who could be a stickler for properness in all things, chose not to be just then. She merely said, "And I assume that these plans are not ones the details of which a dutiful son would confide in his dearest mama?"

"Hardly." A true word, but also one that evoked a twitch of what that word would or might mean in a later context. A brief conversation based on wondering what the reading room activity might be like late at night, was, indeed, "hardly" a plan to divulge to one's mother.

I was about to say goodnight and go find Reggie, who had been dragged off for some reason by friends of his father, when I recognized the expression on Mama's face. It was her "considering" expression—considering whether she was going to say a particular thing to me. Sometimes she did, sometimes she did not. This was a "did" occasion.

"I am glad you and... *Reggie*... are on a first name basis again. There has seemed to be some sort of... barrier between the two of you, a kind of formality you never used to use, for some time. Years, in fact."

The motherly pause left me with no choice but to acknowledge that home truth. "Yes, you are probably right. There was, but no longer."

Mama's occasional, but not *infrequent* sunrise smiles bore a remarkable similarity to the equally rare ones of Reggie's. When they managed to fight their way past that mustache. I was given one just then, along with another pat, this time on my arm. "You have seemed... happier in recent weeks, Harry. Not that you have deigned to visit all that much, but still, when you have, you appear to be enjoying life almost as much as when you were young and entirely carefree. Am I—I most sincerely hope—right?"

"You are."

Though I could not, of course, explain just how and why I was happy, and how easily that happiness could be destroyed.

I was about to commit a near social solecism—the act of hugging one's mama in public—but that impulse did not come to fruition.

An unnecessarily booming voice and large presence intruded. A cannonade of Her Majesty's largest artillery could not have more effectively destroyed our tiny island of privacy. "Lady Fotherby! Lord Fotherby... the younger."

Crenshaw.

As someone of far higher rank than two much younger spares, he had been seated at the dinner table much closer to Lord Ponsonby than we, for which we both gave devout, but silent thanks. Once the interminable dinner had ended, and the influx of ball guests had begun, we did not have to take evasive action to avoid him, except once.

Even so, with this advent, I was beginning to consider whether Crenshaw's presence tonight was God's, or someone's, punishment for the good deed of our agreeing to attend in the first place.

As he was behind me, I had no choice but to turn to face him, though in the process of doing so, I somehow found myself next to my mother, rather than between them. I was *not* hiding behind her, literally, but when one was blessed with having an ally as powerful as Lady Fotherby, one takes advantage.

"Good evening, Lord Crenshaw. How kind of you to accept Letitia's invitation this evening. May we count on your support this year?" There was just the tiniest, slightest hint of a stiletto emphasis on the "this" in the last sentence. Until then, I had forgotten that Mama had mentioned, in passing, Lord Crenshaw's distinct lack of generosity last year, despite having accepted the invitation to the ball. She did not need to explain whether that meant no donation at all, or just a niggardly one in light of the extent of his wealth.

I should learn to pay more attention to Mama's passing references, as had I recalled this particular one, Reggie and I might have found a way to escape this evening, as well as Mama's manipulations, with just the promise—one which would most assuredly have been fulfilled—of sending round a suitable donation the next day.

Or not.

Only the slightest stiffening of his face said that he had been pricked. The arrogant prick. "But of course, Lady Fotherby. I shall definitely donate an appropriate amount to such a worthy cause."

He could do no less, given the direct challenge from Mama. Last year's omission might be regarded as oversight. Evasion or failure to act in response to Mama's remark would not sit well with the matrons of the ton for whom this charity was a favorite good work.

Crenshaw clearly, as one man to another, had no more idea of what that “worthy cause” was than I did, but with far less excuse, as this charitable endeavor of Lady Ponsonby had been a fixture in the ton’s entertainments for all my life, if not longer, and he had been an active member of the ton at least that long, while I could count only a decade or slightly more.

“Do you know—” Mama stretched the word out, and raised her right forefinger to her chin. She did that when she was thinking something out carefully, such as a course of action and its possible consequences. After a moment, she nodded and then looked up at Crenshaw.

“Were you aware of Lord Smythe’s most delightful idea for raising funds this year, my lord? Lord Smythe, the elder, as you might say?”

“I think not.”

“Well, he has proposed that he will donate matching funds to whatever his son raises, whether by personal donation or otherwise, in the next twenty-four hours.”

“A most generous parent.”

“Generous indeed, especially since he is offering five to one.”

I thought Crenshaw was beginning to look a bit wary, much like a deer might look as it ventured into a clearing for a drink at a pool, in the fond belief it was safe, only to suddenly suspect there was a predator... a very *skilled* predator... lurking nearby. He took the safe route and merely nodded his understanding of my friend’s father’s quite imaginary generosity, though I was sure that by the end of the evening, it would be fact, rather than fiction.

“Are you acquainted with my husband, Lord Crenshaw?”

He relaxed at the apparent change of direction of the conversation.

Fool.

Mama’s on-a-mission conversations may *appear* convoluted, but once set, the *direction*, in the sense of the goal, never changes, merely the route by which one arrived there.

“Not well, my lady.”

She managed to look slightly crushed. He looked liked he believed that.

Fool.

"Ah, well, then I will have to seek the aid of someone else. He was called away and so could not be here tonight."

"Called away?" Ha! Double ha! My father had scarpered off to one of our estates on the flimsiest of excuses, clearly with sufficient notice so as not to offend her, and the whole potential for offense wiped away by offering up great-uncle Ronald as a sacrificial dinner goat in his stead.

"It just seemed so fortuitous... your appearance just now, that I thought, perhaps..." She gave a little wave, as if he actually had been about to say something, and she was giving him permission to speak.

Which of course forced him to speak. He might not care much about the opinions of the ton, but he cared enough not to deliberately make himself look bad. Which would be the inevitable outcome if he simply kept his mouth shut. As a practical matter, he had no choice but to ask, with flowery formality, if he might briefly stand in her husband's stead and be of assistance to her.

Fool.

"Would you really?" Oh, that was one of her finest "I shall be eternally grateful if you agree" looks.

He had no idea what he was getting into, nor did I, but he naturally nodded affirmatively.

"Well, then." The... what would Reggie call it? Ah. The *languidity*... of Mama's voice and stance vanished, and she came directly to the point. "I should like you to 'adopt'—so to speak—my son for the next twenty-four hours. Oh, merely in a financial sense, of course. All for a good cause."

We were both too stunned to do anything but stare at her. She immediately understood that as mere males we were unable to quickly comprehend her intent.

"Harold's father, you see, is of a rather competitive nature."

It appeared for a moment Mama was subtly informing me I was a bastard, and that she had played false with the man I believed to be my father all these years. A *less* competitive man one could not hope to find in all the length and breadth of the Empire, not just England.

"Especially when it comes to competitions with dear Reginald's father."

Another *ha!* was silently shouted in my head. Father and Reggie's father agreed on virtually damned everything. It was a point of pride with them, the

sameness of their opinions and actions in the same or similar circumstances. If one of them began to describe what he had done in "Situation A," the other might easily... and quite often did... finish the sentence for him, to which the initiator of the description would inevitably say, "Just so! By George, you have that precisely right."

"If he were present this evening, I know he would do for Harold, here, just what Reginald's father is doing for him. All for the greater good, of course. But..." She artfully paused, affixing a look of hesitancy on her face. Really, if Mama were to go on stage in a competing performance of *Much Ado About Nothing*, she would without doubt beat Ellen Terry's Beatrice all to flinders.

"No, really, it would be... *too much* to expect, to ask that of you." Another stiletto touch, implying with "too much" he perhaps could not afford to match the offer of Reginald's father.

"I should be delighted to assist, my lady."

I wondered if it was my imagination that I was hearing the sound of grinding teeth.

Mama leaned towards him. It was only a little lean. The merest, tiniest, smallest, nearly unnoticeable *hint* of a lean.

A lean in the same sense as a falcon stooping at its prey—one minute, circling high in the sky, the next grabbing its prey in its claws and using its beak to rip off the tiny head. Mama had not snipped yet. But snipping was imminent.

Oh, the uncertainty. The delicacy of the "should I? should I not? oh, dear, I just don't know" when she said, "It's just... well, my husband *would* view this as a competition, and he would, of course, want to win."

Beak open. Head within.

A hearty response, nearly believable, was called for, and Crenshaw provided it. "Of course we must win, my lady. I shall be happy to offer si... seven times the amount your son raises."

The increase in the rate was due, naturally, to the fleeting disappointment that flickered across Mama's face at the imminence of "six," to be supplanted by a smile of approval at the sound of "seven."

But before the beak could close, I had to put my oar in... to muddle a metaphor already mangled mightily.

"Actually, Mama, you may have forgotten that in their last competition, the, ah, elder Lord Smythe won by a fairly large margin. Don't you think that if Father were here, he'd offer at least ten to one?" We both looked at him, Fotherbys united to achieve a common purpose.

"Or is that *too much* to ask?" My tone was not at all subtle in its challenge.

Crenshaw most creditably managed to contain the horrific glare, as well as the alternative roar of outrage, that hovered just beneath the surface of public politeness.

"Not at all," he said.

Mama looked at me and asked, "And how much have you raised already, my dear?"

I had given Lady Ponsonby a cheque for £100, as had Reggie. I would add another four hundred. No. It would be well worth the expenditure, even if my wardrobe might suffer for a bit. I lied mightily upward. "A thousand pounds."

Which required a donation of *ten thousand pounds* from Lord Crenshaw.

Oh, *snip!* indeed.

My internal exultation was then smashed to smithereens.

Without a perceptible pause, as if he had expected my outrageous sum, he agreed.

And then, suddenly *oozing* charm and graciousness, Crenshaw said, "Do you think I might borrow your son? Not for long. He will be returned to you in quite good order and in no disarray at all, I do assure you."

I was sure my face reflected my concern, if not outright alarm, at the thought of Crenshaw "borrowing" me. For *any* period of time. He was smirking at me, though he let neither of us see it.

"It would behoove us, I think, to plan our strategy for this competition, to determine where pushing, or pulling, or prodding, or moving in some different direction, might better achieve the goal. Which is, after all, winning, and winning resoundingly well. Like your husband, Lady Fotherby, I am an avid competitor, and I, too, like to win... *resoundingly well.*"

I could, at that moment, with a great deal of cheer, have resoundingly *thumped* my dear Mama for bringing this to pass. Followed by strangling. If she were not, of course, my dear Mama.

If I refused to go with him, there would, I was sure, be retribution. My... our... one encounter with him before tonight, and earlier tonight as well, had given me enough insight into his character, what there was of it, to understand that. If I went, all lamb-like, to the slaughter, there would be difficulties of a different kind.

Mama's manipulations had placed me in the position of an odd variation on Mr. Stockton's fine story in *The Centurion*. Here, neither of the choices was a good one. The pseudo-gentleman? Or the tiger? And which was which?

Ah, well. As Mr. Henley said in that little poem he felt compelled to share with me in that little pub several years back, declaiming it with fine feeling under the auspices of some rather good ale, I was the master of my fate, the captain of something.

Sort of.

Possibly.

I put on a face good enough to deceive my usually discerning Mama, who was, at that moment, too concerned with her own competitive nature and her desire to immediately share with Lady Ponsonby the good news about the unusual sums which would be forthcoming for their charity, to notice anything amiss.

"Yes, Mama, I do believe Lord Crenshaw and I need to talk. It won't take very long, though."

"Oh, it might be *longer* than you think, my lord."

Arrogant prick. I was already aware of the *length* to which he referred, which was not, in fact, all that long. The girth was, however, admittedly impressive. Not that I planned on ever having any further acquaintance with either dimension, whether by observation or any *closer* experience.

"That's fine, dear. And don't feel a need to say goodbye when you've finished your conversation. You and dear Lord Crenshaw certainly have some plotting and planning to do if you wish to be sure to win."

"I don't *wish* to win in any endeavor, Lady Fotherby. I do whatever needs to be done to *ensure* that I win. To come out on top, as it were."

Gross bastard. Did he truly so despise women, given his propensities, and despite his willingness to pretend to be other than what he was, that he truly believed Mama to be stupid? *My mother?*

Anyone with the slightest bit of observational skills would realize she was an astute, sophisticated woman who was as capable as any man at running all the family enterprises, whether a sprawling household in London or at Fotherby Hall, or our business interests or our investments.

I had no idea what Mama knew or did not know about friends of Edward's and was not about to inquire. *That* was knowledge I had no wish to acquire. But had she not been distracted by the success of her stratagem, she would have caught on to at least the fact of Crenshaw's undertones, and would have investigated further, whether immediately or later.

As it was, she simply said, "Good luck, then, Lord Crenshaw, son." And with that somewhat absentminded response to Crenshaw's bit of braggadocio, she pivoted and swirled away to spread the good news.

Leaving me alone with the bastard, still in an odd island of near privacy. Perhaps those around us recalled the... confrontation? altercation? ...earlier, and were giving us room enough and time enough to entertain them again.

I intended to say, "I don't think, my lord, we truly have anything to discuss. I will leave the sum raised as it is, and provide my mother with an acceptable explanation for my failure to obtain more."

He cut me off after the "don't think" with "Indeed, you don't, boy" and two short steps so that he was standing before me, not quite touching.

A part of me analyzed and admired the effectiveness of his loom, using the combination of his age, height, weight, and the arrogance of his status and wealth. The rest of me did not care for it. At all.

I would have cut and run, though not literally so, of course, but had no chance. A thick hand darted out to grab my left arm, just above the elbow. Painfully so, though I managed to hide the wince. His voice was softer, but he squeezed harder. "This is not the place for the discussion we are going to have, but definitely the time. Walk with me."

And with that he turned, pulled me with him in a near stumble, and began walking. I perforce walked with him, the grip probably appearing innocuous, maybe even helpful, as though he were assisting me because of instability due to drink or the sheer heat of the ballroom. If anyone who might have noticed in that crowd cared enough to pay attention or to wonder, much less do or try to do anything.

I tried to shake his hand off, without success, but was unwilling to take the next step and make that effort a visible struggle, calling attention to myself, to

us, in what could only result in my embarrassment regardless of the outcome. I cursed myself for a coward, but that wasn't enough to move my reluctant, damnably fearful self to action.

"Where the f... hell are you taking me?"

"You've been overcome by the heat, delicate young man that you are, and as a friend of the family, and the evening's highest donor... by *far* the *highest* donor—" his voice was a snarl at that—"I am escorting you to where you might get a breath of fresh air and recover yourself. Much may be forgiven or overlooked or just plainly ignored for a man who has such sterling... *pounds sterling*... credentials."

He appeared to be right about being overlooked, and lauded at the same time, as the word of his generosity, though not the forcing of it, had spread with the rapidity of the proverbial wild fire in a drought-stricken forest. He indeed used the overheated excuse in a few murmurs, and though he did not actually use the word "delicate" to describe me, he might as well have, with his hints about what the "younger generation" was coming to.

Hints that elicited the start of remarks about "Too right. Why, in *my* day, we were not overcome by..." that faded away as we passed out of hearing.

I recognized our destination from enough past visits to have acquired some familiarity with the layout of Ponsonby House. A set of six side-by-side, tall, slender, glass and brass and sleek wood doors, the even taller set of thick velvet drapes that could be used to cover them all pulled back, led onto a wide terrace, perhaps some ten feet deep, that overlooked gardens that in spring and summer would be lit with fashionable lanterns to provide discreet lighting for discreet walks in near privacy.

Most of the light out there was from the bright shards falling through the glass doors, bouncing off the carved-in-swirls white marble of the balusters, shimmering against the railings of silver-white-and-black-flecked pale grey marble, and giving the stone floor a slight glow. A dim gaslight at each end of the terrace did a little, but not much, to alleviate the dark, although they were aided by a clear sky and a nearly full moon.

It was, unfortunately, not so very cold as to make it unlikely, or unnecessarily attention-gathering for two men to step outside. Especially since Crenshaw provided a more than adequate reason for our presence after he had near dragged me to the railing and shoved me towards it with enough force that I had to grab it to maintain my balance. Not enough force to have sent me over in the absence of any lack of agility on my part.

As I recovered myself, he reached to an inner pocket and pulled out a cigar, reached to a waistcoat pocket for a clip to snip off the end and return it, and then with an ostentatious smelling of its length, pulled out a set of matches, and lit the damned thing. It was, after all, what a polite nobleman would do: step outside so as not to offend his hosts when “blowing a cloud.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I smiled at the thought of a bright summer's day, looking at a brilliant blue sky filled with clouds that changed their shapes with the vagrant winds, and seeing a cloudly mouth blowing a cloudly prick, even for just a moment.

He blew a furious puff of smoke in my face. As I was a somewhat secretive smoker of cigars, Reggie not at all caring for them, it did not cause me to gasp and choke, nor even offend me. Well, I was offended by his lack of taste in choosing a cigar. It was clearly a very cheap brand.

“You find this amusing? You find *me* amusing?”

Despite his apparent anger, I doubted he was going to shove me over the parapet, especially as it was only a short drop, four steps down, five at the most. So I replied with honesty. “Yes.”

He was clearly not used to not intimidating younger men. He had, indeed, intimidated me inside, making me ashamed of my timidity. But I was not alone. I imagined he intimidated men of all ages in whatever formal dealings he had with men of rank, whether socially or in business, and even more so men of middling rank, or lower rank, or most particularly, no rank at all. But he exuded a... bigness... a power that might well make a younger man... a younger *friend of Edward's* feel nervous, or uncertain, or overawed, when all that exudation was focused on him.

He gathered up all that power, almost puffing himself up, and shoved it at me again. I managed to keep my equilibrium, though the anger in his eyes, beginning to shade into rage, did nothing to assuage my fear that he might lose control and strike out at me. “You owe me.”

I remonstrated with my self for letting my voice slightly quiver as I replied. “For what?”

“You mocked me in there and made me look the fool.”

Now *that* was laugh worthy. So I made myself do so. “Mama made you a hero. True, just a financial one, but a hero nonetheless. Why, your generosity tonight will be lauded the length and breadth of England, the Empire, giving so selflessly... to whatever cause it is to which you so selflessly gave.”

That pierced the anger, just a little. "You actually have no idea what charity Lady Ponsonby sponsors?"

I took the proverbial bull by the proverbial horns and decided to dance around a bit to see if I could keep from being gored. "Do you?"

The anger, which it now appeared may have been not entirely *true*, but more assumed, faded a little more. "I have no fucking idea."

"Well, then." I shrugged.

"Well, then, indeed." He stopped talking, taking a couple of puffs on his cigar, although this time blowing two perfect rings that hovered above and to my right, his left, for a few moments of tobacco perfection, before dissipating. "You still owe me."

This repetition was annoying, but the reality was I wasn't strong enough to just shove him aside, to escape, not since he had moved closer, standing directly in front of me so that I was effectively hidden from the view of anyone who might glance out the doors, with the backs of my legs so pressed against the railing that a little more pressure might find me sitting on it.

"And as I said—"

I stopped talking because his right hand was between my legs, clutching my thankfully drawers- and trousers-clad prick and ballocks. Painfully. Only slightly so, but definitely enough to make the point that he was strong enough to do some damage if he were of a mind to do so.

He flicked the cigar over the railing and out into the garden.

"You probably only gave Lady Ponsonby a cheque for what... a hundred pounds?" he mused, starting to manipulate me just a little. I resolutely forbade my prick and ballocks to initiate any response. They saluted with a brisk, naval "aye, aye, sir," and acknowledged their orders.

They lied.

They *lied*.

I could not now speak for the pricks and ballocks of non-friends of Edward's, although prior to my recognition of who I was, I doubted I could have done that anyway, but in any event, it appeared that the pricks of those who were, were so eager for attention, *intimate* attention, that it really did not matter much who was providing it. So long as attention was being paid.

"That's the amount I would have given, were I a spare with *some* wealth but not the quantity I enjoyed even at your age. The factor of ten, had you been honest, would have meant merely a contribution of a thousand. Had you said two hundred, I would have considered it a slight bit of revenge, perhaps, for our earlier contretemps over names and friends. But... eight hundred... eight *thousand* more?"

He squeezed and fondled and despite the quite obviously *reluctant* admonitions of my self to my prick, I found myself erect, to my greater shame.

"A nice prick, my boy," he said, continuing in the same soft tones we had used, not quite whispers, but still not enough to resound across the terrace. "Ah, yes, I remember it well."

I refused to squirm, to thrust against the moving hand, as I might have done, if I were honest with myself, had the hand belonged to someone I *wanted* to touch my prick.

Edwardian pricks, however—though I had a sudden feeling the thought might apply to all pricks—had no conscience and even fewer morals.

"It is not, however, your prick in which I am interested. Your arse though... is it as fine and tight as I thought it was during our visit to Mr. Felcher's indeed *Grand Emporium*?"

"I have difficulty accepting that you paid any attention to me, given your *avid* interest in an arse which was unclothed and on display. Unh!" The last noise was a grunt that resulted from a sharp squeeze and release of my manly parts.

"I am fully capable of observing multiple things that interest me, except, of course, when I am fully focused on one thing to the temporary exclusion of all others. As I shall exclusively be focused on *your* arse, the first time I fuck it. And, naturally, the other times until you have fully repaid the additional eight thousand. How many fucks do you think that might be?"

He leaned in, creating a vastly more effective loom than any other I had ever seen.

I was so shocked at the suggestion that I would whore myself for a nonexistent debt, that I threw my arms up between us, palms flat, and shoved as hard as I could. Given the disparity between us, had he been... focusing, and braced, I doubt I could have moved him. As it was, the surprise was sufficient to loosen his grip between my legs and force him a step or two backwards.

Which was in turn enough to allow me to move to the side so that he no longer blocked my exit.

I could have escaped just then.

Except... I spoiled the moment.

I laughed.

Which mightily offended the mighty-in-his-own-perception Lord Crenshaw.

I laughed some more as his face and neck began to go through increasingly darker shades of red. I simply could not contain myself. It was a most delicious thought. And when I voiced it, it was *not* a blurt. It was a *Reggie* thought: rational and reasoned, *before* expression.

"Unhand me, sir!"

Crenshaw stilled, and looked aghast, his jaw dropping. I had spoken in my best, lilting, overly feminine imitation of the words the innocent young heroine... was her name Pauline? ...had spoken to the dastardly, caped, top-hatted, mustache-twirling villain in the American melodrama we saw the same night as we heard the song which I was so inspired to contribute to the proceedings on our third visit to the Emporium.

I only somewhat falsely staggered a few more steps of separation before collapsing my arse on the railing and continuing with my genuine laughter.

"And... and... and..." I somewhat gasped, needing more air than I had, "you succeeded without even needing a cape, or a top hat, or even one twirl of a mustache tip."

He had no idea what I was talking about, other than recognizing I was laughing. At his expense.

I was not so gone in that laughter that I did not notice when Crenshaw straightened up and started to move towards me, fists clenched. I straightened as well, moved away from the railing, and readied myself for my exit from the scene. I had only two viable choices. A swift move stage right, down the curving stairs off the terrace and into the pit. Or the more dangerous dart forward, hoping the surprise of smaller prey moving *towards* the predator would stall him long enough that with a burst of speed I was not at all confident I could achieve, I could arc around him and exit upstage center through the doors.

A single word stopped me. Us.

Though neither Crenshaw nor I spoke it.

“One.”

It was Reggie. He stepped out of the deep shadows to the right... stage right I oddly thought... of the line of golden-light-spilling doors.

We simply stood, staring, as he moved towards us with all the grace and power of something... somehow not *someone*... both massive and lethal.

I blinked. And blinked again. Ridiculous. Impossible.

The image I had just then was of Bouncer, Grandfather's ridiculously named, aged, grizzled mastiff bounding towards where I had fallen from my own six-year-old foolishness, but nevertheless crying as if I had a right to. Bouncer's right lip was lifted in just enough of a silent snarl to show a fang or three and to indicate what he thought of the two stupid humans running towards me, obviously to hurt me again, and what he intended to do about it.

My nanny and her footman lover—they never knew I knew—understood what Bouncer was telling them, as they nearly fell on their faces stopping their headlong rush. And then in starting to back away, Joseph did fall on his arse and smartly stayed there. Nanny Jane just stopped when Bouncer's snarl became vocal as he stood beside me.

How long we might all have stayed that way I don't know, but Bouncer, his muscles rigid and quivering with a desire to launch himself at the two he knew hurt me, converted snarl to a loud... a *very* loud... baying that everyone in the family, every staff member who served at the estate, knew meant *danger!* That in turn brought more rushing, and more rapid stops, until Grandfather arrived, understood the scene, if not the whys of it—he later explained the “whys” of not acting foolish in the presence of Bouncer, and did it so effectively I was unable to sit for the remainder of the day—and told Bouncer to “deliver, sir!” Which Bouncer proudly did, to profuse praise from Grandfather, and a stern command to me that I stop my sniffing and praise him as well.

A child who doesn't reach the shoulder of a mastiff tends not to do mastiff-praising very effectively, but I did my best, with several sniffles-mixed-with-words, mostly “good-Bouncers,” and pats on his side.

And here, I thought for one ridiculous instant, was a younger, stronger, equally furious, version of Bouncer in Reggie. Reggie, whose right lip was indeed lifted, though I don't know if he was even aware of it, showing a glint of gritted teeth, as he arced away from a direct path towards me, and wound up between Crenshaw and me.

Between Crenshaw and me.

Legs spread to slightly more than shoulder's width, braced, standing as tall as one of Her Majesty's guards before Buckingham Palace, hands clasped behind his back, left holding fisted right.

Reggie was *protecting* me? I nearly looked around so I could determine if there was some place I could easily swoon, of course, without risking injury, or knocking myself unconscious. Reggie *deserved* a swoon, at the very least.

Although that would have to wait until he explained what he meant, as I had no idea. Crenshaw clearly did not, either.

As if we had asked him for that explanation, he said, "You asked, Lord Crenshaw, how many fucks of Harry's arse it would take to *repay* your generous donation of those extra eight thousand pounds. I simply answered you."

I gawped. It was not at all an attractive expression on me, so it was fortunate I was behind Reggie's back and he couldn't see it. Though I felt that somehow he knew it was happening, had even, perhaps, intended it to happen.

"As for whether you will ever experience that arse, whether for one fuck or more, the answer is equally simple. Not in my lifetime. And as I can give you, what, twenty-five years, closer to thirty? you will be dust and bones in dirt before I'm gone. *Let. This. Go.*"

No, indeed. A swoon would not be enough. I would have to decide upon some other reward for my knight in a black wool cutaway, and matching trousers.

Crenshaw was not so easily cowed, or dissuaded. He took the offensive, something of which he was also patently capable of being, with no effort at all. "I'll destroy you both."

Reggie snorted. One of his finer dismissive snorts. "You can try, if you wish."

Crenshaw was nearly shaking. "So very easy, boy. So very easy. I simply go inside, my face flushed with the shock, outrage, horror, of finding the two of you here on the terrace, in a passionate embrace, pawing at each other in a manner that could only cause disgust in anyone forced to observe it. And when I confronted you, the so-very-fuckable one behind you asked me to join you, and tried to touch me."

I knew, we both knew, the possible, no, the *probable* consequences of any such accusation. It was what we had feared ever since our adventures began.

Reggie's voice became solemn. Solemn with the solemnity of the red judge we saw one afternoon in the Old Bailey, black silk square atop his wig, pronouncing a sentence of death by hanging. "You could try that. We would, of course, deny everything."

Crenshaw mocked Reggie with his own words. "You could try that. Some might even believe you, but you know as well as I that when it comes to the ton, he who speaks first, especially when there is no *evidence* to contradict his words, is assumed to be truthful. *Believed* to be truthful, especially since there is no known motive for the speaker to lie. And your denials would simply be perceived as frantic efforts to escape the consequences of your vile, immoral behavior."

Reggie stood there for a moment, and I saw his right fist clench even tighter, the skin whitening. I was sure his face was thoughtful, and that his thinking would result in a powerful response. I was, instead, appalled by what he said.

"Would you accept a single fuck?"

I gasped, and the utter horror in that gasp must have conveyed itself to Crenshaw, who looked unbearably smug. I was about to shout a furious denial when I fortunately noticed Reggie's left hand. It had released its hold on his right fist, and was lifted, palm out, fingers and thumb spread as wide as they could possibly be, with his wrist snapping quickly, away from his back and slightly down, back again, repeat.

As if he was gesturing at someone to stop.

The only thing he could want to stop just then was me speaking. Though for an instant I had lost it, that palm gesture restored my trust. I said nothing.

I moved just slightly so that I could fully see Crenshaw's face. He was looking smug, satisfied, certain of his control. "No."

Reggie didn't react, so far as I could tell from his stance. "Do you have a counter-offer?"

"Certainly. I fuck you both. One after the other. Naked. In my bed. Doing whatever I tell you before and during the fucks. And you watch it happening to the other. And say nothing. And do nothing to interfere."

"And... if we agree. Your word of honor that that will be an end to it? Nothing further will be required of us? Nothing will be said of any of this again, in outright words, or hints, or nudges, or winks or nods?"

"But of course."

Liar! I wanted to shout. But Harry's palm was still up and out, though no longer gesturing for me to shut up. Or stay. Or sit. Or lie down and roll over.

He relaxed his hands, brought them down to his side. He turned to me. "Will you agree, Fotherby"—oh so bloody formal when asking my consent to be brutally fucked side by side with my best friend—"on his lordship's word it will be just the one time?"

And then he winked.

Truly.

Though the occasion was far too solemn for a wink, a gesture more suited to some moment of fancy or frivolity, which this most certainly was not. Except... he didn't *actually* wink. Neither eyelid lowered and rose, whether slowly or as rapidly as a director lowering a curtain and raising it again to get one last curtain call, even though the applause was nearly dead.

He absolutely and without a doubt did not, in fact, wink at me.

But I knew he had. And the wink was not fun and frivolity, but reassurance. Trust me. I have this. Will you?

And the wink that wasn't a wink gave me the answer I had had all along.

"No." After a barely perceptible hesitation I added, with just a hint of the petulance I felt Crenshaw would expect from a man whom he believed, without evidence, to have a propensity for being fucked, frequently and well, perhaps without caring much about the men to whom the pricks were attached, "I don't trust him."

Reggie turned back to Crenshaw, his shrug and his spread-wide arms and hands suggesting clearly, "I tried, but what can you do with a man like that?"

Crenshaw's face closed down. His voice remained low, granite-solid. "I warned you. I was reasonable. You give me no choice."

If this were the almost-final scene in one of those sensational novels, some persons of power or authority would have been hidden somewhere about as the criminal confessed his crimes, appearing at the last instant to take him into

custody so that truth, justice and the British way could prevail. Fortunately, since his confession, his blackmail scheme, incriminated both of us as well, no such persons were loitering about in the hedges or behind the statuary.

I hoped, and gave in, and prayed in truth, quickly, uncertainly, that Reggie knew what he was doing.

Crenshaw was nearly at the door when Reggie spoke again. "Actually, Lord Crenshaw, you *do* have a choice."

With his hand on the handle, he looked over his shoulder. "What?"

"Your choice, Lord Crenshaw. Pistols or swords?"

The "What?" in response was drawn-out and incredulous.

"Your choice of weapons, my lord. The one who is challenged always gets that choice."

"What in the bloody hell are you talking about?" Crenshaw's words were a snarl, but because of his closeness to the doors, he kept the volume down.

"Choices, my lord. Yours and mine. Your choice to go in there and accuse me... us... of the things that never happened, ah, *here*, but which you will so eloquently and so falsely describe. *My* choice to challenge you to a duel, for impugning my honor."

It was Crenshaw's turn to gawp. It was an even less pleasant expression on that face than it was on mine. "Duels are illegal!"

"They always have been." Reggie was so calm, so quiet. He might have been having a philosophical discussion.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Try me, Lord Crenshaw." Without looking back at me, Reggie tossed words over his shoulder in my direction. "Harry, how often do I practice with my pistols?"

Pistols? What pistols? How often? Never.

I have, however, only on occasion, been known to lie. Fluently. Believably. Reggie knew that. Reggie counted on me. I gave him what he asked for.

"At least once a damned week with those private lessons. Always insisting I come along and shoot as well, when you know I'm no damned good at it. It's bloody annoying, you know, always losing to you. And watching the others lose."

I felt rather good about those lies. Spontaneous. Extemporaneous. Quite beautifully done. Eminently believable.

"He's lying," Crenshaw said.

Well, of course I was, but Crenshaw wasn't supposed to understand that. Damn.

"Of course he is," Reggie agreed in the tone that might have been agreement, but equally, might not have been. "Fotherby lies frequently. And remarkably well. You would be *amazed* at what people will believe when Fotherby is lying to them. But he does not always lie. And never about anything important. Not about life and death."

Reggie shrugged. "Go inside, my lord. Feel free to test your belief that this is one of his lies."

Crenshaw didn't move.

Reggie's voice went back to granite, back to the solemn strength of a warship's steel. Or something more animal... say, a mastiff a hair's breadth from ripping a throat out. "Say one word about us, about the Emporium, about events there, past, present, future; say anything at all that tends to disgrace us, even if we cannot truthfully trace it back to you, and I *will* challenge you. Publicly. At the worst possible moment for you.

"Or perhaps, I will impugn you. Humiliate you. So embarrass you that only an utter coward would not challenge me.

"If I goad you into challenging me, and I believe I could, understand that I will not apologize, the duel will happen, and I *will* kill you. If I challenge you, the duel will also happen, because *you* dare not apologize. Doing so would be an admission that all you have said about us was a lie. And once you are branded as a liar, my lord, once you have backed down from a duel, you are finished."

Reggie took the slightest step back. Bowed. Gestured towards the door on which Crenshaw's hand still rested, and beyond which a few people were beginning to look at the little *life and death, perhaps literally so*, one-act play being enacted on the terrace.

"Consider this, though, my lord," Reggie softly said. "If it's pistols, I will of a certainty kill you. If swords, I will guarantee to maim you for life, even if by some chance you should prevail. Your choice, my lord. Your choice."

Crenshaw looked at the two of us, said "Damn you!" snatched a door open, and stalked inside.

Reggie watched him go, very carefully maintaining his upright, warrior stance.

I couldn't tell if it was his stare and stance that made the few observers inside turn away. When they did, he crossed to the door, closed it, and turned back to me. Paused, inhaled, and walked to me, shaking. As he neared I could see he wanted to shake me, and shout at me, and probably shake me again. And... possibly... something more.

He wanted all that, I was sure he wanted all that, nearly as much as I wanted to hug him and babble praise at him for his inventiveness and an ability to lie I would never have believed him to possess. For his saving me. For risking so very much for me.

He stood there, so very near. He lifted his arms, just a little. With a kind of spread to them, as if, were I to take those so very few steps forward, he might wrap them around me, and hold me tight, and make sure I knew I was safe. As if I might hug him back.

But I was wrong. I had to be wrong. He *knew* we could not touch. Not that way. Not any way other than the most manliest of British manly ways. Not in public.

We dared not, even now, come close enough to create the appearance we were touching, if someone were watching, as Reggie had watched, unbeknownst to us.

So though I did not move, I tried to let him see, through my face, my eyes, tried to make him understand that I would if I could, but we could not. Tried to express all my awe, my amazement, my delight, my gratitude, the wild amalgam of emotions that were compressed into the so very, *very* inadequate, "Thank you, Reggie."

He did not speak. Just... let his arms slowly fall to his side.

As if he were only then realizing the magnitude of what had happened, what *might* have happened, how close we came to disaster, he stopped seeing me, though he was looking straight at me. He was... gone away as I sometimes did, though nowhere at all pleasant.

And then he said, so low I almost did not hear, "Dear God."

He shut his eyes, clenching them tightly as one does to prevent tears, to regain control so one does not display hurt, or fear, or... anything else at all. Eyes shut, he mouthed the words, "Thank you, Harry," though I don't know that he knew he did.

Nor did I have any idea why he would be thanking me. I had done nothing that I was aware of.

Yet I had done something—something which warranted both thanks and... pulling away.

I saw him doing it, pulling back, though he didn't move at all. His face became blank, unreadable, even for the world's greatest Reggie-reading expert: me. "Of course, Harry."

Such an odd tone. So quiet. So... not quite emotionless, but more nearly neutral.

My own, anguished, "*Dear God!*" was inside.

He completed the not-moving-away, but still moving away, with an actual step away. "Your mother may want to discuss your fund-raising efforts before we leave."

What?

He waited for my response.

What he got was just: "Oh."

He nodded and answered the "Oh, really?" I had not in fact said.

"Yes. She told me about the 'generosity' of Lord Crenshaw, and the humorous circumstances in which it arose. And that you two had left to discuss plans for raising more money. She and I were on the far side of the room, just then, but when I looked about, I was certain it was the two of you who were going out on the terrace."

"And so you came to my rescue, all knightish in stylish armor of tailcoat and white tie." I tried for just a modicum of humor, to try to avoid whatever was happening, get us back to where we were a few moments earlier, before I did whatever it was I did. But it did not work.

My humor, no matter how feeble, had never before *not* worked.

Dear God.

He seemed uncomfortable, as if, despite the brilliant spate of words he'd so recently spoken, he no longer knew what to say. "I... don't think I should call it that. A rescue. I am sure you could have handled the situation. Without... without my interference. You, uh, you are quite capable, you know."

I should have been warmed by the last, and I was. But what I heard most was "interference." As if he had committed a social gaffe, by interrupting a private conversation, with the interruption not at all appreciated?

I was suddenly lost. But with my Reggie... my best friend, Reggie... standing there so stiff and still, I could not let him see that, so I retreated into formality as well. "I appreciate that, Smythe. Still, I do wish to express my appreciation for your efforts on my behalf this evening."

He just looked at me, with what was not, *could not be*, pain in his eyes, a flicker and then gone, and quietly said, "What are best friends for, if not to be of help in times of need?"

Oh.

Best friends.

As Poe had somewhat said, "Only that, and nothing more."

He was not rescuing *me*. He was merely doing what any friend would do for any other.

I don't know why I felt... disappointed. As if there *should* have been... something more.

Best friends. That is indeed what we are, what we have been, all our lives, even through that long-ago hiatus. That is enough.

It will have to be enough.

I nodded, gave him the best smile I possibly could, and then went inside. I didn't... couldn't, simply *could not*, just then... look back to see if he followed me.

Reggie

25 October 1882 11:25 p.m.

Ponsonby House

London

I watched my best friend go back inside. Without looking back to see whether I was following along, as I so often did.

That hurt.

Even though I brought it on myself.

I moved away from the spilling golden light into the shadows from which I had watched it all unfold, only then allowing my legs to shake and give way, so that I slumped against the chilly stone wall. I barely managed to avoid just sliding down and collapsing on my arse on the undoubted equally chilly stone floor.

Damn, and damn, and some infinite number of damns more.

And not of the good, or pleasant, or even merely fine variety.

I might have asked myself "What in the bloody hell have you done?" But why bother? I knew bloody hell well.

I lost my temper, as I have never done before. Though "losing" your temper was not, strictly, an accurate term, except as it may refer to a loss of control.

I have always known precisely where my temper was. Both in general, and on those rare occasions when it wished to make itself known. I had to, as its existence, its nature, was one of the few things that Harry did not know about me. No one really did.

The anger was always under my control, with a sturdy collar round its neck, and a thick leather leash, steel-snapped to the collar onto a piece of steel in the shape of a D, the end wrapped several times around my inner hand.

Leashed. No matter how strongly the mastiff dug his legs in and strained forward, or sat back on its haunches, deceptively placid, with panting, gaping mouth, and lolling, drooling tongue, only to put all two hundred pounds of massive muscle into a surprise leap forward.

Always under my control.

Except tonight.

Their conversation *might* have been about money and charitable donations. This was, after all, a very public location, with the crustiest of the oldest, wealthiest crusts in attendance. But still... I remember how hungry Crenshaw looked at the Emporium, despite all else he was doing, every time his eyes turned to Harry. And Harry never noticed, or if he did, he played the innocent non-noticer so very well that Crenshaw believed. And was not happy.

So when they in turn did not notice me, or even hear the brief bubble-burst and retreat of sound when I opened and closed the door, I moved to the deep shadows to my right. If their talk was a normal one, once I was *sure*, I would have left them to it. Which was a lie to myself. I would have stayed in any event, just to be sure that the talk *remained* normal. Later, I would have teased Harry mercilessly about his “assignation” with the unpleasant Crenshaw.

There would be no teasing, now, as there was nothing to tease about. Nothing humorous at all about the improvised plot to our drama.

I watched and listened to it unfold, as their voices were loud enough to drift over to the doors and where I stood, but not able to push through the wall of wood and glass, or be heard over the din of music, and several hundred mostly elderly revelers—though *our* parents would certainly fall in neither category—well on their way to being entirely in their cups.

But I waited too long.

Once I knew Harry was an unwilling participant, I should have thought of something to get him free, of both the talk and Crenshaw himself, and I could not even think of the ridiculously common excuse of “Excuse me for interrupting, my lord, Fotherby, but Lady Fotherby asked me to find you. She requires your presence, although she didn’t say why.”

I slammed my head against the wall, welcoming the pain as another penalty for my stupidity.

As the conversation turned ugly, and then worse, I stood frozen, unwilling, unable to believe that anyone could be so depraved.

Oh, yes, what we had all done at the Emporium, what the numerous friends of Edward’s did with and to each other in private and not so private locations, would by most of the world be considered depraved. In some places far less advanced than the Empire, the least of our activities, even those conducted in privacy that had been unknowingly violated, could lead to a long and painful death.

But this! Blackmailing Harry into his bed, blackmailing his prick inside Harry.

No!

I have heard it said that when you are in a full-on rage, you “see red.” I slipped from tense control directly into that rage with no changes of color. Instead, I saw the stage and the players with unusual clarity. Instead, I found myself an unexpected Antony, crying “Havoc!” and letting slip the dogs of war.

Or just the one inside me.

Mastiffs, good, solid, *massive* English mastiffs have for centuries been our friends, our protectors. So intelligent we have even used them as war dogs, though they were not enough to make a difference when the Romans invaded all those years ago. Had this been a physical battle, the mastiff whose leash I had unsnapped from the collar and tossed away would have launched me at Crenshaw, snarling aloud, to try to pound him into submission for his vile assault on Harry. I might even have succeeded.

I once saw an old man on a crowded, traffic-stopped London street, hobbled with age, terrified for a small boy I assumed to be his grandson, great-grandson, who was pinned under an enormous cart when the rear axle broke. The old man... the *old* man... lifted the edge of the cart well off the ground, and held it there, *alone*, while others rescued the child.

I think I could have won had I attacked then, but even in my rage I knew that even if I won it would accomplish nothing that would make Harry safe.

I had no plan, only a desperate need to do *something*. And once I did not immediately attack Crenshaw, that moment was lost, and I knew words were all I had. Words! When I had so few of them at my command, and rarely used them well, except by sheerest chance.

I was not a word-artist like Harry, who created... creations of words and tones and volume and pitch, creations to awe, amuse, annoy, annihilate.

Annihilate?

And then I had a plan. Not a perfect plan, but no plan could be perfect when created in the time that ran between the touch of a lit match to a candle wick and the flaring of the fire. No, it was a plan with all the risks of an artist who takes twelve-folded paper, into which he has scissor-snipped, knife-slit, a pattern with the glorious intricacy of the finest handmade lace, knowing as he

cuts, knowing as he unfolds, that a snip too much, a slit too far, and the whole in his hands will fall apart.

“One!” I said, stepping out of the shadows, the mastiff and I stalking forward, hackles raised, a warning snarl on our lips, until we stood between Crenshaw... and *our* Harry.

It was a mastiff stance to start the confrontation: legs spread, head up, eyes locked on the target, muscles tensed, pads and claws pushing against the intricate stone patterns of the terrace floor, a hair's breadth away from a physical assault if he or circumstances forced me into it.

We were most articulate, the mastiff and I, his fierce, protecting growls and yips and howls and snarls becoming words through me. And each word we said was a snip of the scissors, a slit of the blade, cutting the pattern with no time for tempered care and measured certainty, pushing, pushing, *pushing*... until it all unfolded and the pattern was complete.

Crenshaw looked at me, looked at us, with the rage of a predator who lost its prey, and knew it was forever lost. He damned us both with a final snarl, snatched the door open and stalked inside.

We watched him go, the mastiff and I, letting loose the need to be immediately ready to launch and rend and tear, but ready still. Watched until he was swallowed by the merrymakers who neither knew, nor would have cared except as a subject for avid gossip, what happened out here.

Like a good guest, I took the required steps to put my hand on the handle and closed the door. It was impolite to allow that stifling heat to be wasted on the crisp terrace air.

The few who might have begun to watch us, shifted their attention to Crenshaw, and then, more importantly, to themselves and others they deemed worthy to have their attention bestowed upon.

I walked back to Harry, the mastiff and I inarticulate again, wordless. Just... feelings. I wanted, needed to shake him for being so stupid as to be private with Crenshaw. The mastiff wanted to grab him by the throat and shake him until he flailed about, arms and legs flopping, until he understood he was never, ever, never again to make us that afraid for him. I felt all this, and felt... something more, as we stopped, and deliberately did not shake him, did not throat-grab him.

We stared at each other, a few short steps apart, and I lifted my arms, just a little. The way you lift your arms to hint that you want, need perhaps, a hug,

and would give one in return if one was offered. I *would* have hugged him just then, continued all the risks I had taken with Crenshaw, that we might be overheard, might be seen.

He knew, he surely knew, how much I had dared for him. I *needed* him to dare, if not as much, at least a little, to be the one who took that one step forward. One step. All it would have taken and I would have swept him up and hugged him hard.

But he didn't move.

I stared at him, at his face and eyes and lips, and found my Harry-sense missing, my lifelong ability to read all that he said with face and body, even in silence, vanished in the aching emptiness that descended when he did not move.

I heard him say, from a great distance, "Thank you, Reggie."

In the silence after, I bent and hugged the mastiff instead, inner tears falling onto his thick fur. He rumbled back, and when I lifted my head, he lifted his, and with a vast, slimy swipe of his vast, drooling tongue, he licked my face! A help... but not enough.

I watched him go, fading into darkness, going back to the kennel deep inside to wait, knowing somehow he might never be let loose again.

I did not answer Harry. I just let my arms slowly fall to my side.

Though looking at Harry, or at least in Harry's direction, I... went away just then, though in a different way than Harry's going away when his attention was temporarily transfixed by some odd thought or fancy.

I wrapped my inner arms around my inner self, and bent in agony. What had I done?

I had announced, in the most certain of all possible terms, that Harry was mine. For all we were only three on a cold mansion terrace, it was as clear as if I had, in some grand gesture, gotten every bell in London to ring at once, with enormous banners unfurling, and discreet handbills tossed from every rooftop to announce in the largest, but of course dignified, typeface the *Times* would permit on its front page, "'Harry is mine!' Lord Smythe has loudly proclaimed this 25th day of October, in the Year of Our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and eighty-two."

Or mastiff-like, I had unsheathed my prick and pissed all over Harry, not just his lower legs but as high as I could reach, to mark my territory.

I set the mastiff free, if only for a while. Gave up my “what if anyone finds out” fears from the Felcherian blackmail attempt. Ignored the possibility it was not just the three of us there, where the words did not really matter because we three knew already, but there was someone else. Listening as I had listened, but not stepping into the light, just slinking away when all was said and done. Someone who might destroy us yet, with a word or two or three, or force me to live up to the braggadocio of my paper pattern plan and challenge Crenshaw. There was still a risk that all I had done and given up was for nothing.

Dear God.

I might have said those words aloud; I might have not.

I shut my eyes tightly. I would not cry from the loss of that which I had never truly had—Harry—nor just from relief that disaster, or *one* disaster, had been averted.

Harry's rejection hurt, how could it not, but in a way he was right. No matter why he refused to move. So I murmured, “Thank you, Harry,” though I didn't know if he heard, or if he would have any idea why he was being thanked.

And then I pulled away—I *had* to—even though I didn't move at all. I made my face a granite-carved likeness of my real self, unreadable even for the friend, who I still desperately hoped would somehow remain my best friend, who was the world's greatest Reggie-reading expert.

And then I finally responded, not to his lack of movement, but to the polite words that followed that lack. I made sure my tone was quiet, not without all emotion, but more neutral than anything else. “Of course, Harry.”

Ah. My Harry-sense had miraculously returned. I saw him blink a “what?” and repeat our recent moments in his head until he figured it out.

I completed my moving away, with an actual step away, and changed the conversation to something acceptably... neutral. “Your mother may want to discuss your fund-raising efforts before we leave.”

It took a moment of near incomprehension before he realized, perhaps, what I was doing for us. Putting us back on our even keel.

“Oh,” he said, but he meant “Oh, really?”

“Yes. She told me about the ‘generosity’ of Lord Crenshaw, and the humorous circumstances in which it arose. And that you two had left to discuss

plans for raising more money. She and I were on the far side of the room, just then, but when I looked about I was certain it was the two of you who were going out on the terrace.”

“And so you came to my rescue, all knightish in stylish armor of tailcoat and white tie.”

Dear Harry... I could still call him that inside myself... trying to use his wit to ease the situation in which we found ourselves. A good try, though it did not work.

Whatever cleverness there might have been to the pattern of words I'd uttered before, all that was gone, and I was back to Reggie-the-ever-word-deprived, not quite knowing what to say. So I said what I could.

“I... don't think I should call it that. I am sure you could have handled the situation. Without... without my interference. You, uh, you are quite capable, you know.”

I saw when he finally understood, or I thought he understood. He retreated into public formality—dear God I hoped it was only public formality—to match mine.

“I appreciate that, Smythe. Still, I do wish to express my appreciation for your efforts on my behalf this evening.”

I looked at him, hoped he did not see the flicker-and-gone moment of pain I knew was in my eyes, and quietly said, “What are best friends for, if not to be of help in times of need?”

He nodded, gave me a smile which I recognized as not fully genuine, but merely the best smile he could possibly gather up and give to me.

Then he walked past me, to a different door, opened it, and went inside.

I waited and watched until he was gone, as Crenshaw had gone, and went inside myself.

I allowed myself to hope that when we left, it would still be *we* who left, even though all we had planned or might have planned for what was to happen after we made our “early” escape, was now hopelessly shattered.

I so very much feared that all the Queen's horses and all the Queen's men could not put back together our shattered plans and whatever else might have shattered as well.

Harry

26 October 1882 12:25 a.m.

Ponsonby House

London

We left the terrace separately, but did not, could not, stay that way. Not with Mama's scheming and my brilliant stupidity in going along with it, as no sooner did I see her than she whisked me aside, and asked, "How much more do you think you might raise, my dear?"

I lifted her gently resting hand off my arm, and gave it back to her. "Nothing."

I looked surly; I sounded surly; I *was* surly. I had reason and right to be, even though she didn't know why and damned well never would.

She gave me one of her delicate "askance" looks, and the eyebrow lift that so genteelly asked, "Whatever do you mean?" and finished the sequence with the stern look that said, "And you had best have an excellent explanation for that impertinence, young man."

"Mama, I don't have much of a conscience—"

She laughed. "Young men so rarely do, my dear, so what is troubling the little you say you have?"

She would have fan-slapped my arm, my knuckles or anything vulnerable if I gritted my teeth, so I did not. "I don't like Lord Crenshaw, Mama."

"Of course you don't. You're my son. You have excellent taste. And for once the vast majority of the ton is right when it too agrees that he is not... quite likeable. At all."

"And so is the highwayman of old who shouted 'Stand and deliver!' and robbed a loathsome man, worthy of praise, but receives condemnation when he takes the funds of a worthy parson?"

She patted my cheek, fortunately with the fan-free hand. "My dear, such a way with words! I am quite sure you got that from me."

Considering how rarely Father spoke, or more accurately, how comparatively little opportunity he had, I was sure she was right. Though I had not been at all eloquent most of tonight. I shrugged. "That was a bit of ballroom

robbery, Mama, and while my conscience isn't so pious and pure as to make me tell him we were only jesting, especially not after you undoubtedly told Lady Ponsonby shortly afterwards..."

I paused to lift an "inquiring minds wish to know" eyebrow, and received a "But, of course, my dear," eyebrow back.

I had inherited that talent from Mama as well. Father was as incapable of eyebrow-speak as Reggie, but from lifelong endurance of silent conversations had learned to understand it remarkably well.

"And so you told him..." she prompted.

"That I appreciated his generosity, and that while I did not wish to impugn his honor or his ability to donate whatever amount might be needed, I would not, in fact, be raising any more funds which he might be required to 'match.'"

"And did he take the news well?"

I shrugged again. "We had a few words on the terrace." There. That explained if any saw us and asked.

"Did Reggie find you? I thought he might have been looking, after I told him what you had done." She *dared* me to contradict her, and being a wise son, I did not.

"He did. He joined the... conversation with Crenshaw for a bit."

She looked about. "And where is he now? Are you staying for the supper, or will you make your escape just before?"

I hoped, I prayed I spoke the truth. "He should be along any time. I expect we'll stay, after all, but you know Reggie, never a plan in his head, always darting hither, thither and yon, so one never knows."

That earned me a mild fan-rap on my arm, and a smile. And then a larger one that was directed over my shoulder. "Reggie, dear boy. There you are!"

"I am?" he said as he joined us, not looking at me. "Have I been elsewhere? Have I been remiss about staying close and basking in your radiance?"

His foray into jest was not as smooth as his efforts usually were, even when they were successful, but I believed only I could see that.

"Harry says you might stay for the midnight supper, after all."

"But only if you wish. We can certainly—"

"Of course," he said. "If *Harry* wishes it, so must it be done."

The smile that went with *that*, not directed at all at me, was not quite as good as it should have been, either. He offered her his arm, and I followed.

We found a table for six, which was one too many, and we left Mama to fiercely guard it, while we went in search of Reggie's parents. I returned with Lady Smythe, and Reggie with his father. The supper was pleasant, and at least closer to the usual sparkle when the five of us were briefly socializing. Or six, if my perfidiously clever father had not escaped for tonight. Our socializing was naturally only brief, as anything longer would have been uncomfortable for all of us.

We did not eat much, and it was only 12:25 when I checked my watch. So I risked it. "I believe we need to be leaving, do we not? Our... other plans... have only been delayed."

He had to look at me then, and it seemed, it *seemed* that all might not yet be lost between us.

His father gave us a man-of-the-world grin, but refrained from the wink and the nod. Our mothers gave us those exquisite motherly looks of fond disapproval and acceptance.

With bows and nods and smiles all round, we left.

We left.

Quietly. But at least side by side.

I got into his carriage, and he paused before following, his foot on the first step. He called up to Frank, "Home, please!" and got in.

He said as he sat, "I hope you don't mind, Fo—"

"Harry, Reggie. *Harry*."

I could have read the latest edition of the complete *Encyclopedia Britannica* at least seven times before he finally said, "Very well. *Harry*. I hope you don't mind, but I think I'd rather just... go home tonight."

"You're right."

As we approached Bramwell Road, I reached up and rapped my knuckles on the hatch. Frank freed a hand, flipped it open but didn't look down. "My lord?"

"I'll just walk from his lordship's house, Frank."

"Yes, my lord." And he flipped the hatch shut.

"I could use the fresh air, you know," I said. "After all, I have had so little of it tonight at that stuffy Ponsonby party."

I could not see a smile, was not entirely sure there *was* a smile, but the atmosphere in the coach seemed to ease a little. Yes. I had not, after all, entirely lost my powers. Just for a little while.

The carriage stopped and we got out. I had decided there was to be no awkwardness.

"Tomorrow, Reggie?" I firmly said, more statement than question.

"Tomorrow, Harry," he agreed without hesitation.

I resisted letting my inner sag show. I touched my finger to the brim of my top hat, tipped the finger at him, and walked away.

I didn't look back, but he watched; I knew he did. Perhaps not to see me all the way to my steps and up and through the door, but he watched.

All was not right in *our* world.

Yet.

But I was sure it would be.

Perhaps.

No.

It would. It *would*.

Though I didn't yet know how.

Reggie

28 October 1882, 11:20 p.m.

Pig and Whistle

London

“Reading rooms tonight, gents?”

Although I recognized the horses drawing the carriage and so knew it was the one Felcher had sent for us, I'd not looked to see who was driving. Still, I was not surprised to look up at the driver's seat, and see the other Harry, he of the supposed eight-guinea prick, looking down and asking the question. The other drivers supplied by Felcher simply transported us, but other-Harry always had something to say. Having previously offered to share his cock with us, it came as no shock he would inquire, despite it being none of his business what our intentions were upon reaching the Emporium.

Although the reality surely was he knew bloody well what went on in the place, quite probably with a greater depth of knowledge—and experience—than either of us. Though that comparison was somewhat meaningless, given the paltriness of our experience. A paltry which was, we were determined, going to give way to substantiality as soon as ever might be.

Other-Harry looped the reins, set the brake and clambered down. He was more massive than I, at least, recalled, though his size had only been an impression, given we'd always been separated by the distance between him up on the seat and us beside or inside the carriage. He leaned against the wheel, legs spread wide. Between the waning full moon and the somewhat dim streetlight, we could see him fairly clearly.

Yes, he was certainly in his forties. His grey- and silver-streaked hair tumbled down around his collar, covering his ears, a thick curl draping across his forehead from a center part. Those set-deep, dark eyes gleamed at us, and the stubble from last time was more of a beard. Also flecked with grey. That wide mouth was smiling at us.

As he spoke, I realized he had somehow managed to mislay most of his thick accent, or rather, abandon it. He did not speak as we spoke, nor as one who had bootstrapped himself into Eton-like tones, but more middle class. I did not ask why, he did not tell.

"The reading rooms are going to be full tonight," he said. "They always are on weekends. And you'll be arriving well after the start. Long waits for a reading room, gents, if you want to take your time with the book, or with sucking or fucking through the holes. O'course, if all you want is to seed and go, you can always shove your pricks through one of the holes in the end rooms of the center set. There'll be a talented mouth or arse waiting to be used at each one."

Not news I wanted to hear. Nor Harry. I had been at an exceedingly dull ball I had deigned to attend, and learned Harry had made the same deigning decision, when he found me assisting the architectural integrity of the house by leaning against a wall and preventing it from collapsing. He could not simply grab my arm and yank me away, but he did the verbal equivalent.

Marvelous inventions, for the most part, terraces and balconies outside of ballrooms. Fortunately it was a balcony to which his words dragged me, not enthusiastically but not balking, either. It was not a big balcony, and it required us to be somewhat close together, but not so close as to cause any talk if we just talked and got no closer. He stood with his back to the railing, me with my back to the doors.

He pulled out one of his damned cigars, clipped it, lit it, and after a couple of puffs, blew a perfect circle up into the air. I'd have pushed the bastard off the balcony with no regrets had he blown it in my face, as well he knew.

He also knew I was going to say something, but he cut me off with, "Not a bloody word, Reggie. *One* of us deciding he had an urgent need to smoke a cigar, and the other going with him to the balcony, so as not to sully our hosts' home, all to continue a fascinating conversation about something quite manly—tits, cunts, dogs, horses, racing, shooting, whatever—arouses no suspicions of anything untoward. On the other hand, you gesturing, and disdaining a bit of tobaccoish fun would draw attention."

As I knew he was right, he knew I knew he was right, and so on, I said nothing.

Another few puffs, another ring, a large cloud with no shape that unquestionably stood in lieu of a loud sigh, and then he said, "Enough, Reggie. Two days since the shite at Ponsonby House, and we've not seen or talked with each other. Enough. You protected me, I said I was grateful, as I truly was, and still am. So. Have you wanked since then?"

My decades of Harrying experience, in every sense of the word, normally stood me in good stead. I rarely so much as blinked at the twists and turns and

looping back swirls and curls of his conversation. That one stunned me. As he intended.

He allowed me half of a slow count of “one” to reply, and when I did not, went on. “By your silence, you haven’t. Neither have I. Your ballocks must be ready to burst, especially now that I’ve brought emptying them quite thoroughly to your attention. Now, that clearly can’t happen here, although...”

The buggerer paused and looked at me with a sly grin that no one inside could see because I blocked their view. “We *could*, you know, if you wanted to. If we were very, very quick. Just... standing side by side against the balcony, facing the street, and, well, doing it.”

“Doing it?” It was as close to a squawk as I cared to come.

“You know. Undo our trousers, pull our cocks out, and discreetly, though quite, quite, quite quickly, wank until we spurt our seed out and over the railing. And as the railing isn’t very high, really, quite dangerously low for an inebriated guest one would think, but anyway, we wouldn’t even have to stand on our toes to do it. Of course, we’d have to be ready to adjust ourselves and get back inside even faster, should we, ah, spatter someone.”

“You’re out of your bloody mind.” I couldn’t help myself. I let loose a grin, just a small one, not likely to be seen past my mustache, but Harry managed the feat. As he always did.

“Why do you say that as if you’re surprised? *How* long have you known me?”

“Bloody forever.”

“Well, then.” He shrugged. “However, as much of an adventure as that seeding-soon solution might be, it has one major flaw.”

“Only one?”

“There only needs to be one. My prick, a quite sturdy thing, a veritable flower of English manhood—” He looked slyly at me to see if I would acknowledge his word play, and when I would not, went on. “—is not at all amenable to cold, and might decide, indeed, in all likelihood would decide, to withdraw from the fray and go into hiding, were we to attempt it. My prick would prefer, I think...”

The bastard tilted his head to one side and down, as if listening to whispered words from his nether regions, and then straightened to look at me again. “Yes,

my prick suggests that he would much prefer a hotter clime for seeding. A warm hole, be it mouth or arse. He would even, should circumstances demand, be willing to accept a helping hand."

I reluctantly gave him the groan he expected for his somewhat punning ridiculousness, although I could not help the fact my prick not only swelled at all this ridiculous banter, but was beginning to agree with Harry-the-prick's commentary, urging me to pay close attention to what the brilliant prick across from me had to say.

"And just what did you have in mind to solve our seeding problem, other than silliness?" I of course knew the answer, but wanted to give him the pleasure of saying it.

"The Emporium."

"And any particular holes?"

He paused as if he had to think this out, when we both knew he didn't. "Well, if Reginald-John-Reginald is there, I know he would be most willing for you to try either of his holes, or both in succession. I fear I may not be quite Felcher's type, but he might be willing to let me have the use of his mouth or arse for a while. And if those plans are unsuccessful, we are, after all, two quite handsome gentlemen, with quite lovely pricks. I am sure there would be one if not several mouths or arses who would be amenable."

It was my turn to pause as a quick image pulsed in my head of my cock thrusting through one of the glorious holes into a warm and willing arse, or fucking the face or arse of a man seated in or bent over a reading room chair. Harry was right. I did need a good seeding. We both did.

I set aside the weight of Ponsonby House and decided we should, indeed, go adventuring together.

Which led us, not all that long after, to other-Harry peremptorily gesturing us closer to him. With a "why not?" glance at each other... this was, after all, an *adventure*... we complied.

We stood side by side, facing him, not placing him in shadow, but given the time of night and our positions we hid him from the view of anyone coming out of the Pig and Whistle.

He licked his lips as he had before, and as before my prick lurched in my trousers. He grinned as if he saw it, though it was not that big a lurch. "Decided whether you might want to try a bit of the rough, my lords? Somewhere private,

with your mouths on my cock, and your hands on my balls. Mayhap tonguing my hairy arse like Felcher likes to do? Get me spit wet, so I can fuck your mouths? Oil me, so I can fuck your arseholes?”

He licked his lips, with a wide tongue that made me wonder what it might be like lapping my arse, pressing against my hole, perhaps... pushing inside?

“Oh, yes, I think that’s what I’ll do. Fuck a coupla toffs, whose arses probably ain’t had a good rogering in ages.”

His voice was as mesmerizing as the stare of a mongoose, holding a cobra motionless.

“Eight guineas, my lords. I don’t lie.” He looked down, and our eyes dropped with his.

Both Harry and I gasped. Belatedly, at the images of our being fucked side by side, with his prick alternating between our holes; immediately, at what we saw.

While he talked he’d opened his pants, and drawers if he had them on, I couldn’t tell, and hauled out his cock and balls into the night air. His prick was not nearly so delicate as Harry’s, as it seemed to thrive on the cold, not retreating at all but advancing. Strongly.

I did not recall any of the gentlemanly portraits with a prick that long, that thick, with a large slit that wept clear liquid as other-Harry stroked from base to knob and then swiped up the long trail on his fingertip. He tauntingly held it out to Harry, as if expecting him to lean in and suck the finger down, and when he didn’t, other-Harry grinned and sucked the long, hairy finger himself. Not just the tip, but all the way down.

Nor did I recall ballocks of that size in any of the gentlemanly portraits.

“Well, my lords, what do you say? A private place with this,” and his fist wagged his prick at us, “or take your chances with the reading rooms?”

I should have been more shocked at a friend of Edward’s flaunting an enormous and leaking cock in public, where anyone might suddenly appear, but I was not. Nor was Harry. I looked at him, and as if sensing the look turned his head towards me.

“It’s an *adventure*,” he murmured.

Though I doubted, or rather, wasn’t certain, that the fact was this would be an adventure together would weigh in his decision, it was the deciding factor in

mine. Were we to go to the reading rooms we would separate and be gone on our discrete though not at all discreet adventures, and have to regale each other with the intimate details afterwards. With this adventure, though, we would not regale, but relive what we shared.

I looked at other-Harry and said, "Yes."

As he rapidly restored his prick to its hiding place, still mostly erect, I asked him where this private place might be. I nearly laughed when he said it was at the Emporium.

"How much?"

Other-Harry had impressive ballocks, perhaps even steel. He didn't flinch at all. "Just the usual admission fee, my lords. Five pounds. Each."

His voice didn't contain the slightest hint about who would be paying his admission fee, but we all knew it would not be him.

"And we enter as usual—" I cut myself off at the realization that in so very short a time frame, the Emporium had become a "usual" place for us.

"No, my lord. There's a special entrance that leads to where my room is."

"Of course there is a special entrance. And is it indeed, your room, or does it customarily rent by the hour?"

Harry glared at me, as there was indeed no call for snappishness on my part, but other-Harry took it in stride.

"My rooms, my lords. I live there. But if I, upon occasion, have a gentleman caller," and he looked rather roguishly at the pair of us, "or even two at once, the customary fees must still be paid. For all."

Other-Harry shrugged. "Of course, if the money is an issue..."

Harry snorted at the well-deserved snappishness back. I said it was not, and we all got into our respective parts of the carriage.

Harry

28 October 1882, 11:35 p.m.

37 Preston Street

London

The rooms were nicer than I expected. Two, with the smaller one for washing up and a commode. A large rumpled bed, with some clothes strewn on it. An armoire with one door somewhat sagging open. A potbelly stove whose fire had apparently died down, as he went directly to it, used a thick, much-folded rag to protect his hand, opened it, and with the efficiency of a man well used to doing it, fed pieces of wood from the neat stack next to it. Not that the room was breath-visible cold, but more warmth would be nice, as our activities were unlikely to be performed ensconced beneath several layers of blankets.

A table and two wooden chairs. A small couch, with another, slightly nicer chair beside it.

All in all, a not bad place in which to have an adventure.

If you weren't two toffs who clearly didn't know what the bloody hell to do next. Other than, once our visual inspection was complete, stare at nothing at all, particularly not each other. Nor the elephant in the room.

Perhaps we should find some words that would enable us to leave with a modicum of ill will left behind. We were, after all, in the Emporium. Or rather, the interconnected set of buildings which housed it. Still, if we stumbled around the halls long enough, someone would surely come to our aid and direct us to the reading rooms.

The reading rooms we knew and understood. The reading rooms were a venue for certain sex, as we were highly unlikely to be rejected if we opened a door left ajar, to ascertain the interest of the occupant. And even if we made no attempt at that, once in a reading room, seeding was assured, if by no means other than a helping hand that was attached to our own body, whilst examining portraits.

Other-Harry must have noticed our apprehension. Or rather, mine. I had every confidence in Reggie's ability to cover the apprehension, the wondering what the bloody hell we'd gotten ourselves into, with a calm exterior. Unruffled. Unruffleable.

Other-Harry's voice made me start. "Always fuck 'n' suck with your clothes on, do you?"

Well, yes.

If one was going to stick one's prick into a mouth or arse in a reading room, or through a glorious hole, one does not need to remove one's clothes except to the extent needed to provide access to the body part in use. But if three men were going to have sex in one room, on one bed, nakedness was apparently *de rigueur*.

And wasn't that just bloody awkward?

I don't know what Reggie was thinking when we agreed to this, but now that I thought about it I was not certain I had been thinking at all. Other than about that massive eight-guinea prick other-Harry had displayed, and what it might do, what it might feel like to taste and touch and smell. It simply never occurred to me that nakedness would be involved.

While men may often see other men's pricks in the most normal of settings, men simply were not naked in the presence of other men. If it does occur, as in a changing room, or daring to swim without a bathing costume when women were not around, it was only for the briefest of moments. Even with the socially required aversion of one's eyes, one can not always entirely avoid a brief glimpse of a back and arse as drawers were stepped into or out of. Perhaps a side view, with the man being viewed doing his damndest to keep prick and ballocks as modestly hidden as possible.

It would, now that I thought of it, likely be entirely different with a group of men made up of friends of Edward's. Far more flaunters, and if they were not flaunting, they would be uncaring, even blasé, about their naked state.

Which was precisely what this group—this group of three—consisted of: friends of Edward's.

Each of whom was about to see the other two not a little, not somewhat, not partially, not half, not mostly, but *entirely* naked. And knowing I was about to see all of Reggie and he, me, was somehow more... fraught... than the impending viewing of all the flesh attached to those eight guineas.

And thus my dilemma, and the undoubtedly greater, *vastly* greater dilemma for dear, stodgy Reggie.

To nudify, if that was a word, or not to nudify, was indeed the question, as the honest answer to other-Harry's question was that yes, we did fuck and suck with our clothes on.

A state we were not going to be permitted if this adventure was to continue. I looked to Reggie to see what his opinion was, and my mouth dropped open.

Staid, stodgy, stuffy, England-will-drown-beneath-the-waves-ere-propriety-be-damned Reggie was disrobing.

As in, getting naked.

While I had been in my “gone away” thoughts, all delicately dithering about moral concerns, Reggie was embracing an apparent tenet of Edwardianism: nakedness whenever possible, particularly if hard or heading towards hard pricks were involved.

Reggie's efficiency in all things, his proficiency in precise movements that accomplished the task at hand with the least amount of energy required, carried over into nudifying himself.

He stood between the couch and the chair beside it. The sequence thus far was easy to discern. First, the topcoat off, neatly folded, precisely placed on the chair. He had probably squared off the edges so there would be no awkward angles to create an odd appearance. Top hat on the couch. Scarf folded and draped over the back of the chair. Jacket folded atop the topcoat. Waistcoat ditto as the next layer. Tie untied; beside the scarf. Shirt unbuttoned and being peeled off over his head; to be followed by folding and layering.

It was at that point he noticed both my staring—no, my casual glance in his direction which he happened to catch—and my complete lack of progress in nudification of my person.

He smirked, the bloody bastard. “Changed your mind, Maus?”

And then quoted Burns with an abominable attempt at a Scots accent: “Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie, O, what a panic's in thy breastie!”

“I am not any of that. Nor am I panicked.”

“You're just not undressing.”

True. And Reggie had stopped as well to mock me. Which gave other-Harry the chance to come up to him—other-Harry the half-naked man with the huge, muscled chest covered in a carpet of dark, shaggy hair flecked with grey, and biceps beyond belief—and grab Reggie's still-trouser-covered arse.

Reggie jumped, just a little, but then stood still and let other-Harry's large hand squeeze and caress his cheeks. The other hand was squeezing and stroking Reggie's chest.

He smirked at me again. "I'm afraid you're going to need another driver, Maus. I'm sure Felcher will provide, but *this* driver will be too well-occupied—" And then he repeated the phrase with emphasis on the "well" to be certain I was following. "—to be driving you anywhere."

The next sentence inside his head was most assuredly, "Although he will, of course, be definitely driving me... to distraction and well beyond." He merely chose not to say it aloud.

I almost said I was simply admiring the view, but I kept my blurring mouth shut and said nothing at all. Instead, I pulled one of the chairs by the table over to the couch, and began emulating Reggie by getting rid of my clothes. Though my pile was more of a pile that would undoubtedly topple because of improper balance, compared to the precision of the tower of fabric Reggie had built.

Having a head start he was finished first, and no friend of Edward's could fault me for stopping my own nudifying and then *objectively*—and definitely not in a manner which would be utterly inappropriate between friends such as we—admiring the view.

It was not a spectacular view.

Giant-Reginald of our clock of armchair cocks might be called that. Some of the men I had seen in Felcher's sample books could, and should, be called that.

But... spectacularity wasn't quite... real. Even if you were fucking the spectacular, mouth or arse, or rubbing your prick on a ridged belly to spurt between his nipples, there would still, I was certain, be a sense of distance, and even as you seeded, a sense of separation, because you really couldn't quite believe you were actually getting to do that.

Reggie, though... Reggie was *real*.

The man lucky enough to have him... not merely seed with him, or on him, or in him, or the other way about... would be an extraordinarily lucky man.

I yanked my thoughts away from a "to have and to hold" that would never be for any of us, and pulled them back to where my thoughts had to belong just then: on the reality of Reggie.

Hairy, yes, a fact he sometimes lamented, but without ever having touched, I knew the hair on his chest, beneath his arms, around his prick, on his belly—that delightful mound that pushed out just a bit, like a small pillow you might rest your head on—even the hair on his arms and legs and back and arse would

be marvelously soft. Other-Harry was far more hairy per square inch of flesh, and it would be of the prickly variety, I was sure.

Reggie had no bulging biceps for which his shirts and coats had to be specially tailored, no tree-trunk thighs with similar necessities. Just ordinary muscles that did what he needed them to do, day in and day out.

His prick, though, was another matter. Despite his disparaging comments about it, Reggie's prick was, in my never humble opinion—indeed, I doubted I even knew how to form a humble opinion—quite marvelous. Darker-fleshed than the rest of him, with ropy, coiling veins, and a wide knob that was a deep purple when the skin was pulled back. He looked upon it as some gnarled and ugly thing that had its obvious uses, but wasn't something of which to be particularly proud. I looked on it as epitomizing the best of Reggie: powerful, forthright, no hiding it, or hiding who or what he was. Well, except for the one thing we both had to hide. But still... a real man.

Who said to me, "You're staring."

"I am."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"Because... Because..." He sputtered to a stop.

I looked at other-Harry, who had gotten most spectacularly naked himself. And our brief, out-in-the-cold viewing was not half so good as the indoors, in the warmth, more personal view of a definite eight-guinea cock. The most expensive cock of our personal views, thus far. "Isn't that what friends of Edward's do, other-Harry?"

He almost answered the question before the name I gave him caught up with him. "My name is Harry."

"Well, yes, I know," I began, as I also went on with the process of nudification, thereby demonstrating the fallacy of Reggie's oft-stated belief that I was incapable of performing multiple tasks at the same time, such as walking and talking.

Or walking and breathing. He had once recommended that when I wished to get from point A to point B without falling on my arse, or tripping over something that wasn't actually there, I should hold my breath, concentrate on safely getting to point A plus one, stop, breathe out, breathe in, hold it, repeat

for A plus two, and so on until I safely reached my destination. It was quite a marvelous thump I gave him, though it didn't stop him from laughing outrageously at what he wrongly perceived to be his witty words.

"But you see, other-Harry, Katt and I have another friend whose name is Harry. Really, an extraordinary person. Handsome, well-set-up, personable, unusually witty and well-spoken, altogether a remarkable man."

I naturally ignored the choked-back laughter trying to break free from Reggie.

"But as we, Katt and I, don't have sex with him, calling you Harry might well confuse us, and put us off our game, so to speak. And calling you 'horse,' even though there is certainly some accuracy there, would simply evoke images in our heads, or mine, at least, that would be quite off-putting as things proceed. However, if we call you other-Harry, though... perhaps you might prefer 'Harry Two?' ...no? ...well, then, by calling you other-Harry we know just who you are and can concentrate on your many marvelous attributes. Including the most highly valuable one."

Other-Harry seemed somewhat stunned by this spate of words, but then, I was used to that reaction to perfectly ordinary conversation on my part. Though this was not what one could precisely call ordinary. However, by the time I put a period to my peroration, I was naked.

And once again, we were just a couple of swells, albeit without clothes, who had no idea what to do next.

Other-Harry did.

He gestured me over so I stood facing Reggie. His right hand started stroking Reggie, and his left hand, me. It was naturally the courteous thing to do, especially as I was often referred to as Harry-the-ever-courteous, to use my right hand on other-Harry's buttocks, since Reggie's left was occupied with careful backing and forthing on the eight guineas.

After a few strokes to be sure we were hard and weeping, he let us go, lifted his arms up over his head, out and wide, and then down to our shoulders, pressing and releasing in a near massage, then rubbing circles on our backs, until his fingers were curled around our necks, and his thumbs were caressing just below our ears.

The gentleness stopped, however, and with not-surprising strength, given the size of his shoulders and upper arms, his hands pushed us towards each

other, causing a little stumble that in turn put our faces perilously near a position in which it might be possible to kiss.

Which was what other-Harry wanted. "Go on, gents, kiss. Fuck those mouths with yer tongues, just like yer do with a tight arse. So damned good to see a coupla toffs doin' that."

The pressure increased and our mouths might have met, but we both resisted and turned our heads, fortunately in the same direction, so that cheek briefly glided across cheek, instead of the other way, with noses and forehands probably bashing one another.

Our "No!" was sharp and simultaneous, and we both dropped our hands away from where we had been pleasuring other-Harry.

He let us loose and we jerked apart. Reggie looked stunned before covering it with a layer of silent stodgy affront. I babbled to distract.

"Uh, I, we, well, really, I just, uh, don't kiss. *We* don't kiss. Not each other. But I might, you know, with the right person, but, uh, Tom here, he's not the right..." Bloody hell that didn't come out the way I meant. "I mean, we're together, but just not that way. So..." I shifted my voice to as much sternness as my sagging prick would allow, "So... no kissing."

"So... no kissing," other-Harry said, mocking us both.

"Right," I replied.

"On the mouth."

"Right."

"Not him?"

Bloody hell, I saw where this was going, but couldn't derail it. Derail? Damn, but I have listened to entirely too much train talk from Reggie.

"No."

"Nor me, either?"

"No?" I firmed my tone, and repeated. "No. I'm sorry, but—"

"I'm not the right man, either?"

"Um, well, no. No offense, but... no."

"You have no opposition to kissing cocks?"

I hadn't ever kissed a cock that I could recall. Reggie hadn't, either, so far as I knew. But I wasn't averse to the idea. Far from it. Kissing a cock could certainly lead to other enjoyable cockical things.

"None. I quite like kissing cocks." Well, of course I lied. I had a great many Edwardian virginities yet to lose, and there was no need to divulge the existence of each and every one of them.

Still with his hands resting on our upper backs, just below our necks, he turned to look at Reggie.

"Are you as eager to kiss a cock as your friend is... ah, Tom, isn't it?"

Having delivered and picked up things from Reggie's home, there was no way he did not know our real names, so the taunt was uncalled for. But it also wasn't enough to make my prick go soft and get me to start putting my clothes on again. Nor did it have that effect on Reggie.

Reggie smiled at the two of us. "No one is ever quite so eager about *anything* as Maus, here, is. But though I'm ever in second place in the eagerness stakes... yes."

"Good." With that, his large hands shifted to our shoulders, thumbs pressing in front, fingers in back to a point of pain just short of forcing a fight back. Plus a downward push we would have had a great deal of difficulty in resisting, but then, we had no desire to do so.

I suspect experienced friends of Edward's do not bruise their knees, or one of them, when getting to the floor to use their mouths on another man's prick. I wondered briefly, as I extended my tongue and started licking my side of other-Harry's cock, whether knee-dropping was something I should practice in the privacy of my bedroom. At a time when I was certain neither Bentley nor the other servants would be close enough to hear any thumps or bangs or curses resulting from a mistake in speed or angle of fall.

It was... arousing to be so close to another man's face, separated only by the width of a fat prick. Staring into his eyes as he stared back, looking at each other's lips as they locked onto the hot flesh, straining your eyes to the point of pain looking sideways when one of you was at the knob and the other was at the root, and you were moving towards the middle, eyes following eyes, your tongue slurping the underside, but carefully just your side of the underside.

And then his hands on our heads held us in place, face to face as he fucked himself between us, thrusting forward until our cheeks—Reggie's left, my

right—were pressed into the musky hair at the base, and then pulling his hips backwards so his prick slowly slid between us, our lips *almost* meeting at noon and six on the circle of his shaft, but carefully *not*.

When he started to thrust again, sometimes he would swerve his hips the tiniest bit and part of his knob would slip inside a mouth and then pop out again, a little slimier, a little shinier, and then the outward push. And back again. And repeat and repeat. I could hear other-Harry's breath getting ragged, had no time to consciously wonder whether he was really going to get off this way... wanking with two mouths... just focusing on the stroking of the prick between us, the pressure on the back of our heads keeping us in just the place he wanted.

And then the bastard yanked his hips all the way back, his prick went with him, and we found our lips touching. We reacted with the same *get-away!* speed and fervor one does when one inadvertently places the tip of one's finger, or any unprotected flesh, on the metal of a stove or anything else as hot as that. Fortunately he let our heads go as he started to laugh at his not-funny-at-all joke, or I might have bashed his ballocks with a fist so I could move back.

I avoided Reggie's eyes. I did not want to know if he was horrified and disgusted by that brief moment of our lips touching; did not want him to see that I was... not fully so. And the not fully so was in its own way somewhat horrifying.

At least it was not a kiss.

One did not kiss one's best friend, with open mouth, with lips touching and breath mingling for perhaps the tick or the tock of the clock, but not both.

"Relax, gents, it were only a kiss," his big voice boomed down at us.

Not a kiss. Not, not, not! I wanted to say, but dared not. Too childish by far, too revealing by far.

"And now we've got the kissing out of the way," the bastard said, "I've a mind for having my prick in a hot, tight hole. And not the hole in a man's face. Which of you gets fucked first?"

Fucked first? He was going to seed twice before we left?

My face must have reflected my surprise at the idea. Yes, now that it was brought to my attention, the armchair clock of cocks had involved more than one seeding by some, perhaps many of the men there. The international set of giant-Reginald fuckers had all seeded more than once. But I'd never considered that multiplicity as a possibility having anything to do with me.

"You gents ain't never seeded more than once, close together?" other-Harry asked.

I looked at Reggie, who shrugged, and I responded, I thought, for both of us. "I, well, uh, no? It's never happened. Never had a reason to."

Other-Harry looked down on the two haunch-sitting naked toffs with clear amazement. "You never wanked when you were young, to see how many times you could seed in a single day, until your prick was so sore you didn't dare touch it for fear it would fall off?"

Another shared look between the two of us told him we had not. Although that look was not necessarily true for Reggie.

I knew that if I *had* thought of it, and tried it, and liked it, as I now thought I was certain I would have, I would have told Reggie, and somehow persuaded him to try the task as well. I suspect that if Reggie had thought of it, and done it, he would have been so embarrassed, despite any liking, and would have considered himself so very perverted that he would have been too ashamed to ever mention it, even to his best friend. Which meant he might have, he might not, and we were never going to know.

It had not truly occurred to me before, but I suspected Reggie and I have been friends of Edward's for a long, long time, maybe all our lives, though not very good friends of his, since we had no idea the friendship even existed. Having experienced the incredible seedings that were possible with one's *Edwardian* hand, as it were, I was momentarily suffused with regret that I had wasted all the years when I might have been seeding far more frequently, though, I was sure, never to the point of pain.

Other-Harry pulled me back from my gone away reverie over lost seedings, with another, "Well, gents?"

We promptly and with great graciousness offered each other up on the altar of sacrificial first fuckings.

Other-Harry just laughed. "Up, gents."

We stood. He looked back and forth between us, then down at pricks which had returned from whatever retreat the kissing shock had caused, to be prominent and interested once more.

"Up to me, then." He waved us close, started stroking our pricks again, and said, "I believe the shortest will be first."

Reggie-the-ever-bastard looked unbearably smug because as close as we were, it was clear he was longer than me.

So I misunderstood the standard of measurement and said, "Well, yes, it's true that Jerry isn't as tall as me."

Reggie's glare was only in his eyes; my utter innocence was displayed on all my face.

And then to my... well, not *everlasting*, but certainly long-lasting... delight, other-Harry said, "Man, it is."

The smug was gone, vanished as the day wipes away night.

As other-Harry turned to go to the bed, he switched hands so that his left was wrapped round Reggie's prick, tugging him along, his tail wagging behind him. I snickered softly at the image but not softly enough, as Reggie looked over his shoulder and mouthed the usual two words at me: "Lady Payback."

My wave back was superbly eloquent: "Yes, yes, so you say. I'm not at all concerned. Payback be damned, full fuck ahead."

It was that "full fuck ahead" that had me somewhat worried, as other-Harry positioned Reggie on the bed, on all fours, facing cross-wise, his feet and part of his legs off the edge. With a word or two of instruction and a brief slap on his arse, Harry spread his legs wider, which lowered his lower half.

Other-Harry moved to the nightstand, opened the drawers in sequence, removed cloths, a stoppered bottle of what had to be oil, and a black box he had to struggle with to get out. He almost set it on the bed to Reggie's right, but realized that would have hidden it from me, so with a grin, he put it beside Reggie's left knee.

Another arse-slap kept Reggie from doing more than twist around to look. Other-Harry flipped the lid and then angled it so we both could see. I could not prevent the gasp. Reggie did a better job of suppressing his, but I'd heard his stifled gasps—when he felt it was beneath his dignity to show shock—often enough to recognize them.

Inside there were four pricks! Or rather, not precisely pricks, but prick-shaped... objects. Three appeared to be of wood, the fourth of... marble? Differing sizes, from the length and thickness of a somewhat fat finger, to the marble one, which, by a quick, comparative glance, was nearly the size of other-Harry's prick. He caught the expression on my face as I looked at that one, and just smiled.

"You've never used them?" he asked, though his voice said, *Good Christ, of course these two naïve idiots haven't.*

We knew about fucking, though we'd never been fucked. We knew about felching, if felching was arse play. But it seemed arse play, as he used the words, was something different, and so our faces said.

"Well, if you're virgins, of course you haven't had a dildo up your arse."

A name for prick-like devices; an even greater expansion of our Edwardian education. I so liked to learn, especially as everything about other-Harry suggested that a dildo in one's arse was something quite extraordinary, though not, perhaps of the level of extraordinariness of having a cock inside you. Especially an *expensive* cock.

Why couldn't education at Eton and Oxford have been this much fun?

We were, it was obvious, going to experience both pretend-prick, and real-prick. And Reggie was Burton, the *leader* of our varied expeditions to the Mecca-equivalent for friends of Edward's, though I rather thought it wasn't so much a place as an amalgamation of experiences. A great many experiences.

It was, of course, only fitting that as Burton he enter first. Or, as here, *be* entered first. One's Intrepid Assistant was never at the forefront of experiencing, but always came second. As it were. So of course I blurted, "Burton," not loudly but quite clearly.

Other-Harry looked at me with a clear "what the bloody hell?" in his eyes.

Reggie understood. Dear, understanding Reggie. He looked down at the... dildos? yes, dildos... and looked up at me. "A good leader of an expedition," he said, "always makes sure his intrepid assistant shares in everything. Indeed, a really good leader does his best to ensure that Intrepid Assistant has a deeper, stronger experience to remember than the leader does."

While I could control the shudder at the emphasis on "deeper" and "stronger," there was no way I could prevent my prick from swelling, and spurting.

Smug Mr. Burton, who saw both swelling and spurting, favored me with a... what else? ...smug smile.

Other-Harry cut through our expedition-into-Edward's-land moment. "Well, sir? Which one first?"

First, of course, implied more. Perhaps all. First gave Reggie a dilemma. If he picked the smallest, the one we all knew was most likely to slide in, or

perhaps be forced into, his arse, with the least amount of difficulty, and more important than that, the least amount of pain, he might brand himself as a namby-pamby boy. Which, of course, he wasn't at all.

If he elected the braggart role, and picked the gleaming white marble largest-of-all, he would certainly guarantee himself pain he was unlikely to be able to control or hide.

"The second." And when other-Harry started to reach for the box, Reggie blurted, or as he would say, merely hurriedly said what he'd decided to say, "From the left. Not the right."

Other-Harry, who obviously knew what Reggie meant from the start, but had nevertheless moved his hand towards the second largest, picked up the second smallest. He caressed it in his hands where we both could see. Set it down on the bedclothes, unstoppered the bottle, poured some oil in his palm, set the bottle back, picked the dildo up, and swirled his hand up and down and around until it gleamed.

"Fingers first?"

Another dilemma. Namby-pamby, or smart, depending on your view, by saying yes, or braggart once more by saying no. Reggie chose smart. One could always count on Reggie choosing the smart.

Though what he had done for me at Ponsonby House was not smart of him, but oh so bloody brave. And I shoved those thoughts away.

I paid careful attention, as I knew that what Reggie experienced, I would experience, though undoubtedly my experience would be hampered by Reggie urging other-Harry to just bloody get on with it, and shove the marble dildo up my arse and not waste time.

"Fingers," Reggie firmly said.

Fingers it was, though only singular at first. And not a gentle finger. That hairy digit, with knuckles that looked as though they might be permanently swollen from fighting, rammed right up his arse. Reggie attempted to convert the "Ow!" of penetration into merely an "Ah," but was not truly successful. A few rapid strokes and other-Henry pulled out, dribbled a little more oil on his hand, placed second finger on top of first finger, and shoved both inside. I watched as he rammed them both in. And stroked rapidly again.

But this time he elicited first a small noise, then a whimper and finally a loud moan. "Got it!" said other-Harry.

“Got what?”

“The lump... or bump or bulge or button or knob... inside a man’s arse that makes getting fucked, whether with fingers or dildos or dick, really, really fine,” he said with a *Damn! you two really don’t know anything, do you, but I’m sure as hell going to enjoy teaching you* tone.

After several more two-finger thrusts and corresponding whines and whimpers, other-Harry pulled them both out. I was close by. Not close enough to interfere, but close enough to see everything. Reggie’s hole stayed open just a bit, before it closed following the finger removal.

The fingers were replaced with the second-smallest dildo, the sort of knob-appearing end pressed against Reggie’s entrance. At that moment, it did not look small at all. Especially in comparison to the determined tightness of the barrier.

Other-Harry looked at me, perhaps for permission, which my nod eagerly gave. He smacked Reggie’s left cheek... *hard*... with his left hand, the surprised, definite “Ow!” response immediately followed by a “*Jesus fucking Christ!*” howl when other-Harry shoved the whole dildo up inside, or to be more precise, *down* inside, because Reggie had let his front fall down towards the bed while raising his arse to the just preceding finger-fucking and bump-nudging.

Other-Harry pulled it nearly out, and shoved it back in again. “Damn! You Christ-fucking bastard!” Reggie yelled, clearly not caring if his words were heard through the length and breadth and depth of the Emporium.

But really, “*Christ* fucking?” What did that even mean? And the idea of fucking Christ was, well, just plain offensive, but then, obscenity was, itself, offensive, intended to be so, so perhaps it might be permissible, and not entirely a social solecism, to say “Christ fucking.” I mean, it was not as if Christ were actually here, and available for, perhaps amenable to, actual fucking, which, of course, He never would be, even if He were. Here, that is. Although...

“Maus!”

I blinked as I always did when forcibly pulled back from my awayness.

“Are you back?” Reggie asked between gasps and moans and whimpers. Arse fucking, even with a dildo, must be a delightful thing once you moved past all the bloody pain, what with the look on his face.

I nodded. Wondered, too, how he was able to even think of me, much less speak to me, given the speed with which other-Harry was using that dildo on his arse.

"You're staying," he started, but went on with, "Oh Christ, oh fuck, Jesus yes, right fucking there you bastard shit, don't stop!"

I agreed to stay, physically and mentally, though I doubt other-Harry knew what we meant, or cared. And then Reggie said, "God damn you all to hell, Harry. Will you just fucking stop and fucking fuck me?"

Other-Harry yanked the dildo out, dropped it on the bed, then with a twist and a lift, and a stopper-yank, he poured more oil on his prick, barely managed the re-stoppering and setting it down, swirled his prick to slick it up, seated it at the slightly gaping opening and shoved! Balls-deep. With a loud slap of flesh on flesh as he bottomed out.

Reggie called other-Harry "Harry." My name. He shouted it out as he begged to have *other*-Harry's prick fuck him.

He couldn't have been calling for me. Couldn't have believed... imagined! ...it was me. He couldn't! We had an agreement, an understanding, one of his bloody damned railroad-shipping-farming-foundry-milling fucking investment contracts! This was an adventure, only that and nothing more.

And I was jealous of other-Harry.

Jealousy is an absurd emotion. Especially for one as inconstant as I. Though my friendship with Reggie has, in truth, been the one constant in all my life. But still...

Even if the jealousy is not of the virulent kind, there was always a tinge of resentment of the one who has what you want, but do not have. One should permit it only when one has just cause.

Jealousy because someone else was wealthy, but you are not, though you have, in fact, done all within your powers, never slacking off, to achieve it, but failed instead? Just cause.

Jealousy, before you realized you were a friend of Edward's, that a friend found a woman to love and be loved by in return, married her, and joyfully began a family, while you never found such a one, though you never actively searched, either, nor put yourself in the way of opportunities to find her? Just cause? Only a little.

Jealousy, even though just a twinge, a spark, a tiny flicker, and only that and nothing more, because your best friend was being fucked for the first time, by an impressive prick wielded by a man who knew what he was doing, is not just cause at all.

Reggie and I were best friends, sharing adventures, as we've shared the other Harry, the hung Harry, tonight. Reggie would, I think, be entirely shocked if he were to know that despite having only fucked one man so far, I have wondered what it would be like to fuck him. Wondered whether, even if it was a good, or great, or even grand and glorious thing for us both, doing so might so alter our relationship that our friendship would founder, even sink.

I had no just cause, but still... I was jealous.

Jealous as other-Harry pounded Reggie's arse.

Jealous when other-Harry paused and suggested I could stop all the bloody noise by shoving my prick down Reggie's mouth and fucking his face.

Shocked at the shock on other-Harry's face when I babbled I couldn't, I wouldn't, because we didn't do... that.

Shocked at the shock on other-Harry's face, when he said, with a pause in his fucking, though he made sure his prick was all the way in, "You're just friends without benefits at all?"

Embarrassed for no reason at all, since Reggie and I had never agreed to anything more, to admit in a shaky voice, that friendship was the only benefit of the friendship we had. The only benefit I wanted, I didn't say. But it was.

Wasn't it?

Dismayed, for even less reason, when other-Harry resumed a far-more-vigorous-than-before fucking, and I heard, I thought I heard, him mutter, as he resumed his prick pounding, "Bloody arseholes."

In a daze and a haze of lust and other feelings I would not, dared not, recognize, I watched and wanked and wanked and watched, until Reggie roared his blasphemous roar of "I'm seeding, you Christ-fucking bastard!" and other-Harry shoved inside Reggie's arse with one last thrust so powerful I thought Reggie would just shoot across the bed, fly off it, and hit his head on the wall.

I seeded when they did, spraying the box of dildos, though not intentionally so.

And then we all held still. Very still. Other-Harry set the pace as he had for most of this adventure. He slowly slid his prick out of Reggie's arse, his

bruising grip on Reggie's waist still in place, and when he was out, he briefly admired the spurt of seed that popped from Reggie's hole, straightened up, and stepped back from the bed.

Reggie fell forward, collapsing face down on the bed, heedless of the enormous wet spot I had seen him make, as even though I couldn't really see his prick while I was so frantically wanking myself, I could see the glorious mess he made. Knowing him, I knew it was the first, perhaps the only time, he had allowed a wet spot, or rather any of the numerous wet spots of his own making in a single seeding where his prick was directed at his body, to touch him.

I had rested one knee on the bed whilst I wanked, so, lifting it away, I stood. I let go of my wilting prick.

We had all seeded. Remarkably well, was my assessment, self-serving though it was. So really, there was no need for anyone to attempt a second seeding, whether by wanking or in my arse. If Reggie seeded again, it wouldn't be in my mouth, as he would no more fuck my mouth whilst I was, in essence, being bred like a stallion atop a bloody mare in bloody heat, than I would his. And surely other-Harry, for all his size and bravado, was so worn down from the incredible seeding that Reggie's arse had supplied, that he would neither desire nor require another?

I was wrong.

He came over to me, patted me on the cheek, said, "Damn. Two fucking virgins in one fucking night."

I twisted and sat my arse down on the bed. Reggie didn't move, just laid there, breathing heavily.

"I need to piss," other-Harry said, in a sort of a kind of a hopeful tone.

I crushed whatever hopes he might have had. "Not bloody likely. Either of us."

He shrugged. He went round the bed, opened a drawer in the other nightstand, reached in, and then tossed a number of photographs onto the bed. "These might help you get ready quicker." He padded off to the other room.

More gentlemanly portraiture photographs? Possibly... perhaps probably... ones I had not already seen? Even though my prick was complaining it had absolutely no interest in standing tall in the foreseeable future, it perked its not-so-little knob up and took notice.

What could a newly fervent friend of Edward's do but examine them?

Though I hadn't really expected it, the activities the gentlemen were portraying were beginning to perform a Lazarus on my prick. But then I stopped and gasped and gaped and thoroughly, embarrassingly gawped at the next photograph. And the next.

"R..." I hastily converted the "R" of "Reggie" into an innocuous "er" and whispered, "Jerry."

He didn't respond. I looked over towards the door to the smaller room. It was shut, but I could still hear the piss... uh... *pissing*. I had no idea how long that would last. I whacked his left shoulder, a *whack!* being more firm than a thump, and indicating far more seriousness of intent.

He was not all that interested in doing anything other than contemplating with what few functioning brain cells he had, the marvelosity of his recent seeding, so he just opened one eye and "Hmmmphed!" at me.

"It's Bentley!" I whispered to him in an undoubtedly panicked tone.

He rose up immediately, bracing himself on his palms, frantically looking around the room that had no men in it other than the two of us. When he saw no Bentley, he glared at me and lowered himself to his forearms. "You fucking bastard," he whispered.

"No, no, you bloody arse, not here, but *here!*" And I shoved the two photographs at him. A masked black man sucking his own cock, a masked black... slave... being sucked on a swing by a white monk, fucking the white monk's obviously so very eager arse. The religious slut!

Reggie looked, and looked again, and looked bloody again, and then he shoved them back at me. "Not Bentley," he firmly said, though softly, so as not to call attention from other-Harry. "It's just some blackamoor with an enormous prick. Not Bentley."

"It is," I insisted.

Reggie sighed one of his endlessly patient, oh-he-of-little-understanding sighs. "Have you ever seen Bentley naked?"

I had not.

"Have you ever seen him stiff, naked or not?"

I had not.

“Have you ever seen him with a mask on sucking his own cock?”

I had not.

“Have you ever seen him with a mask and manacles fucking a monk?”

I had not.

“Then it’s not bloody him, you asshole!” he furiously whispered.

But it was. I knew it was.

I thought I knew it was.

But that became moot just then. Other-Harry walked back into the room, heading towards the bed, his massive prick jutting once again in front him, without the aid of the gentlemanly portraits that had, in reality, destroyed my stiffness.

Well, to borrow a Reggie saying, “Christ-fucking hell, I was fucked.”

Or about to be.

Reggie

29 October 1882, 12:03 a.m.

37 Preston Street

London

My arse hurt.

A great deal.

That was, of course, somewhat offset by the remembrance of what Harry would call the marvelosity of my recently finished seeding. And offset, too, by the fact that I could now consider myself a bona fide friend of Edward's, having been well relieved, indeed, extraordinarily well relieved, of my arse virginity, at the hands, or rather, the fingers and prick of other-Harry.

And now it was his turn. The real Harry's turn.

He was fucked! Well, about to be fucked.

And since it couldn't be my prick... and where the bloody hell had that ridiculous thought come from... other-Harry's was a nice substitute.

Or to be accurate, which I ever strove to be, other-Harry's prick was a superb substitute. Much longer, much thicker, not cursed with ropy veins, it was a splendid body part with no perceptible flaws, perfectly designed to perform its fucking function.

Harry looked nervous.

Ha!

He deserved to be.

And I was going to help him just as much... or as bloody little... as he helped me.

So I watched while he was offered the choice of dildos, and sneered inside when he decided he had to better me by picking the second largest dildo, instead of the second smallest, for the first... the first non-finger... invasion of his arsehole.

He had to make me gape, too... the Christ-fucking bastard, and wasn't that a marvelous piece of obscenity of my own invention... when he begged... he fucking *begged!* ...for *three* goddamned huge fucking fingers of other-Harry's hand. The consummate slut!

Other-Harry made me the same offer once he was fully inside Harry's hole, once he was fully plowing his arse with strokes of such speed and ferocity he barely kept the slit of his knob inside when he pulled back. "Fuck his mouth, you stupid fucker!" other-Harry almost shouted at me. "The bastard wants it."

I wanted it, too. My one chance, my only chance, to seed *with* Harry, to fucking seed *in* Harry, and I had to be fucking honorable and decline, since Harry's only interest in me was as a best friend, a friend of Edward's friend sharing several adventures, but never *together* adventures.

I watched and wanked while Harry moaned and whimpered and screamed and howled and whined and begged and shouted while other-Harry used his hole, hammered and hammered and hammered his hole, until they seeded with a simultaneity that took me over the precipice again as well.

And then we were done.

Truly done.

I think other-Harry might have thought otherwise, but I, for one, was unwilling to endure this any longer. And if necessary, I would rudely and crudely dress Harry, and drag his resisting arse out the door. Enough was fucking bloody enough.

"Get dressed, Maus," I managed, once other-Harry had pulled that massive, still somewhat bloody hard, the fucking bastard, prick out of Harry's gaping... fucking *gaping!* ...arsehole.

Enough.

Goddamnit! Bloody fucking enough!

I didn't goddamn Christ-fucking care I had seeded the dildos just as Harry had. I didn't fucking Christ-fucking care that Harry was exhausted and panting and entirely incoherent and incapable of rational thought.

"Maus!"

Perhaps he didn't hear me, or understand me, but I preferred to believe he was ignoring me. So I shouted, "Maus!" whilst leaning down next to his left ear. I had expected the upright jerk of his head and upper body and so avoided the head-smash that might have broken my nose.

He looked at me, sated from seeding, eyes glazed over, but I wasn't interested in letting him have his moment to appreciate, to recover.

"Get up."

"Huh?"

"Get dressed, Maus. We've had our fun, our glorious fun." Though I don't think my tone quite matched my words, and I found I didn't care much if other-Harry understood, perhaps was offended by, all the nuances or not.

"But..." Another whine, another "Reggie" to "er" conversion. "Can't we just..."

"No. We're done. Get your fucking arse, your fucked-out arse, up and get dressed."

Suiting my conduct to my orders, I stalked over to the neat pile I had made, and began donning my clothes. I dressed in silence, furious silence, without quite knowing, without quite *admitting*, the cause of the fury and the silence.

What I'd said and done was a risk. A serious risk. Other-Harry was bigger and stronger than either of us. In reality, he was bigger and stronger than both of us together. Multiplied by two. Perhaps three. Five? Had he taken offense at what I was doing, both of us, or more likely just me, could have been seriously hurt.

As it was, other-Harry stayed silent, stayed out of the way, as Harry forced himself out of the bed, still in his foggy, seeded-out state, staggered over to his clothes, and began to dress himself. I had to offer... had to force... my assistance when he tried to put his drawers on over his head.

Dressed, we moved towards the door, or rather, I moved, and pushed Harry in that direction. Once there, I looked back. Other-Harry, all arrogance, anger, pissed-offedness, perhaps even fury, was still naked, sprawled in an armchair in a way that *demand*ed you pay attention to, admire the glory of his body, of his prick and ballocks. He was holding a lit cigar, something I had not even smelled, and I was less than fond of any cigar smells, even ones I recognized Harry considered a cut above all the rest.

I reached inside my jacket, pulled out my wallet, removed two one hundred pound bills. I could not insult him by just dropping them on the floor and leaving. He had done nothing to deserve that. I told Harry to "stay!" much as I would a recalcitrant puppy, and propped him against the door. I walked back to other-Harry. Extended the notes to him.

He blew smoke in my face. And told me to "fuck off."

I could easily have done both, given my mood. But still, I was a Smythe, a lifelong friend of a Fotherby. We Smythes, we Fotherby-friends, did not conduct ourselves that way.

So I explained.

"Other-Harry. Oh, very well, I know your name is Harry, and I bloody well know you know who the 'Harry' is that you are 'other' to. But it's a game we have to play, and we played it well tonight. So this"—I gestured with the two pieces of paper that were intrinsically worth nothing at all, in the absence of Her Most Financial Majesty's promise of value—"is neither bribe nor insult."

I paused. "You did something for both of us that we both wanted, and needed. If we are not... *precisely*... shouting with joy over the outcome, that has nothing to do with you. You did all we could have expected of you, given our situation, and gave us far more than we deserved."

A good part of that was a lie, since, if you wanted to be perfectly honest, which I really didn't want to be just then, other-Harry had done nothing more than get hard at the prospect of fucking two virgin toff arses, and then followed through to fuck them both.

"I... we... don't want to insult you. You're not a whore, and we know that. But you gave us something tonight we hadn't known we wanted, and you provided it spectacularly well. So this is... nothing more than expression of thanks. A vail, if you will, for services rendered. But not... *payment* for services rendered."

Other-Harry was a minor enigma. I suspected that instead of dragging himself up by his bootstraps, and thus making sure he lost whatever accent he'd previously had, which would have condemned him to poverty for all his life, he had, instead, been of a better class, though not the nobility, and fallen low. And the gross accent he had set aside, or inadvertently lost, with us, was, instead, an accent he had adopted to protect himself in the milieu in which he had to live.

For a coach driver, for a man who posed for gentlemanly portraits as I was certain he did, two hundred pounds was vast wealth. He could not quite retire on it, but he could certainly live without ever having to work for a fair number of years, and even more, if he was particularly frugal. Not that I expected other-Harry to be the slightest bit frugal.

I stood, he sat, in silence, as he stared at the bills in my still-outstretched hand. It was entirely his decision. I could always find an investment for two hundred pounds that would return a nice profit over time, if he rejected our inordinate generosity. What was there for him to consider, especially at such length? Two hundred Christ-fucking, as it were, pounds for a pair of arse fuckings?

Generosity incarnate.

He said nothing, but waggled his fingers at me, to indicate he had no objections to being paid far more than the best whore who ever lived, male or female, for two virgin fucks. The finger waggling required that I step forward and put the bills into his hand. I was not so petty as to force him to come to me to get his money.

He took the bills and folded them as precisely as I would have, though in his nakedness he had nowhere to put them. I refrained from suggesting I might gleefully shove them up his arse.

Once the bills were folded, he nodded and said, "My lord."

A reminder that he knew.

Occasionally, when Arbuthnot and I were negotiating a deal of some sort, most often one of major import in terms of long-term value, I have found myself compelled to become something of a business behemoth to achieve my goals.

A behemoth is not a pretty, dainty creature. It is, by definition, a monster. I am not fond of being a monster, but when necessity demands, I rise to the occasion.

Such as this occasion.

I behemoth-loomed over him in his chair, for all that he outweighed me, out-heighted me, out-everythinged me in physical terms. "Two words, Harry, that you have just forgotten. Two words that won't pass your lips again with reference to either of us, since we are, in truth, nothing more than a pair of jumped-up merchants, trying to pass ourselves off as our betters, and you know that to be the truth and the whole truth and most definitely nothing more than all the truth. Or do you really not believe I could, if I wished, manipulate you into a life sentence at hard labor, or confinement to Bedlam until you actually go mad?"

Other-Harry shrank in his chair. Even his prick seemed desperate to hide.

"Sorry, sir. I misunderstood, sir. It won't happen again, sir."

I un-loomed my behemoth, and let it slide away. Just me, and only me, once more, I thanked him again, as if the behemoth had never happened.

He should be grateful that I hadn't called on the mastiff.

I opened the door and escorted... perhaps dragged... Harry out. I had dropped no mental or physical bread crumbs when we entered, not expecting other than that other-Harry, once we were all fucked out, would escort us back to the exit. Fuck it.

I would find our way out.

And I did.

I would get us home.

And I did.

Reggie

29 October 1882, 11:35 a.m.

121 Falmouth Lane

London

Servants were always grateful for time off. Beyond, of course, their customary half day each week.

Mine were, of course, used to the additional, undoubtedly pub-spent, time on the Wednesdays when I was “being visited by Marie.” As with the proverbial clockwork, they were given a few shillings each, and required to leave for a specified period of time. *And* they were still paid their daily wages.

They were shocked when I arrived early this morning, and told them they could simply lay the fires in all the rooms, do the cleaning—which should be minimal, considering how rarely the house was used, even before the recent changes began in our lives, Harry’s and mine—and depart until tomorrow.

They would, of course, be gossiping among themselves, as they knew very well the consequences of gossiping with anyone else, about this day off. I was, perhaps, going to engage in wild debauchery—in *daylight, no less!*—or perhaps even an orgy, which would leave the rooms not merely in disarray, but as if some unnatural disaster had occurred. I rather suspected they would be disappointed when they found nothing disturbed, disarrayed, wrecked or destroyed.

Well, perhaps the first two, but only mildly so.

I was not the type of employer, the type of nobleman, who provided his servants with excitement. They would have to manage that for themselves... or not.

The excitement I planned to add to my own life today was, unfortunately, not of a type I could share with Harry. Consequently, I felt guilty about what I had already done, what I was about to do, but not, of course, guilty enough to stop.

The “had done” part was giving the servants the day off and then visiting the Emporium.

The guilt arose because I was visiting the Emporium alone. We’d made a pact, Harry and I, to do this whole Mecca-Burton, Edwardian-exploration thing

together, and it felt as if I were violating that agreement by going off on my own. I had not realized, however, just how addictive my collection of gentlemanly portraits was; all the more so, perhaps, because I could not peruse them whenever I had the urge to do so. Which was not really surprisingly frequent.

I berated myself en route, pointing out that for years I had wanked with never a concern about Harry, nor the slightest twinge of guilt because Harry was not around to wank with me. Our pact did not include terms that prohibited personal wanking, nor any that required all other explorations of the delights and debaucheries, even depravities, of the world of friends of Edward's, be only joint.

I arrived too early for the reading rooms to be open, I was informed by the current Reginald-the-doorkeeper, with appropriate facial expressions evidencing his deep sorrow at having to supply me with such devastating news. As men's pricks tend to want what they want when they want it, which was always *immediately*, if not sooner—a tendency undoubtedly heightened by being a friend of Edward's, from my limited observations of the breed—had I arrived with the intent to engage in as much reading as I could bear in as short a time as possible, he might well have been right.

I opened my mouth to explain the shocking truth that I was not then interested in reading, but he was beforehand, going on to explain that the rooms were being readied and would surely be available at the regular opening time of noon. Perhaps I would care to wait in the display room?

"Readied" meant, I was sure, nothing more than that used cloths were being removed for disposal or cleaning and fresh ones set out, table drawers were being replenished with vials of oil, spills of various fluids on furnishings and floors were being ignored if sufficiently dried, and if not, were given a quick swipe and wipe with the used cotton squares, but without the effort that would have been required for a thorough cleansing.

Cleanliness may be next to godliness, or at least somewhere in the same general vicinity, but as I have learned in our Emporium expeditions, it has nothing whatsoever to do with sex. Or at least, not sex in a quasi-public location such as the reading rooms, or the areas used for private showings. The signs left behind by the men who were there before us, or as Harry would likely say, the men who have *come* and gone before us, the smells of the men themselves, body odors and covering colognes, the varying scents of seed, the stickiness of floors and occasionally walls and chairs, the generally dim lighting, enhance the experience.

When his explanation was done and his offer made, I simply said, "I thank you for that most courteous offer, but as I am here with the intent to acquire possession of several examples of unusually fine work in the art of gentlemanly portraiture. Would you..."

My voice trailed off as I recognized the expression a nobleman so often sees when dealing with the lower classes: incomprehension. I shifted to words of fewer syllables, and briefly wondered whether I would ever encounter a man for whom only words of less than one syllable would suffice. "I wish to buy pictures from Mr. Felcher."

Dawn thundered across his face like that herd of American buffalo which stopped our train for an inordinately long time. And a "Well, why didn't you just say so?" expression as well.

Current-Reginald turned, walked a few steps and thumped his fist on one of the inner doors. "Oy! Reggie! Got a *customer* here!"

The door swung inward. "Well, tell him the reading rooms aren't ready yet," an unseen man said.

"For pictures, Reggie."

"Oh." The door swung wider and another Reginald-I-presume stepped through. My presumption was correct. It was the blond from our first visit, the eminently fuckable Reginald-John-Reginald, as Harry made sure I knew quite well. He was already speaking as he entered.

"I'm sorry, but we're not yet open for..." He clearly recognized me. "You, sir."

"Me, sir."

He grinned quite widely in a way that said he'd heard of Harry's "you, sir; who, sir; me, sir" badinage with giant-Reginald. I held up my hand to forestall any more of that. "We won't go there. Now, if Mr. Felcher is on the premises, perhaps you might enquire if an exception can be made to your customary business hours?"

He nodded. "Of course, sir. May I tell him who is asking?"

"Tom."

His face plainly provided me with three messages, one following the other rapidly. First, more than a few men called themselves "Tom" while patronizing the Emporium, with an infinitely small chance that any were being truthful.

Much like me. Second, he now recalled the names I had devised the day Harry and I were introduced to reading at the Emporium. Third, coupled with his failure to turn and leave to speak with Felcher, he was waiting for a last name.

Thankfully my customary stodgy, stolid face hid the near-frantic mental review of our prior conversations with Felcher and the various Reginalds, to discern whether either Harry or I had supplied a surname for either of us. We had not. What, then, should I...

Ah.

"Katt." Blond Reginald blinked slowly. "With a 'K,' and a second 't.'"

He absorbed the information, and asked, "And will your friend be joining you, sir?"

"Mr. Maus, you mean?"

That was worth two more blinks. And a spelling-out.

I waved my hand dismissively. "Yes, yes, I had the same feeling when Jerry and I first met, quite some years ago. Yet an enduring friendship arose between two such different species. A *most* enduring friendship. Most."

The glint of a grin in his eyes, humor he could not allow to reach his full face or to affect his lips by the slightest twitch, gave me another three messages. First, he recalled the conversation in which our names were first given. Second, he didn't for a moment believe I was being truthful about any of the names. And third, he understood my message.

Though why was I still pissing on someone's legs, anyone's legs, to establish the territory of "Harry's *mine!*" when the confrontation with Crenshaw and the aftermath established that he was not? Or rather, no more mine than any man might say of his best friend.

"I will go ask Mr. Felcher, Mr., ah, Katt. If you will wait, it shouldn't take long."

He was nearly into the next room, when I called out, "Oh, Reginald, please tell Mr. Felcher how *deeply* I enjoyed, ah... *meeting* him."

Reginald's gait twitched, and he choked a little before agreeing to do so.

I had not had to wait long. The prospect of pounds in hand was, as I had expected, more than sufficient to gain Mr. Felcher's attention and bring him round, all eager to serve me. And service me, I thought, without *too* much o'erweening ego, if I suggested it.

Indeed, his opening words were, "And how may I serve you, Mr. Katt?"

Ah, the messages that were being conveyed by faces. This one confirmed that Felcher's double entendre was intentional. Which was pointedly emphasized by his less-than-subtle glance at my crotch. Reginald-John-Reginald, having served his conveyor-of-messages purpose, was not present. I was, true, slightly plumped, but what friend of Edward's would not be, when contemplating what I had been contemplating since last night. Even with all the activity that should have put paid to any such contemplation for at least a day.

"I should like to purchase some additional pictures."

Facial message: *So soon? Jaded so fast? How very profitable this man will be for me.*

Vocal message: "I shall be delighted to bring you the latest book of samples, my... Mr. Katt."

I ignored the little jab reminding me of his knowledge of true names, since we were private.

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Felcher. I know the pictures I want."

He offered me the wrinkled brow of a merchant doing his best to provide what the customer wants, despite the vast hindrances being offered by that customer. It was quite good. He must have had to use it frequently to have perfected it.

"Ah, respectfully, sir, we can find the pictures you wish to acquire far more rapidly from the number associated with each one, than a verbal description."

"I suspect these do not have assigned numbers."

"I'm not sure I understand, sir." Oh, he was beginning to understand quite well. He was just not yet ready to acknowledge that understanding. "All of the images of gentlemanly portraiture available for sale have a number."

Even in supposed complete privacy we kept up the pretense about what the pictures really were. I could only assume that he insisted that everyone do so at all times, himself included, so that the risk of admitting what they actually were, at an entirely inappropriate, perhaps even legally fraught, moment was reduced.

"Even the sets for private sale?"

He became very still at that. He acquired a shuttered look, much like shutters being closed due to the advent of a storm, presenting a sturdy barrier to

any ingress. He did not wish me to know what he was thinking, and he was good enough at shuttering that I did not. But there were only a few logical lines of thought leading up to a response, and he had to be sorting rapidly through them. I immediately decided not to waste any more time.

"Please don't plead ignorance, Mr. Felcher, or offer me a quite believable look of incomprehension, or even insult my intelligence with a denial."

He shrugged. "Very well. Then how did you know about the private sales?"

Before answering, I pointedly looked at the chairs in the room. Not vastly comfortable looking, either of them, but enough for a conversation and more so than standing. I waited for a merchant's polite offer of comfort for the customer while negotiating a sale.

I waited in vain for all of ten seconds and then simply sat. I stared up at him, and let the absence of expression on my face convey to him that conversing was conditional upon sitting.

He sat.

I resumed. "The existence of sets of photographs for private sale is only logical."

"A logic apparently not shared by the vast majority of those who purchase my wares. They don't come barging in before hours, making inquiries."

"Barging?"

"Very well. Most politely asking leave to be admitted into these august premises." He affected a tiny smile, which might have been genuine. Or at least ten percent so.

"May I be direct, Mr. Felcher?"

"Can I prevent you, Mr. Katt?" That was accompanied by at least a thirty-percent-authentic smile.

"Probably not. You see, your sample books offer a limited range of sexual photographs of men, though a fairly wide variety of, ah, models. There are those who will purchase only partially naked men, no pricks and balls on display, probably hoping that if they are discovered they can laugh it off as an amusement, nothing illegal at all. Others will purchase naked men without erections, so they can claim artistry and not obscenity. The remainder of your customers are willing to accept the risks of being caught with photographs of naked erections, whether one or several men, or of men fucking or sucking, in pairs or groups, or groups of pairs. And that's all the samples show."

He didn't acknowledge the analysis other than to say, "Your point?"

"My point is that I noticed the absence of something in those books, and I did peruse them most thoroughly before making my portraiture purchasing decision. There was not a single photograph of men using their tongues on other men's arses, much less photographs of the seed being sucked out of a well-fucked arse, and then a full mouth displayed before being swallowed. As a number of us experienced, well, at least by observation, not all that long ago, felching is a most arousing thing to watch, just as arousing to do given the state of your prick throughout, and though I am not entirely certain, nearly as arousing to have it done to your own arse. Your well-fucked arse, of course, thereby enhancing your fucking enjoyment."

I would have gone on but he interrupted me with a point of order. "What did you just call it?"

I naturally did not resist the urge. "Call what?"

Facial message: *You bloody well know what I mean.*

Vocal message: "What I did to giant-Reginald's arse." He raised a hand as I opened my mouth, to forestall what he suspected, probably correctly, my response might be. "And please, sir, if we are ever to get to your point, omit any further wisecrackery."

Americans do not offer much to the broader culture of English-speaking nations, even if one grants they truly fall within the appellation of having culture, but upon occasion they do offer the rest of us interesting new words and phrases. That bit of slang had been all the rage amongst the ton a few years back, brought on by a spate of visitors from the American South with recently acquired wealth. This particular contribution to the Empire, besides the vast sums transferred by various means from their purses to those of Britons all, had apparently spread down and out into society.

I said, "Felching, sir. We didn't know if the activity had a name, and of course if it does have a proper name, we won't call it that any more. At least not in public. Sticking your tongue in a man's arse and sucking out seed was something entirely new to us, one of those heaven, earth, philosophy things, and it just seemed like it should have a name, and so we decided it should be called felching."

Our talk was already taking him into avenues he had not expected, but this one was instead a wind that blew him far off course. But he regained control and brought the ship about. "Felching. Hmm. Felching."

He affected a look of consideration, to hide the look of pleasure that was trying to escape. "You are right, it had no name that I know of. It is just something... some of us do, enjoying both the doing and having it done. Felching, you say?"

"We considered 'felchering' but that didn't sound quite right."

He considered that, before nodding. "Yes, yes. The wrong word, indeed." He paused. "But it would be seen as somewhat egotistical were I to promote the use of the word."

"As Mr. Maus and I will hardly have an opportunity to drop it into casual conversation in our social sphere, I am reasonably sure your ego will survive any promotional efforts. But still, you do have felching images, do you not?"

He acknowledged there might be a few, with a brief remark about the difficulties of catching the right moments in a single session.

"Well, then, now you have a name for that set. 'Mr. Felcher's Fine Felching Photography.'"

He affected a polite demurrer, with some degree of effect.

"I don't suppose, sir, that that collection includes any of you engaging in that activity? Your tongue, as I'm sure you are aware, is most long and agile."

My tone conveyed my expectation of his gratified and horrified, "Alas, no," reply.

Which brought us back to the issue of private sales. And so he reminded me.

"Sir, I simply reasoned that if you omitted photographs of felching from your usual sample books, even though it was prick arousing to a substantial number of us at the last showing, though not all, it was for a good reason. Such as being able to increase sales of your wares, by appealing to the desires of smaller groups of men who will believe themselves to be special, because you offered something only to them. Engaging to satisfy their *elite* perversion, if you will, amongst friends of Edward's. I also decided there were undoubtedly a variety, a wide or even vast variety, of other heaven, earth, philosophy things that friends of Edward's might do to or with each other that would be inspiration to wanking, which would generate even more income. And all through discreetly offered sets in private sales."

I had, of course, planned out this remarkable, if I did say so myself, series of logical lies, when the reality was that I simply hoped to avoid divulging that

during a night of learning to get well fucked by an eight-guinea cock, the cock's owner had let slip the private nature of some parts of his personal Emporium collection.

"Very well, then, Mr. Katt, tell me what kind of a set you imagine I might have for private sale, and if you are correct that such a set exists, you shall have it. However, only complete sets are available, and no discounts are possible."

"A set with a black man endowed with a most remarkable prick, truly impressive in both length and girth, and a white man."

He looked nearly disappointed. "My dear sir, you apparently did not peruse the sample books as well as you thought. You could have found those images there."

"I saw them, Mr. Felcher, but they are not... esoteric enough for my imagination."

"Let us call a spade a spade, sir, when what you mean is 'perverted enough.' So, given that black and white sex of any sort is inherently perverted to most minds, much less between two men, what additional perversion had you *logically* in mind?"

"One of them a slave, and one of them a priest... no, a monk. I leave you to discern which color belongs to which."

Mr. Felcher became quite still then.

The last Frost Fair on the Thames, the one with an elephant on the ice, was nearly seventy years past, so I had never personally experienced that degree of cold. I was certain, though, that England that year could not have been as cold as this room in the Emporium was at just that moment.

"Indeed, sir. You have a quite... remarkable imagination."

I waved away what was not at all intended to be a compliment.

"And what, Mr. Katt, do you... imagine... that these two might be doing in these photographs?"

My response involved a planned shrug of the disclaiming variety. "Whatever esoteric—"

"Perverted."

I acquiesced. "—perverted activities you might have been inspired to have them perform."

“And you have never seen such a set?”

The equally planned denial came readily to my lying lips. “How could I? I reasoned from the lack of felching photos that private sales existed. I reasoned there would be others which would include, yes, yes, *perversions*, about which I had no concept. And so, I decided to come to you, and share with you, as one perverted man of the Edwardian world to another, a personal perversion of my very own, in the hope that you might satisfy it.”

“And provide you with hours of wanking, and copious seedings.”

“Many hours, and indeed, I expect to expel quite copious amounts of seed.”

His expression briefly looked as if he recalled the precise amount of seed I’d expelled in his arse, and then on his face and in his hair at what Harry and I would forever call our felching visit to the Emporium.

I remained silent. Not pushing him, waiting for him to agree that such a set existed and that I could buy it. And if he did not admit its existence, I knew I would simply disclose that I knew otherwise, and describe the single image I had seen. It was incomprehensible that there would not be a set of those photographs, instead of just one.

I did not, of course, *need* this set. I had made good use of my previous selections, and not even all of them.

But I *wanted* this set. I wanted to use them at my leisure, not look at them and become instantly erect as I had done immediately following my fucking and my own seeding, and then have to shift my focus away... true, most *enjoyably* away... from a close examination of each one.

I did not, of course, agree with Harry’s certainty that the masked man in both sets was Bentley. Even Harry admitted he had never seen Bentley naked, much less erect, much less fucking a monk or his own mouth. But still, if it *was* Bentley...

If a cat may look at a king, a man may look at a manservant—never his own, of course, and the thought of looking at Bartlett in that way was horrifying—with lust in his heart and in his stiff prick as well. He may even, perhaps, just perhaps, look at certain images and imagine, imagine only, in the privacy of his rooms, well-oiled prick in hand, perhaps even a dildo in his arse now that it was no longer virgin, that he was a white monk. Using... being used by... a magnificent black slave with a magnificent body and more than magnificent prick.

There was nothing wrong with that bit of imagination. I wanted that. I was determined to have it.

Fortunately, I did not have to make any disclosures that would have led Felcher to other-Harry's big mouth. A *delightful* big mouth it would be, for whatever man's prick he was swallowing, or whoever's arse he was devouring prior to fucking it. I wondered if the latter had a name, but decided my sex-naming days were over, even if it did not.

It was Felcher's turn to acquiesce. He did so with no further arguing, though he decided he should also inflict some pain on me, anyway. "Very well. Five hundred."

Even my staid, stodgy nature, so well controlled I have on occasion had my expression compared to carved granite when I should have been expressing surprise or shock or something similar, was not able to prevent a gasp at that. I did manage to quickly cut it off so it was only a small gasp.

Felcher heard it, though, and smirked. "Perhaps your perversion is beyond your means, sir?"

"I..." I almost asked him whether he might consider a lower price, as I loathe the idea of handing over money merely because someone states a specific amount as an item's worth, without at least the effort—usually successful—of arguing for a change. I recalled his "no negotiation" in time, so if not as smoothly as I would have preferred, I finished with, "—of course have sufficient funds with me, having fully expected to pay an inflated price."

I gave him the best unrehearsed, not-for-Harry, smile I could muster at that moment. "I admit I did not expect quite that much inflation, but you did, after all, say 'no negotiation,' did you not?" I allowed just a hint of "I would, of course, be most agreeable to enter into negotiations if you felt so inclined, sir" to be heard. But not enough so that I could be accused of *attempting* to negotiate and thereby undoubtedly invalidate the agreement we had just reached.

He heard, and though I would not have thought it possible, his smirk grew larger. "Precisely so."

"Well, then."

"Well, then, indeed." He paused, allowing me to see him considering asking for proof that I actually had that much money with me, but he wisely decided he would not so insult me. I was not so addicted to the perversions of the

Emporium, its people and its wares, that I could not give it up, give *them* up, at any time, and just walk away. An insult of that magnitude would have made me do so.

I was inordinately glad that he decided to just say, "I shall be back with your collection in a moment." He stood and left.

It was naturally far more than a mere moment before he returned, with a shallow, wrapped box in his hand. Of course, I let him see me consider asking him for proof that what I was about to pay for was actually in the box, but then reject that course. We exchanged value for value, and then I left.

There was, of course, the temptation to rush immediately to the emptiness of Falmouth Lane and wank furiously, perhaps without even disrobing, just spewing my seed in the entrance hall, letting it spatter on the shredded paper I had ripped off the package and let fall where it might. I chose, however, to prove... No. I chose to confirm that I was not addicted. "Proof" would have meant I was uncertain and needed the acts to demonstrate a particular thing was true and not another. Confirmation, however, merely meant... reaffirming an existing, known fact.

An addict would have chosen, would have had no choice but to choose, the franticness of that rush. Those of us who are in control of ourselves and our urges take the time in a tavern for a leisurely luncheon. That I defined "leisurely" as half a sandwich, and half a mug of ale, accomplished in under ten minutes, was no one's business but my own. I am, after all, master of my own definitions.

And having demonstrated my mastery, here I was, in my empty house, naked, aching hard. My hands were shaking as I unwrapped the package, dropped the paper and string beside the bed, and then spread the ten pictures out. Ten? I only fleetingly wondered, not really caring at all, whether other-Harry had this full set, and what *he* had paid for it, which was certainly not five fucking hundred pounds.

I set them out carefully on the sheet, the bedcovers having been tossed in disarray to the floor, in the order in which they were wrapped. It turned out the ones I had seen before were part of the odd-numbered images in the sequence. I sat back on my haunches, prick in my fist, leaking profusely, and examined each photograph most, most carefully. I did so while being sure that while I wanked, I did not make a mistake and come across any of them. I did not care for the idea of paying full price—*more* than full price—for a complete second

set merely because I could not fully control my own seed spraying and smeared one of them to uselessness.

One: the slave was tall, slender, muscular, with a marvelously ridged abdomen. Large balls that fell far below where you might expect them to be. Thick hair in his pits, trimmed hair around the base of his magnificent, the only word that could possibly describe it, cock. Smooth elsewhere. And a supple mask that covered his hair and ears and nose and cheeks, leaving his large, thick lips and wide mouth, and a somewhat assertive, you might almost say rugged, chin visible.

There were manacles on each wrist, on each ankle, and long chains connecting right to right, and left to left.

It was supposed to be some outdoor scene, though it made no objective sense. But then, the images that get men hard, and leaking and wanking and seeding do not have to make any kind of sense at all, so long as they accomplish that goal for the man looking. The slave's arse was on a child's swing, his legs spread and braced as if, were there not a white monk kneeling between those very legs, with his mouth around the bell end of the slave's prick, his fingers curling so very white against the shaft, he might shove off backward to gain the air. And then, on the forward motion, his legs outstretched and toes pointed, the whole world could see that fine, upstanding, Tower of London tall, prick. There was straw or hay all around. And oddly enough, a bloody pillar to the left of the swing.

I doubted that any monastery, with or without fields, had swings, or hay in close relationship to a pillar. But then, sense was not required. The viewer could block out all the illogicalities and substitute his own reality.

Two: It was the monk's turn on the swing, though he was not the one holding it up and back. His robe was shoved up, his prick and balls and naked legs entirely visible. Those legs were spread up and wide, the slave's fingers visibly curling tightly into the monk's thighs, just below his knees. It was clear from the strain in the slave's back and the bulge of his muscles, that it was his hands which were holding the monk and swing off the ground. All the while the slave's mouth devoured not all of the monk's gleaming white prick, but just enough for the viewer to see that most of it was in his mouth.

Three: The monk was seated on a stool in the damned hay, his robe again pulled and pushed up and away so that his prick and ballocks could be clearly seen, as well as his slightly plump legs. I wondered briefly why they—the

“they” who set up these photographs and took the pictures—simply didn’t dispense with all the damned fabric. But then realized that would just leave a probably somewhat plump, overall, young white man having sex with a well-endowed black man. The manacles would be meaningless, and the plain nakedness would destroy the perverted actual and mental images of a celibate monk breaking his holy vows in a most egregious manner.

The black slave was seated in the hay, the monk’s splayed legs, with still-sandaled feet on either side. The monk’s prick was five inches, perhaps six, but no more, slender, sticking straight out. The slave’s right hand caressed the front of the monk’s left leg, below the knee. The monk’s hand curled around the back of the slave’s neck, clearly about to push his head forward, so that the black fingers would lift from just behind the knob, and the black man’s mouth would open to engulf the religious cock.

Four: It was the monk’s turn to kneel before the stool-seated slave, his body entirely covered, but then, when the photographic and wanking focus was on black body and enormous black prick, the pale white flesh was irrelevant. The wide knob of the slave’s prick was inside the monk’s mouth, his fingers coiled around the base of the cock, with a great deal of black flesh between white fingers and white lips. The slave’s hand was curled around the monk’s neck, but not with a gentle caress, the gentle “suggestion” of “swallow my prick now.” You could see in the way the fingers pressed that the artist had captured the instant before the slave forced the monk’s head down, even as he thrust his hips up, so that his sword-prick would impale itself in the sheath of the monk’s mouth and throat.

Five: The swing was gone. The stool was gone. Even the pillar was gone. Now there was a bench, wide enough to kneel on, there in the hay. And kneel the monk did, on all fours, robes tossed up over his back, his legs spread just to the edges of the bench. And yes, the monk had a deliciously plump arse. The kind any friend of Edward’s would be most delighted to sink his prick into. Repeatedly. Which was precisely what the slave was doing. Half of his prick was buried in what had to be a hot hole. But whether it was tight was open to question.

Given the lack of pain on the monk’s face, indeed, the little smile that curved his lips, that massive prick had been up his hole before. Indeed, you might even imagine, if you wanted to flesh out the fantasy even more, that the young monk’s holes, both above and below, had been used frequently in his monastery, from the abbot on down to the least of his brethren. Perhaps he had

even serviced the few servants they might have. Or guests who stayed a night or two, to accept the monastery's vow of hospitality in a probably unexpected manner. Except for those who had visited and stayed before, and returned for the simple reason of the young monk's holes. Damn, what a delightfully perverted mind I had.

Six: The slave's turn to be fucked on the bench. A not altogether successful image, given the difficulties of ensuring that such a small prick would be at least visible in part, with some of the shaft in shining contrast to the black arse and thighs. The position required his robes to be thrust aside in a most unconvincing way. While the concept of that small white prick pounding the dark slave arse was an intriguing one, in my mind he did not last more than a few strokes, seeding far too soon. It was not an image I would select for my own seeding, then or in the future.

Seven: The slave was still on the bench, only this time he was on his back. The monk, his robes piled high on his back, squatted over the slave's enormous prick, his pale balls hanging surprisingly low. The slave's manacled right hand was guiding that massive flesh spear into the monk's undoubtedly eager, undoubtedly experienced hole. A viewer would be certain that in the next moment, the monk would slide down, seating that prick inside himself in one fast stroke, and then his talented thighs, and knees and calves, plumpish though they are, would make him rapidly rise and fall on the thick cock inside him, doing all the work, glad to do all the work, until he finally seeded the inside of his own robes, and the slave prick burst into glorious seeding far, far inside him.

Eight: Mr. Felcher, or the photographer, or whoever made the artistic decisions, apparently realized that photo number seven in reverse would simply not work. With a better-endowed white man to act as monk, perhaps, but not with this man. Instead, it was a variation of number five. This time, however, only the knob end of that long thick prick was in the monk's arse. This time, the slave managed to have his hand clamped around the monk's mouth, though the chain made it necessary to pull the monk's head backwards in an obviously painful angle. The pain on his face seemed real, as well, not merely fine acting. I could imagine the slave's prick having punched in deep and hard. Several times. A hurting kind of hard, as if the slave resented his slavery, and the monk's freedom, and wanted to punish the monk as best he might for what the slave did not have. Oh, yes, a most excellent artistic decision. My weeping, begging-to-see prick applauded.

Nine: The slave was again on his back on the bench. This time, however, the young white monk was squatting above him in a different way, his soft prick and balls visibly dangling, his eyes cast heavenward as if to ask whether God had enjoyed watching his ravishment. The slave was clearly felching! Sucking out however many explosions of seed were spewed inside the monk's arse during the photography sessions, as I could not imagine it had all been accomplished in one. In my imagination, however, the monk had been fucked by the slave at least three times, perhaps four, before the seed-sucking began. The monk's right hand was caressing the head of the slave's still-rampant cock.

Ten: Dear God. The monk was naked! Except for the cap that created the effect of a tonsure, and his sandals. He was on his back with his robe spread out beneath him to protect him from the hay. His legs were once again up and spread, held by the slave's strong hands. This time, that powerful dark shaft was just an inch away from being fully buried in the monk's arse. This time, the monk's head was thrown back, his mouth gaping, a look of utterly believable, utterly *true*, ecstasy on his face. The viewer knew, knew with absolute certainty, that the slave was going to pull out just one more time and then shove back in with all the fury, all the ferocity of which he was capable, forcing the monk's seed to burst up and outward one last time, while the slave himself let loose his biggest load of that long fucking day, deep in the sacred bowels of the perverted, deviant monk.

I was gasping by this time, my control hanging by the veriest thread, sitting there on my haunches and wanking at increasing speed, looking from one to another to another, uncertain which would be the one I needed, pushing them out of sequence, until... yes! That was the one.

I lifted, leaned forward, bracing my left hand on the mattress, my right wanking, on "all threes" as the saying might be, stroking faster, I was sure, than I had ever wanked before, enough to make my prick hurt even more than it did with its desire to explode. I focused, I fantasized, I imagined that marvelously monstrously huge black prick doing this, and then that, and then even *that*, to the monk, to me, and then I began spewing. I was, I was sure, erupting with all the vigor of all the volcanic eruptions in the history of the world combined, shooting spurt after spurt after spurt of thick, hot seed, all most carefully aimed to spatter the sheet and not my expensive photographs.

And when at last I was done, I let my prick loose to drip and drool on the bed, and stayed on all fours, gasping, my chest heaving, for some indeterminate time.

When I regained a modicum of control, I collapsed on my side for a while, and then forced myself up and off the bed. In my arrogance, I believed that I would get several winks out of my new acquisition today. The reality was far from that. I was one and done. I got off the bed, staggered upright, pulled a pillowcase off, wiped myself down, then bunched it up and tossed it on the bed.

I redressed myself, not really caring that upon returning home I would not be looking as pristine as when I departed. The servants might well notice, but... bugger them all. For an experience like that, an experience I was planning on repeating, bugger them all if they objected or judged.

I carefully collected the photographs, making sure they were not stained or damaged, and with equal care locked them in the chest where I kept the rest, and then set it in the back of the armoire, beneath several pairs of boots and shoes I rarely wore, and thus kept here, instead of at my own home.

I wished I could share the tale of this with Harry, but that would require admitting my fantasies, as he would inevitably know if I was only telling part of a tale. I did not think he would understand. Indeed, I was sure he would not.

Ah well, it was just one more secret to add to the thankfully fairly short list of secrets I was keeping from him.

I briefly considered cleaning up the mess I had made, but decided that that was, after all, what I paid servants for. They could bloody well earn their living for a change.

I carefully locked the door behind me and went home.

Harry

29 October 1882, 3:20 p.m.

121 Falmouth Lane

London

At first I thought it odd that the servants were gone. That I had, perhaps, arrived at a time when Reggie was upstairs, about to come across one of his photographs, or, considering the general range of his seed-spewing, perhaps several. I had not made any particular noise on my arrival, neither in unlocking nor locking the front door, so I stood listening in the entrance hall, but heard nothing.

If he was here, it would be fun to catch him being flagrantly delicto, so I quietly went up the stairs, almost creeping down the hallway. The door to his bedroom, or as he so delicately called it, the fuck room, was ajar, so I pushed it carefully open.

It was empty of people, so nothing flagrante at all. But definitely fragrant. There was a scent of Reggie's cologne, the stronger smell of sweat, and the distinct odor of seed. Once by the bed, with its wrinkled sheets and strewn-about covers, I had no need of an explanation of what had happened in here, and not all that long ago.

Reggie had kneeled on the bed... there. Naked, of course. A quick wank with servants around, and only one picture for inspiration, required nothing more than open trousers, and an expendable cloth that could be gotten rid of where it would not be found by servants. But a wank like this, in an assuredly empty house, required nakedness. And probably eight or ten photographs.

I only had seven. But what a superb seven they were! And each and every one of them was crying out, demanding to be used.

What could I do but agree?

Now where...

No, I really shouldn't. But since "should" was rarely a barrier when something seemed likely to be, or I knew would be, pleasurable, that wouldn't stop me.

Besides, there was more than a hint of risk involved. Reggie gave the servants instructions to stay away for a specific time; I had that right as well.

But today, given the fact Reggie had unquestionably come and gone, I had no way of knowing when they would return. If they returned while I was wanking, would I hear them in time to make myself presentable enough to keep them out of the room, on the pretense I had someone in here, and send them away again?

Or would one or more of them just walk in on me, naked, knees on the bed just there, where Reggie had been, sitting on my haunches, stroking my prick as I was sure he had done, or moving to “all threes” as the saying might be, looming almost, but not quite, over my photographs whilst furiously wanking?

Bugger it.

I stripped in rapid order, letting my clothes fall where they might, in a manner calculated to drive Bentley to distraction, but then, Bentley wasn't there to see.

Though Bentley *was* there. In sight, as it were, though not in actual person. I was sure of it.

Reasonably sure.

Somewhat sure.

After all, one should pay attention to the opinions of one's friends, one's *knowing* friends, especially when that friend disputes your conclusion, with the application of a serious amount of vim and vigor and ridiculous rationality.

I clambered up on the bed, carefully avoiding the still mostly wet spot. I opened my package, for once being careful with the wrapping, as I did not wish to endanger the contents by ruthlessly ripping, though I dropped the string and paper on the floor.

I carefully set my seven treasures in a slight arc just beyond the furthest from Reggie's knees seed stain. I was somewhat smug about the fact that other-Harry only had one of these, and not the full set. Though given the outrageous price I had paid... three bloody hundred pounds... other-Harry could never have afforded them without a steep discount.

My knees where Reggie had knelt, my arse on my heels, I looked at my treasure—my precious, one might say. Though never aloud in Reggie's presence.

One: The left end of the arc. Bendy Ben sprawled in one of those armchairs, head back a bit, though I felt his eyes were nevertheless looking straight at me through the mask. Mouth open as if he'd just inhaled. Arms on the arms, legs

wide, large, long-toed feet flat on the floor, ballocks resting on the seat. And between his legs a Tower of Babel prick, rising towards, well, not the sky, but the ceiling of whatever Emporium room he was in to be photographed. The background was blurred, but that was fine. Who cared about wall hangings at a time like this?

Two: He was still in the chair, but nearer the edge of the seat, and leaning forward. His left hand was between his legs, three fingers cupping his ballocks, thumb and forefinger circling the base of his upstanding prick, though I doubted it needed any support. His mouth covered the knob. My prick wept in sympathy.

Three: A slightly different angle, more to the side. Nearly the same, but this time there were only a few inches of his prick visible between marvelously thick lips and his fingers. And those inches seemed to gleam, as if they were slick with spit from his having swallowed his whole cock and then slowly come back up again to the right position for his image to be captured.

Four: On a floor, a carpet. On his back. The image that had nearly caused me to seed my trousers at the Emporium without touching myself, just from remembering it while waiting for my gentlemanly portraits to be brought to me. Those long, powerful legs lifted up and past his head on either side of his shoulders, his straining, well-muscled arms holding them in place, braced behind his knees. His clasped fists supporting his lower back and buttocks. His head raised, his long, long prick straight out, parallel to the floor, and once more his mouth was around his knob, and perhaps an inch of shaft.

Five: The same position only more impossible. His lips were wrapped around the base of his cock.

Six: On the floor in front of the armchair, on his shoulders, his legs spread wide over his shoulders, his back braced against the front of the chair, holding his arse nearly vertical, while his cock pointed down towards his mouth. His left arm and hand were out on the floor for support. His right hand circled the base of his prick and part of the shaft. There was a drop of what could only be seed visible on his mask. And somehow, by some miracle of art, the photographer managed to capture a large drop of seed en route between his knob and his open mouth.

Seven: A close-up of his masked face, eyes shut, almost as if the camera had been held directly above him when the last of the seeding from the previous image was done. His mouth was opened wide, wide, wide. It was *filled* with seed.

I did what one does when one was wanking not to a single image and concentrating on it to the exclusion of all else—all, of course, but the fantasies in your mind that build on that image and make it active. I looked from one to one to one, making them live inside my head, move inside my head, as if I were in the room where all this had taken place, a very, very private showing.

I wanked as I knew Reggie had done. I went on all threes, as I knew Reggie had done. My eyes darted from image to image, as Reggie had so recently done to whatever images he had selected. And then, just as I knew Reggie had done, I looked back at my choice for seeding. The fourth. Bendy Ben's mouth just around his knob, but in my head his prick was pulsing. I could see each shot of seed making its way up that long tube in rapid succession, to explode like some massive artillery shells in his mouth and down his throat.

I exploded as well, making a second mess of Reggie's bed, even if not as much as he made.

And as planned, not a drop touched my pictures.

Reggie would, I was certain, have sat back on his haunches when he was done, holding his drooping prick. I was too loose-limbed to be so proper. True, I lifted up, and back, and then braced myself with my left hand, shifted my hips and legs and collapsed sideways on the bed, my lower legs flopping off the side.

After a while of recovering, I grinned to myself and sat up. I stood and used the used sheet to wipe myself as clean as I could get just then.

I dressed, gathered my images, and looked at them again, with only the tiniest of stirrings down below.

As I had never seen Bentley naked, and certainly never erect, nor was I ever likely to, I truly had no idea why I was so certain Bendy Ben and he were one and the same. And yet, I had not actually wanked to images in my head of *Bentley* doing all those things to himself. I could never do that. The man who inspired that wonderful seeding was simply Bendy Ben. The most extraordinarily pricked, Bendy Ben.

After a moment, I went to where I'd hidden away my locked box of pictures, and added the seven to my collection. A most expensive addition, but worth it for a limited edition, if Felcher were to be believed.

I left the room for the servants to ponder and clean, and went home.

I would not, of course, dream of ever asking Bentley anything to do with photography. At least not with reference to Bendy Ben.

Never.

Harry

31 October 1882, 11:00 a.m.

No. 18 Bramwell Road

London

I could not resist. Simply could not. I had told myself before leaving Falmouth Lane that I would not. I had believed myself just then.

But it kept bothering me. Knowing I knew the truth, but Bentley not knowing I knew. Believing I did not. Believing I never would.

All I wanted was just simple confirmation. That was certainly nothing too major, given Bentley was a friend of Edward's, just as I was. A secret we were clearly keeping about each other. This would be just one more, would it not?

It is so rare to feel one step ahead of Bentley. To know something he does not know I know. The problem with that situation—its rarity—is that it leaves me uncertain how best to disclose the knowledge of the knowledge. A brief, well earned “Ah ha!” and a gloat? Or something more substantial and long term?

I rather suspected I would be relegated to the former, but in the never-ending skirmishes between one's noble self and one's manservant, a nobleman must do what a nobleman must do.

And what one must do was somehow assuage one's devouring curiosity, and the same curiosity of one's best friend, about a vital issue as we, Reggie and I, continued our journey into the uncharted, for us at least, territories ruled by friends of Edward's.

Well, to be correct, not *entirely* uncharted, as we had had four rather, ah, *inspirational* visits to the Emporium, during which we charted rather a lot of Edwardian territory. I for one found those visits to be... satisfactory. Yes, indeed. Even more than merely satisfactory.

Yet... not as satisfactory as I had hoped, or at least thought, when our adventures in gentlemanly portraiture began.

I shook off that depressing thought and focused on the joy-filled encounter to come.

I had become more and more convinced through my mental re-perusings of the images, that my conclusion as to the identity of Bendy Ben was correct.

Then “more and more” became certainty. And with that certainty, despite my recent assurances to myself at Falmouth Lane, I simply had to know.

I rang the bell to summon the footman on duty. I was standing before my desk, practicing my perusing a book pose, so when John walked in, my startlement was only partially feigned. I instructed him to find Bentley and very nearly instructed him, as well, to command Bentley's presence. A jumbled thought involving valor, discretion and one's better parts intruded, and so I merely asked John to ask Bentley to come to the library.

As he shut the door, I decided a standing pose of perusal was not powerful enough. Seated behind my desk would be much better. Bentley would, of course, take the chair before the desk when I ord... ah, when I *requested* him to do so, which would put him somewhat lower than me.

Not surprisingly, Bentley came in without knocking. He walked right up to the front of the desk, directly opposite me, though not so close that his thighs might touch the edge, thereby avoiding any accusation of intentional looming, a most unmanservantly thing to do. My head was down, carefully perusing the book I had selected at random from the bookshelves behind me, so that he would have to wait just a moment as I finished an important part. Just a tiny reinforcement as to who, precisely, waited upon whom.

I had reckoned without Bentley's uncanny ability to read upside down. Which he almost immediately put to good use. “I was not aware you found fertilizers so fascinating, my lord.”

Fertilizers? I actually looked at the book then. I found I had been “perusing” the first page of a chapter titled “Manuring No Mystery” and on the facing page was a colored manure chart from the previous chapter. Well, damn. Not that I would show any of that to Bentley.

I *ahem'd!* and carefully closed the book, although contriving first, quite accidentally, of course, to have it fall open at the frontispiece, so that I could find out what I had purportedly perused with such intensity. Ah. The title was *Agricultural Economy*, which was published in... in... MDCCCLXXIV. I loathed Latin in school, with a particular loathing reserved for the damned Romans and their utterly odd way of numbering things. Why couldn't they have done the sensible thing, and used ordinary, plain, readily understandable *English* numbers?

I had perhaps glared too long at the number I wasn't willing to take the time or make the effort to translate, which led Bentley to say, “I do believe there

might be more current books available on the subject you were perusing with such intensity, my lord. Shall I place a request with Hatchard's to acquire a more up to date tome on the topic?"

I said with what hauteur I could manage, my eyes watching my hand carefully setting the book to the side, "There is an issue at Stokes about fertilizers. I merely wished to familiarize myself with... with manure, so as to be better able to make a decision."

Of course, we both knew that Addison, my steward, was more than capable of making any major or minor manorial decision without the necessity of writing to London for my advice.

I recognized that I had to reassert a nobleman's natural right to dominate any conversation with a manservant, so I turned my head forward again, raised it, and looked up. And bloody up. With a damned pause I hoped was unnoticeable, on the bulge rather prominently displayed *right at eye level!* had my eyes been, or stayed level.

Did all friends of Edward's automatically examine the crotches of every man they happen across? To compare and contrast with one's self? To yearn for or summarily reject? Or had I merely become a pervert of the first water, or discovered I had always been so, since first we visited the Emporium, and saw what we saw, and did what we did?

And did all the things we did thereafter?

I refused to allow my mind to dwell on the recent repeated epiphanies of epic proportions, just as I refused to permit my eyes to look upon or my mind to consider, much less appreciate, the epic proportions of that bulge.

Bloody hell. How had I managed *not* to notice that bulge in all the years we had been together?

No. Absolutely not.

I could not possibly have failed to notice a banger, as Reggie might well call it, of those proportions running down the right leg of trousers as tightly molded to Bentley's leg as any trouser of mine. Not for the nine years we had been together. Well, only as nobleman and manservant, of course.

No. This was... something recent. This was... *yes!* This was a sign. A veritable signal. He wanted me to know. Wanted to me ask.

So I did.

"Bentley, are you Bendy?"

He paused and looked at me.

Looked *down* at me.

Well, hell. I would have been better served to have retained my book-perusing pose standing. As it was, he now had the position of power. Though, even standing, he was still quite a few inches taller than me, but at least the disparity would not have been as vast as it was at that moment.

"I am, my lord, I believe, of a somewhat limber persuasion, but I should not go so far as to describe myself with the use of a nonexistent word."

"No, no. I mean, are you *Bendy*? Is that your name?"

He stared at me for a moment. Then sighed. This was a sigh I had not, to the best of my recollection, heard before. I was not quite sure how to interpret it. It sounded... almost sad.

He looked me directly in the eye. "I deeply regret, my lord, that I shall have to hand in my notice. I would not be so uncaring of our long relationship as to make it effective immediately, though to be quite candid, I am of a mind to do so. However, having said I would not..."

"What?" I gulped in as much air as I could possibly take, and tried again. "What, what?"

I had apparently taken in an insufficient amount of air to enable me to speak with the... the... *rounded*? vowel sounds of the aristocracy. What I expelled was more of a squawk.

The sigh that preceded his response was of the variety one might describe as "speaking patiently to a child when one really has no patience left at all and is merely pretending."

"I have always said, my lord, that I could never work for a man who is not young, if not in body, at least in soul. I have no desire to be a nanny, dressing and undressing some drooling dunderhead who cannot comprehend the world about him, and has so far departed from that world that he has no idea who I am."

I was reeling. Bentley was giving me notice? That whole Vesuvius, Pompeii, lava thing was nothing compared to what was happening at 18 Bramwell Road just then.

No, no. That was not it. What "it" was, was that I was... adrift. Lost at sea. Yes. In need of guidance to return safely to shore. So I spoke carefully. I was articulate.

"What, what? *What?*"

The patient sigh that preceded his next words was several orders of... orders of... what does Reggie say? Orders of *magnanimous*? greater than the one before.

That didn't sound right inside my head. But I shoved that aside to listen.

Bentley asked, "Shall I elucidate?"

I could only nod.

"You have forgotten my name."

"*I have not!*" Well! If that was the basis of this sudden urge to depart from my service I could certainly turn the situation around. "Your name is Bentley!"

I nearly said "Ha!" or "there!" or even a somewhat more assertive, though excessive assertiveness was always a risk with Bentley, "You see, you were quite wrong about that. I do know your name." But I resisted the temptation to say anything at all just then.

"My lord, you just referred to me by another name in a tone of voice that indicated you believed that other name to be mine. Fading or uncertain memory, particularly of the names of one's closest friends or companions, is a certain sign of senility creeping in." That new sigh again. "Most regrettable, my lord, *most* regrettable. But I shall do my utmost to assist you in finding a suitable... companion. One who can properly care for you in your declining years."

Damn it. Damn it, damn it, *damn it. Fucking bloody hell shit fuck Christ-fucking damn fuck!*

I scrambled for words that were not expletives. "Bentley, my dear fellow, surely you realize that from time to time I go... off, uh, course? But only for a short while? I always find my way back. Don't I?"

That last was a rather plaintive appeal for reassurance. For affirmation. For confirmation.

He nodded.

It was *not* an encouraging nod. Much less an affirming or confirming one.

Not when his expression was rather like, well, rather like the expression one might have if one discovered a bug in one's soup. A large, *disgusting* bug. Though, of course, all bugs are disgusting. It is merely that a bug in one's soup is somehow... *more so*.

I did not relish being a bug, in or out of soup. Most especially not a bug just a hair's breadth from being *squished*, with the squishing, of course, being Bentley's departure from my employ.

A consummation not only devoutly to be abhorred, but avoided at all costs.

Costs?

Costs?

When in doubt, resort to bribes. When in a panic, resort to even greater bribes.

But delicate bribes, so as not to offend the finer feelings by being so crude as to say, for example, "I'll give you a hundred pounds not to leave."

Only the utmost desperation would permit one to fall so far into the depths of crudity as to say, "Name your price."

I was not quite to the stage of that final measure, and hoped it would not come to that.

"Bentley, my dear fellow, we have been together for nine—"

"Eight."

"—years. We met at the agency, and I was right on time."

"You were late."

"Ah. Well, yes. I remember it well. I do. Really, I do."

He did not look as if he quite believed me, but I discerned a hint of a glimpse of a gleam of a possibility of humor, far, far, *far* back in his eyes. And not ready at all to come anywhere near the fore.

Strolling down memory lane, with the gaping holes in the path into which I was likely to repeatedly fall, would not meet the requirements of the situation.

"I have, from time to time, I freely acknowledge, been in error on certain matters. Even as I am here and now. The reason for my error hardly matters—"

Bloody damned right it didn't. I was not about to tell him about the photographs and endure the resulting explosion that would lead to his immediate departure.

“—just the fact of my mistake. And it was. A mistake. A large one. Enormous, one might say. A veritable Kohinoor of mistakes.”

There was just the slightest softening of his stern expression at my generous admission. A British nobleman simply does not admit error to one in his employ. I could only hope that Bentley, if he stayed, would not take advantage by bruiting the occasion about.

“My error was, however, just that. A mistake of fact. A wrong belief based upon—”

Bloody hell. I was so not going in the direction of any damned photographic confession, yet my innate honesty kept me veering towards it.

However, British noblemen are never entirely honest with their servants, no matter how esteemed or long-employed. It is not the done thing.

“A wrong belief based upon, well, a wrong belief that something was, or might possibly be, true, but which I now fully understand was not, never has been, and most assuredly could never be. I can only hope—”

Bloody hell. I was not going to go *there* was I?

Even less than the already listed “not done” things, it is not done for a British nobleman to beg his servant for forgiveness, no matter how egregious his supposed error might have been. He is, after all, the master. The other is the servant. One is up, one is down. One is at the pinnacle of the social heap, the other is not...

And this mental babbling was getting me nowhere near finding a way to avoid doing something I should have realized far earlier was inevitable.

Bentley knew it was inevitable, as well. Were this Reggie before me, I would have added, “the bastard,” but one couldn’t make such a personal reference to one’s manservant, even in circumstances such as these.

So I bit the bullet, summoned sinews, found fortitude, and with a variety of other descriptions for doing what I had no choice except to do, I finished the sentence: “—you can find it in your heart to forgive my most egregious error.”

There. I at least sidestepped having to use the word “beg.” Though it was bloody well implicit.

He just stood there. Waiting. Bloody hell, I had just kowtowed to the man, and that wasn’t enough?

Oh.

Costs.

"I shall, of course, find a way to make it up to you, Bentley, in an appropriate manner."

The humor shot to the fore, and though it was not the most pleasant of humors, since I was the source of the amusement, at least it was there, and the granite was gone.

With a slightly less than manservant-to-master bow, he said, "All is... forgotten, my lord."

The bastard was thinking "forgiven," I was certain. At least he didn't have the effrontery to say it aloud. Because if he had... if he had... bloody hell, I would have done nothing at all.

And then it struck me. "Forgotten." Forgotten, indeed! Another jab with the knife.

My "indeed" was only a touch of a tad cold, as I dared not descend to frost just then. Besides, Bentley tended to be impervious to frost, or at least to mine.

There was a short silence while I gathered myself, but Bentley beat me to the finishing line. "If there's nothing more, my lord, I have things to do. With your permission?"

"Things to do," ha! Far better things to do was what he meant. Naturally, I gave him a regal nod and an "of course, of course" as I turned my attention to the important matters of business which awaited me on my desk.

Matters of manure.

Bloody hell.

I waited until he was gone and the door shut, before bracing my elbows on the desk and letting my head collapse into my hands.

Although I had something of an idea of a start towards the costs of making it up, I needed advice. But Reggie would not be back from some business meeting until this afternoon.

I decided to consult him then.

Reggie

31 October 1882, 3:20 p.m.

24 Bramwell Road

London

He stood there in the foyer, unashamedly dripping scads of water on my floor, just inside the door Charles was shutting behind him. A few steps inward, and he was shedding rivers of water on the stunning new Persian carpet, with an intricate design of black and silver, with strands of accenting red and gold, that I'd recently acquired as an adornment for the marble floor.

Not content with what he had already done, he proceeded to *wipe his damned wet feet on my new carpet* and then shook his head like some damned soaked puppy, spreading the water far and wide. After which, with just a bit of a smirk beneath the dripping, he looked at me and said, "I'm wet."

I kept my tone even, as, knowing Harry, somewhere during the course of this conversation, there would be a moment when I could allow my tone to be... *not* even. "Ever one to state the obvious. Why are you here being wet, instead of inundating your very own home?"

"Because it's closer?"

"You're only three homes down the street. You could have had James drive you all the way."

"James wasn't driving. I was in a cab."

"Ho! Was Harry the—" Ah. I could hardly—*ha!*—finish that appellation out loud in my own home. And of course it was unlikely the driver was him anyway. I changed tack. "You left home with insufficient funds to pay for the remaining distance and had to disembark here?"

"Arse."

Fortunately, my staff were all familiar with the long bonds of our friendship, and we could be free with our mocking, or downright denigrating on occasion, badinage that we, at least, generally found amusing. In recent weeks, however, we had necessarily found ourselves being far more careful of what we said, lest we let something slip.

Charles came up behind him, helped remove the sodden jacket, handed him a towel which had miraculously appeared from somewhere or other, and left.

Unfortunately, that had not solved the issue of wetness. He was soaked through. Harry started to move towards the stairs.

“No.”

“No, what?”

“No, you are not going anywhere near the Aubusson upstairs and risk damaging it.”

“Fine!” he snapped. “If you will have Charles retrieve my coat, I will put it around my package and go home.”

He paused and flushed, even though we both knew he was really speaking only of the *wrapped* package dangling from one hand by its string, and not any other package.

“There’s no need to leave. Just step off *that* carpet, too. It just arrived yesterday. You can drip for a moment on the marble. It’s far easier to clean.”

Harry’s fine red feathers became even more ruffled. “You propose that I stand here until I just dry, sometime between now and, what, the next opening of Ascot? A fine beff you turned out to be.”

I could not help but smile, and he smiled back.

After the... *incident*... I had not been allowed to see Harry. One of Grandfather’s edicts. They were never explained, always obeyed. Looking back, I wonder whether he saw himself as some sort of Tsar, Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias. I doubt, though, he was smart enough to have that as a conscious thought; instead, he just acted as an absolute monarch. Successfully so, as no one, including my father, dared gainsay him. After his fortunate death, though I of course had never disclosed to anyone but Harry that I thought it fortunate, Father allowed the friendship between our families to resume.

The first time we saw each other again was incredibly joyful. There was a great deal of hugging, and laughter, and tears, and between the adults there were only two sentences on the separation. Harry’s father asked, “Do you—” undoubtedly intending to end with “know why?” My father cut him off with a “no” that could have been curt, but instead just indicated without the actual words, “let it be.” They did, and sent us off to play.

We were old enough to be trusted not to wander off the estate, and in a moment when we were tired from playing, and private by a stream, we vowed

to be best friends forever. Which teasingly turned into b-f-f. Which changed somehow to our own word: "beff."

"My dear beff, I could not love you half so much, loved I not my rugs more."

That got me a smile. "Now just be patient. I have a plan," I said.

"You *always* have a plan. And as ever, the question is whether it is a good plan."

I gave him a small *harumph* to remind him I was Reggie-the-ever-well-planned. I walked around him to the wall and pulled the bell for Charles. When he appeared, I sent him off for one of the large winter blankets stored in the camphor-lined closet. While we waited, I again asked Harry why he was here.

"I went to the tobacconist's in Hartford Lane." He held up the string-wrapped package. "It's a box of Cuban cigars. The finest kind, I am assured."

I affected horror: left hand clasped to my heart, right arm out, hand up, palm facing Harry in a fully, ah, rejectional, manner. "Lips that touch tobacco shall ne'er touch mine!"

"Considering that your lips aren't touching mine under any conceivable circumstances, I rather think you're safe," he declaimed back, loud enough that any listening servants might hear, and accompanied it with an eyebrow lift even I could interpret, silently asking, "What are you up to?" "And in any event, arse, that line is about liquor."

"A prohibition of liquor? Heaven forfend! Why, in the right circumstances, I would have no objection at all to lips that touched liquor touching mine."

With that, I licked my lips. Harry gulped and flushed. Excellent. Except, I had no idea why that reaction was excellent. It was not as if my beff and I were suddenly going to begin kissing one another. True, we were engaged in a variety of sexual things together, but not *together* together.

We stared at each other. With something like a wild surmise, silent, yes, but far from a peak in Darien.

We were on a shared adventure, learning to be the best friends of Edward's we could possibly be. He had his men, I had mine. Only that and nothing more. Ever more, only that. Which was a thought that urged depression on me, though I had no reason why it should.

Very well. All was clear. No further lip-licking. No kissing.

And what do you call what happened with the other Harry?

Go away! I shouted at my ever-intruding, no-better-than-he-should-be, half. That doesn't count.

And it didn't count. Not at all. Harry—not my Ha... *my?* ...no, not *my*... I merely meant to think, not my best friend Harry, but other-Harry—had us working his prick at the same time, one on each side of that incredibly thick banger. As we simultaneously moved down to the tangled jungle of his redolent pubic hair, and then back up and up again, a full eight guineas' worth indeed, to his knob, our tongues lapping his flesh, we might... *might*... have stretched our lips out, so that they *might* have met in the middle—or to one side or the other, if we were in a measuring contest as to whose lips could stretch farther.

But we didn't. Our lips never met as other-Harry fucked them, holding our heads in place.

Liar!

That doesn't count as a kiss! Just because other-Harry thought it was exceedingly humorous to pull his cock away from us just as we were about to reach his knob, and with the pressure he was exerting on the backs of our heads, it was inevitable that our lips would touch. And part—not at all in the “opening” sense—as rapidly as possible.

I wrenched myself away from my disturbing thoughts, only wondering a little what his thoughts were, that he had not spoken. I severed the silence.

“You still have not explained why the drowned-rat look is to be the latest sensation in noblemen's wear.”

“I didn't *intend* this, as you bloody well know. I had decided to walk... yes, yes, *yes!* I know that I rarely—”

“Try never.”

“—*rarely* walk. But it was still a decent day, even for All Hallows Eve. Unusually sunny, and nearly warm. I had absolutely no reason—”

“And what do we say about England's weather?” I gave him my very best teaching a young child voice, the *impatient* patient voice you use with a somewhat stupid child, perhaps one who has already been provided this information, perhaps even *several* times, and still hasn't learned the lesson.

He glared at me, of course, as he usually does when he is, if not precisely in the wrong, still not quite “in the right.” And then he gave the correct answer,

one known nearly from birth by all those fortunate to be born on this sceptr'd isle, and one rapidly learned by all visitors, usually within a day, but certainly no more than two. "Just wait a minute and it will change... for the worse."

Harry assumed as much dignity as one of those long-haired little dogs his mother so adores might have, after it has been dunked into a vat of water and then set out on the floor. "Do you, or do you not, wish an answer?"

"I do."

"Then be quiet and let me finish."

I opened my mouth to agree, but stopped when he gave me the "shut it!" look I more frequently used on him than the other way around.

I "shut it."

"As I was *trying* to say, there was no need for an overcoat or an umbrella, right up through the time I entered the shop. But as I started back, I was no more than a few blocks away when it became like, it was like, was like... yes! A hurricane. Black skies, howling winds, rain moving sideways. I was nearly knocked off my feet. I was fortunate to finally find a stout-hearted cabbie with an entrepreneurial spirit, braving the rain and the winds."

"Really, Harry? There was a storm, of course. But hurricanes hardly happen in Hartford Lane. Nor Heatherford Street. Nor Hampshire Court. It rained. You got wet. You came here. Why?"

"Bentley," Harry said, holding up the string-wrapped package, covered in oiled paper.

"Bentley has an aversion to your package? Your package consists of items you do not wish to disclose to him?"

Harry opened his mouth, but had no chance to begin any annihilation of my character, personal habits, or any of the *et ceteras* of which he was fully capable, as Charles arrived at that point.

I took the blanket from him, and shook it out, delighting in the fresh scent. One of my best ideas, I thought, a camphor-lined linen closet.

"Charles, if you would be so kind as to take Lord Fotherby's package in hand, he would be eternally grateful."

Charles was facing me, so he had no opportunity to observe Harry's full-fledged glare at me over Charles's shoulder. Harry of course understood, but patently did not, at just that moment, appreciate the double entendre. Charles

merely blinked. And blinked again as he tried to decide whether I was making some sort of a May game of him.

I continued my instructions. "Dry Lord Fotherby's package with a soft cloth, rubbing it carefully, and then examine it closely, to be sure it is not leaking. Leaking packages are not at all the thing, you know."

Harry's glare, still shoulder-hidden, was a thing of beauty, albeit one of only a fleeting joy, so briefly there and then about to be gone.

Charles looked confused, but of course, in a household such as mine, where the master was known to have a rather immense propriety pole shoved firmly and immovably up his arse, he couldn't quite say to his noble employer, "You're making no bloody damned sense, your bloody damned lordship."

I waved him off, my final instructions being to guard Lord Fotherby's package with his life, as Lord Fotherby would take it much amiss if his package were to be lost or damaged. I then told him I would take care of foyer matters from here.

Charles did a most admirable job of donning the perfect servant's utterly bland demeanor and departed. When his task was completed, there was, I was sure, going to be a serious discussion in the servants' quarters about whether his lordship (me) had gone entirely off his chump, heading directly for Bedlam and thus bringing about the loss of all their jobs, or whether I was merely mad north-northwest. In the latter event, they might be able to bring me about to a wind that was southerly, so that I might once again know a hawk from a handsaw.

Finally alone, I said, "Take off your clothes."

"Wha—? I, uh, you, *what?*"

"You're not deaf, Fotherby." I was sure we were alone, but even so, I did not dare a "Harry," not so much for the use of the word, since the staff knew how long we had been friends, but because of the feelings that might be imbued in the word. "Remove your clothes."

I was approaching him, the quite large blanket spread wide by my outstretched arms, though I walked carefully, so as to avoid stepping on it and tripping myself. He glanced at the nearing great wall of Chinese cloth—the bedcover Charles had selected instead of a blanket had a rather fanciful dragon embroidered on it—and said, in a harsh whisper, "Are you fucking out of your bloody fucking mind?"

"Ha!" I nearly said aloud, but refrained.

He failed to understand what was occurring.

I would not enlighten him with words; he would have to figure it out for himself.

I had no spontaneousness, had I? It was an accusation leveled against me with some fair degree of frequency. Usually by friends; by Harry more frequently than others, especially when he was inveigling me into participating in one of his spontaneous schemes for our supposed mutual delight.

When the conversation turned round to *why* I lacked what so many believed to be an essential quality in one's nature, though I was damned if I comprehended why they believed that to be so, the generally accepted theory was that I had been cursed at birth by a fairy or a witch of an unusual order of malevolence. No one, however, was quite able to explain how either my mother or my father could have been so *déclassé* as to annoy a fairy or a witch, considering that even if witches and fairies existed, they would hardly be of the same social order as my family.

Harry, however, had concocted another explanation. He had, he said, discerned little to no spontaneity in my parents, and even less in my older brother. He therefore said it made a neat little syllogism: The Smythes lack spontaneity. Reginald was a Smythe. Therefore, *ipso facto, quod erat demonstrandum*, Reginald lacks spontaneity. In view of the harrowing personal deprivation handed down to me by my family, Harry decided it was his duty to engage in a lifelong effort to educate me in the ways of spontaneousness.

Well, what was I doing if I was not enacting a bit of spontaneousness this very moment? When word got around, as it inevitably would, that would teach all the spontaneous nay-sayers not to nay to, at or about me.

We were quite close, nose-tips touching if we but leaned a bit, as I draped the bedcover around him. Ah, the hell with it. I whispered softly back, so much so he had to tilt his head in, and almost brought about that nose touch. "This is an eminently sane solution to the problem. Do as I say and the servants only have one area to clean up, not a trail of wetness to deal with. You get dry much sooner than you would traipsing around damaging my home."

"This is ridiculous!"

I smiled. "Harry, surely you are not embarrassed by this suggestion? I have, after all, seen your, ah, handstaff, and the bobbles below, on multiple occasions

over the years. And far more than that, *far* more than that, quite, quite recently. But a viewing by anyone is most unlikely, as I am so very carefully holding the cloth to hide you from prying eyes. Including mine.”

He glared at me. “Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord. In this case, the Lord is a Fotherby. One Harry of the name.”

With that, the bedcover began flopping and wiggling and jiggling as he struggled with the wet clothes that perversely wanted to adhere to him, much in the manner of one of Harry's Shakespearean heroes or heroines, going on and on and on in the mode of “‘til death do us part.” Numerous items began to make one-by-one *plop!* sounds as they hit the floor, while I tried to figure out *which* items they were.

I was enjoying the mental stripping of my beff, not even looking at him, when the accident happened. And it *was* an accident.

Truly.

Well, it was.

Harry was standing as a man does when removing a stocking and he has no seat available: bent forward, balancing on one leg, the calf of the stocking-to-be-removed leg resting on the opposite knee, while one peels the stocking off. And once off, one quickly replaces one's foot on the floor, pauses to be sure of one's balance, and then repeats the process.

The first stocking was successful, but as he lifted his other leg, perhaps a mite too quickly in the circumstance of having one bare, and undoubtedly damp, foot on a wet marble floor, he lost his balance and started to topple. What choice did I have but to let go of the bedcovers where I had been holding them together, and grab his shoulders to prevent his fall?

Some might say I could have chosen to grab his shoulders *with* the cloth.

To that I would say, “Ha!” And also, “Balderdash. You weren't there to observe the, ah, exigencies of the situation.”

Quick reaction was required, quick reaction was provided.

No choice at all, the way I see it.

And... see it I did. Or rather, them. All three of them, through sheer white drawers rendered effectively invisible by the rain. That most admirable, pale ivory prick surrounded by thick, curling hair of a far more vivid shade than the ginger above. Plump, red-furred ballocks.

I did not lewdly and lasciviously lick my lips just then. I utterly deny the accuracy of that characterization. I was... *appreciating* the view, with a most proper degree of appreciativeness of yet another thing of Harry beauty, which once again was a joy of mere temporariness.

I most assuredly did not contemplate any kind of forever enjoyment. Not for an instant. Not even a *part* of an instant.

And no one can prove otherwise.

“Reggie!”

It never ceases to amaze me how much information can be conveyed in a single word. Harry was a past master at it, and I have no idea how he does it. This was what he said to me:

Reggie, you right bastard, how dare you embarrass me this way! I do have rather a nice prick, don't I? Do you remember the bitch known as Lady Payback? I'm going to bloody well set her on you. Again. Are you really admiring me or is that just a tease? I know you did at other-Harry's, but that could have just been being nice with him around. Cover me up, you daft bugger, before the servants see. I'm liable to become aroused if you keep on staring that way. Bloody hell, I'm going to catch a chill and die of consumption if you don't permit me to promptly remove the excess water from my person!

There might have been something more, but I think I got the gist of it.

Not letting him see my inexcusable, inexplicable reluctance to stop looking, I did what propriety demanded I do: I raised the wall to its full height again. To achieve that most honorable goal, I did what any man would do in the same or similar circumstances, though I rather doubted there *were* circumstances having any sameness or similarity anywhere in all of England, since Harry was involved. I squatted, not possessing any type of bendiness at all, with the intent to tilt just slightly forward, reach down, grab the wall, and lift both it and myself upright again.

Mistake.

Big mistake.

Huge. Of a magnitude unparalleled in any history of my mistakes that might be compiled and published for the delectation and amusement of the ton.

Moments earlier I had been concerned with what our positions might appear to be like were my servants to see us, with our heads close and our noses so

close an inhalation, a sneeze, might have made them touch. Thus, when I found myself with my knees spread wide, my hands firmly fisting the cloth in two places and my body tipped for balance so that an exhale, a sneeze, the faintest hint of a possibility of an “it’s bloody damned cold up here” shiver from Harry would end with my nose nuzzling his beginning-to-bulge prick, I should have done as propriety demanded, with or without any pole up my arse, and immediately stood.

Instead, I froze.

Held my breath to prevent sneeze or exhalation. Tried to decide whether I hoped for a shiver that I could blame any touch on, rather than conduct of my own.

I just... *admired*.

This admiration was entirely different from the admiration I had, ah, admired at other-Harry’s. That was almost a clinical appreciation, a calm evaluation of certain artistic elements and qualities about the body of the person before me.

There is absolutely, positively, completely and utterly not one bloody thing wrong with *admiration* of your beff, whether from near or afar. Indeed, I realized in that moment that admiration of your beff is a prerequisite of... of beffiness? beffhood? beffship? It is a necessary... What did Arbuthnot call those clauses we inserted into our railroad investment proposal to the Americans? Ah. *Conditions precedent*. If the conditions were met, then the contract would proceed; if not, then not.

We, Harry and I, had long ago met the conditions precedent to our beff status. We admired each other tremendously, in a variety of ways.

I was merely exercising my admiration in a rather more intimate manner than any in which we had previously engaged.

For longer than I should have.

But, really, the length of my admiration was in large measure Harry’s fault. Quite large measure.

He could have brought it to a halt far faster than he finally did. The moment I achieved the position I was in, a blurt began racing towards his mouth. I was sure of it. So sure, I would have wagered anything, well, anything up to a shilling, that that was so. Yet somehow he prevented the blurt of a so-very-shocked “Reggie!” from leaping from his lips. Indeed, he wrestled the blurt into

submission, and when it was under his control, he merely said, softly so that only I could hear, "Reggie."

What he said was readily comprehensible, even in my somewhat befogged, admiring state.

Reggie, you bloody damned fool, get off your knees before someone sees you. I can't believe you're breathing that heavily on my prick. Yes, I know it's not actually knees but close enough to be mistaken for it should any of your servants return, as they are bloody well about to do, you damned fool. Though my prick is worthy of a beff's admiration, is it not? Get up, you idiot, I'm starting to get hard and I don't know why!

"To hear is to obey," I dutifully murmured back, and with a reluctance I really did not fully understand, for all my rationalizing of why I had done what I had just done, stood and juggled the thick fabric until he was decently hidden from all views, mine included, once more.

That moment of disclosure, far too brief though it was, also brought with it a bit of bafflement. It was utterly beyond me how a man whose necessities had been bared for far more than a few moments of observation in the public venue, or nearly public venue of the Emporium during our felching adventure, could possibly start to become aroused by the quasi-exposure that had just occurred.

My cock apparently understood it, however. I wish it would explain. Or perhaps exposing one's self in public, accompanied by an exercise of erectile function—no *dys*function here, naturally—is simply what one does if one is a friend of Edward's? I wonder... is there a way we might put this theory to the test, without risking arrest and disgrace? Or with only a small risk?

But then the answer struck me. Felcher had asked, on our second visit, whether our pleasure on the first visit would have been enhanced or harmed, had we known that what we did was being observed. And we had both said we would have enjoyed that knowledge. The second visit, what with mirrors and multiple glorious holes, certainly confirmed those admissions.

Harry's prick-display, here and now, accidental... *entirely accidental*... though it was, and the beginnings of arousal, were no different than the displays we had both put on that first afternoon. And enjoyed so very much. And the same with our clock of armchair cocks.

During my wall-holding musings, head averted this time, Harry completed his disrobing. His *disturbing* disrobing. I had to once more give stern

instructions to my prick to just lie there, quietly, and not attempt to get up and wander about. I briefly contemplated swatting my prick, as one does with a recalcitrant puppy to make it obey, when one prefers not to have puppy piddle everywhere, just as one prefers not to have prick piddle leaking out. However, I have never been fond of pain. Perhaps...

“Smythe!”

The loudness of his voice so near to my head startled me, as he intended. There was less information to absorb from this word.

Pay attention, you arse. I'm naked under here like you wanted, and I don't understand why you wanted it, but here I am and there you are, and do you think, perhaps, it might be possible for me to just go upstairs and don some of your clothes so that I can go home? Do you think my ballocks were as nice as my prick? I personally think they are nearly so. Are these bloody revels of yours now ended?

“Uh, yes, of course. Just go on upstairs.”

“Ha!” he said, with a very smug sound, as he reached up inside the blanket, curled his fingers near where mine were, and took command of the fabric.

I let go and stepped back.

He walked, no, he *moved* in the direction of the staircase with a very odd, shuffling kind of step, weaving back and forth as though he might be a bit on the toddle, the bedclothes trailing behind him like some gargantuan cape. He paused at the first step, carefully went up three, looked over his shoulder and with a smile, mouthed “Ha!” at me again. The cover continued to trail as he went up.

Trail behind him *on the floor*.

Which I should have been looking at instead of watching him and knowing he was naked under there, and wondering, wondering... I wasn't precisely sure what I was wondering.

But when I looked down I understood his “Ha!” and his smile.

The shuffle was because he was kicking the various pieces of dripping wet clothing before him, beside him, out of his way, so that by the time his bed cape was traipsing up the first step, my foyer floor was a bloody slick mess.

I broke with lifelong, propriety-pole tradition and bellowed for a servant. Charles arrived rapidly, and with the astuteness of the best of servants, took in

the litter, the glitter of water, the dampness of the stairs, all in one encompassing glance.

His respectful, so *very* respectful, "My lord," conveyed an unmistakable Harry-like message: "I shall, I see, have to clean up the results of your silly spontaneosity."

I have little to no ability to speak in sentences with the complexity of a Dickens novel, but consisting of only one word. Or two. It appeared I was alone in the world in that respect.

I waved at the mess. "We have had, as you see, a mishap. As I would prefer not to have any of us slip and fall and break our necks, or other valuable parts, please assemble what resources you need to get us back the way we were before Lord Fotherby decided to stop by."

"Yes, my lord."

I skirted the mess, and went up the steps carefully, avoiding any spots that even appeared to be slick from Harry's passing.

I paused at the door to my rooms. They were, after all, *my* rooms. I was entitled to walk in or out at any time for any reason, or no reason at all, but Harry was certainly on the other side of the door. Quite possibly naked. Quite possibly drying himself. Quite possibly admiring his naked self in my cheval glass. So while I had the right to enter without knocking, no matter how enjoyable I might find the view if my imaginings were remotely near accurate, I could launch a round of unpleasant gossip were I to do so.

So I knocked on my own damned door.

And when there was silence, I knocked again.

Damn his idea of humor. I was about to fist-slam the door to make a point when he called out, "You may enter."

All bloody king to bloody peasant, like.

I entered anyway. He was dry, his hair somewhat topsy-turvy, and dressed in one of my robes, which didn't quite come to his ankles. He pointedly looked down to observe that reality, and looked up again with a kind of helpless shrug that indicated he couldn't help the fact he was taller than me.

Bartlett came out of my closet—well appointed, but far from the vastness of Harry's closet cave that the forty thieves would have been well satisfied to own—with some of my clothes. He showed what he had to Harry. "Of course,

they won't quite fit, my lord, what with you being taller than my lord, and all. But well enough to get you home."

Harry nodded his approval, the regal bastard, took them from Bartlett's hands, and went behind the dressing screen. He then tossed my robe so it landed over the top of the screen, and I most assuredly was not imagining Harry's temporary nakedness.

Bartlett interrupted my non-imaginings by speaking to Harry again. "I shall find a topcoat, my lord, and we will of course provide you with an umbrella."

He looked to me, received the expected... required... nod of agreement, and left to take care of the next phase of getting Harry dressed and gone.

But while Harry was here... why was he here? And so I said.

He proceeded to tell me the tale of his non-wet hurricane morning. All the while remaining behind the screen, entirely out of sight, though he could have stood, and what with him being so bloody much taller than me, he could have seen right over its top and talked directly to me. Of course the sheer embarrassment over what he had to say accounted for his temporary invisibility.

When he finished, and I said nothing, he said, "Have you nothing to say?"

"Nothing to an invisible man, Harry. Just come on bloody out and get it over with."

He did, making a show of first peeking around the edge like a schoolboy getting the lay of the land to see where there might be danger to his person, whether from other boys, or prefects, or masters or even the dreaded headmaster. I rather thought that just then I stood in the role of dreaded headmaster.

I was seated in one of the large chairs by the fireplace, and he sauntered over to sit in the other. A nervous saunter, as he knew he really had no business sauntering at all.

"Get what over with?" he asked with all the innocence he could muster. "Are you going to rap my knuckles with a ruler?" He looked about. "No, I guess not. Unless you have one hidden up your sleeve. Or down your trousers."

"You're an idiot, Harry," I said fondly.

"I am not an idiot, Reggie! Not at all. Well, not a lot. I mean, hardly ever. Or... just occasionally."

"This morning being one of those occasions."

He sighed and finally nodded. "And is this where you're going to say you told me so?"

"Do you really think I am going to pass up this opportunity?"

He sighed, just an ordinary sigh, head down, admiring my exquisite... and dry... Aubusson. "You never do." His head snapped up at that. "Not that you have all that much occasion."

I let that one slide past.

"I told you so, Harry. I told you Bendy Ben is not Bentley. Had you asked, I would definitely have told you that under no circumstances were you to even hint to Bentley that you thought he was someone named Bendy Ben, who implicitly has a photographic association with the Emporium."

He took it in stride. One of the most marvelous things about my beff was that when he was wrong, especially if he was caught at it, he at least owned up to it.

The wrongness here was not in his conclusion that the images we had seen at other-Harry's, the ten images I had purchased as a die-before-disclosing-to-Harry secret, were photographs of a masked Bentley. He was, I was certain, absolutely right, though we had no proof.

And I reminded myself that I had not wanked to mental imaginings of *Bentley*... the real Bentley, the manservant to my best friend... doing all those delicious and delightful and perverted things I imagined him doing with me on and off that swing. The man in my head was someone who merely... looked somewhat like Bentley might look naked, who merely resembled Bentley if he were to have a prick that size and engage in those kinds of things, masked or not.

The former was awful and faintly disgusting. The latter was, I assured myself, not.

But still, he should never have said anything. "I told you Bentley was not Bendy Ben. He told you so, as well."

"Well, no he didn't. He never actually *said* he wasn't."

"Harry, if you were he, and the subject of such a horrible accusation, would you dignify it with an actual response?"

Which was, in its own way, a kind of idiotic thing to ask. Harry would most likely blurt out an immediate and loud denial. So I clarified. "If you weren't a blurter?"

After a moment, he agreed.

"And let's say, by some ridiculous chance, you were right. Would you truly want to *know*?"

"Well, of cour... Oh."

"Indeed. How could you ever look at him in the same way? Stop... imagining things? How could he remain in your employ, knowing that you knew *that* about his private life?"

I waved away the impending impetuous remark that those photographs didn't look at all private to him. "You know what I mean, Harry."

"Very well. You're right."

"As ever. And now, let's get to the matter of the bribes required to keep him around. And why you found it necessary to come here."

The answer was, apparently, wrapping paper. Gift wrapping paper. He had none in his own home that he knew of; he was fairly sure the ever resourceful Bartlett would have some, with appropriate accessories for appropriate finishing touches, and thus his arrival, so that he could get the box of Cuban cigars wrapped. The inordinately expensive Cuban cigars, he informed me. Top of a line I had no interest in. And a brand Bentley had once recommended to him as being particularly fine.

Fortunately, that was not all. He planned on offering him a full day off each week, instead of the usual half-day, though with the necessary accompanying proviso, that all of Harry's clothes for the day would be set out so that they could be found and donned at the appropriate times.

We then came to the crux of the matter. The actual bribe. A one-time conveyance of a sum, no matter the size, might leave the impression of willingness to be subtly blackmailed, by time to time reminders of his employer's egregious offense. The solution was a rise in wages. And that was where the delicacy came in.

Too large and it would be clear he was being bought and paid for. And while he would accept it, as what man would not, he might eventually come to resent it. Too little, and he might be so offended he would set aside his

forgiveness and walk away. The amount had to be perfect, a just-right figure that apologized on a long-term basis, but without groveling.

We discussed the matter and came to a conclusion.

I rang for Bartlett, who arrived with a coat, an umbrella, and a brilliantly wrapped box of cigars. Plus a bag with handles into which he placed the gift after the elegance of its wrapping had been admired. "The rain has somewhat slackened, my lord. I am sure you will be able to make it home with a minimum of difficulty."

We both thanked him, and in fairly short order, Harry was on his way.

I went back to my bedroom, sat in the same chair, and pondered my recollection of the masked slave image I had seeded so bloody well to. All this discussion of Bendy Ben had gotten me stirred up. I could not do it just then, but later, when I was supposedly asleep, I would find a moment or three to wank to mental pictures of the man who wasn't Bentley but merely resembled him, perhaps a long-lost brother or cousin, doing marvelous things to me with his mouth and arse.

My evening was not going to be quite so dull after all.

THE SECOND INTERLUDE

*1 November 1882, 1:45 p.m.
37 Preston Street
London*

“You broke your word.” The frigidity of the four words was the only real indication of the underlying fury in the man who sat quite upright in the chair in front of the desk. A chair designed to pull its occupants down and down into its lushness. An elegant-fabric and plump-stuffing seduction into relaxation. And with relaxation, perhaps inattention that would give the occupant of the comfortable, but not at all seductive, chair behind the desk, some advantage related to the reason for the occupancy of the chairs.

This time, the reason for the occupancy was simple. The man in the seductive chair had walked into the Emporium through one of the private entrances; made his way through the labyrinth with the accustomed ease of one familiar with the intricacies of its deliberately difficult passageways, and arrived at the outer office for the actual office.

The guardian of that particular gate, an *actual* Reginald, took one look at the new arrival's face and decided to apply the words of wisdom his da had imparted to him long ago, before he ever left Ireland: “When you find yourself between a brick wall and an oncoming train, step sideways. Quickly.”

Actual-Reginald sidestepped by simply waving his hand towards the door to the actual office, and saying, “He's in.”

The door did not get flung open with a dramatically forceful gesture, compelling it to crash against the inner wall, although it was opened without a knock or a “by your leave.” When the door was closed, it was with a moderate degree of force, enough to make a point, but without the degree necessary to call the closing a slam.

A few strides forward—long strides, naturally, given the length of the legs doing the striding—and he was in front and seating himself in the seductive chair.

The man behind the desk was not as annoyed by the unannounced intrusion as he might otherwise have been. He had, after all, been expecting it to occur for several days, though he had not known precisely when. When had turned out to be there and then.

Faced with the accusation, the man behind the desk did what he did when confronted with a truth he did not care to acknowledge: he lied, and lied well. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The problem for the man behind the desk was not so much the fact of the confrontation, but how much the other man knew. If he only knew the first, and smaller part, whether each detail or only in general, the problem could be solved, or at least smoothed over. If he knew the second part, or the third part, or both—a distinct possibility, since the man involved in the third part had a distinct tendency to blather, babble and blurt—the problem might be insoluble. Might even mean the severing of a most profitable business relationship.

The furious man opened his mouth to speak, shut it, and then spoke something different from what he had perhaps originally intended. “The hell with it.”

The man behind the desk affected surprise. “The hell with your accusation? You are retracting it?”

The man in the seductive chair did not demean himself with a derisive snort, but the sense of it was felt, anyway. “Not likely. ‘To hell with it’ is directed at this chair. I decline to choose one of the others, knowing how uncomfortable they will be, thus encouraging me to speak quickly and leave even more so. I have decided I will simply enjoy the comfort of this chair, declining to allow it to seduce me into unawareness and give you an advantage.”

With that, he relaxed the rigidity of his posture, scooted his arse backwards, and somewhat collapsed into a spread of long, loose limbs along the arms of the chair, and stretched out towards the floor. He sighed. “Much, much better.”

His posture left him looking slightly up at the man behind the desk, but that did not concern him. There was no lessening of the previous ice, when he said, “You broke your word. You know when and where and why.”

He held his hand up to forestall words that weren’t about to be uttered. “And to avoid prolonging this with further protestations of your lack of knowledge of the subject matter: limited editions.”

"And so they are."

Another lie. They had been, but really, when faced with the opportunity to make a sale at an inflated price, and only hours later, another, no one with the slightest degree of sense or avarice could have expected him to refuse the sales.

"Or were. Or perhaps never were at all. Your word was: limited editions, made available only to carefully selected men, none of whom would put me at risk of having those images invade my personal world."

He paused, and if anything, the fury and frigidity increased, though the volume did not. "I was confronted with them in my own home—" They both ignored the not-quite-accurate description. "—and was accused of being Bendy bloody Ben. And if one knows, the other knows, since they bloody share everything."

An odd expression crossed his face, one the man behind the desk could not interpret. It was followed by a temporary crack in the ice, the smallest of inward-looking smiles, and then the ice resealed itself, so the surface was slick and smooth once more.

"You lied, of course," said the man behind the desk. "Denied everything."

"Of course not. I didn't dignify it with an answer and took offense at the accusation."

"An interesting approach. Effective?"

The responding smile was smug. "Quite."

"Ultimately profitable?"

"Quite."

A shrug, a gesture of spread arms and open hands from the man behind the desk. "Then there is no issue, really."

It was not quite a question.

It elicited a headshake. "I still want to know how it happened, because, as I see it, it could only have happened had you broken your word."

Another home truth the man behind the desk would have to evade. He threw the driver under the wheels.

"It was my driver. One of my drivers. He describes himself as Harry the horse. A not inaccurate description if you envision a small horse. A very small horse. I believe you are acquainted with him."

"I wouldn't describe it as being acquainted." The man in the seductive chair recalled the beginning and ending of his acquaintanceship—with the driver's large, hairy arse. And how thoroughly that arse had enjoyed being pounded roughly by a far more expensive prick, in both length and width. Right after completion of the photography for *The Masked Slave* and *The Coachman*. "And how?"

"It seems some gentlemen of your acquaintance made a similar acquaintance of Harry-the-horse. Quite recently. And between rounds of, ah, horsemanship, he shared with them some photographs to rekindle their interest in riding again. As it happened, one or two were of you. One in the latest masked slave set, the other of the, ah, Bendy Ben set. Though he does not, of course, know your name. Or theirs, other than the names they gave him."

Fury abated, he stretched his arms, and sat up. Stood up. "You will, of course, remind Harry-the-driver that he is not to share those photographs again?"

"But of course."

Having evaded a problem of significant proportions by careful falsehoods, the man behind the desk decided to do the source of some of his most profitable gentlemanly portraits the courtesy of standing on his departure. It was a signal honor, but one which he knew would be ignored. Still, he stood.

The black gentleman in black let himself out, with more quiet than he had let himself in.

The owner of the office sat in his chair. Were they... the purchasers of the Bendy Ben and the most recent Masked Slave set, aware that there was another set demonstrating the remarkable flexibility of Bendy Ben? And the earlier Masked Slave sets? With the coachman? With the judge? With the stable boy? With the prince?

He would be, he was sure, able to persuade the gentlemen to both purchase, and maintain silence about the identity of Bendy Ben. He would even refrain from giving them hints.

He smiled to himself and rose. It was time to determine whether anything interesting... whether *anyone* interesting, was happening in the reading rooms.

THE FIFTH VISIT

Harry

2 November 1882, 10:30 a.m.

No. 24 Bramwell Road

London

Was I really going to do this?

There was no reason I should not. We had made no agreement, Reggie and I, that *all* our Edwardian adventures would be as a cou... no. Would be in company. Although, in truth, we had so far shared all our adventures. Hell, even *Monsieur* Jacques turned out to be a shared adventure, as we happened upon him when we were together, and then fucked him sequentially. Just... separated by a few days.

But Reggie had known I'd had his mouth, and he'd shared the news with me about having his arse. So really, if one were counting... which I wasn't, of course... one would still have to consider that as an adventure together.

This, however, was different. It was an adventure I was planning for myself, and one I had no intention of divulging to Reggie. Ever.

I was sure... No, I was positive, with a certainty carved in granite... Bloody hell. I had all the certainty of something indeed carved in granite—granite-colored sand—that I needed an adventure all on my own, to find out if there was any difference. If the extraordinary nature of our adventures was something one could simply expect from being a friend of Edward's, engaged in doing any of the multitudinous things Edwardian friends did to one another, or whether the specialness came from the sharing.

Yes. That was it. I was doing a Reggie-like thing of carefully examining all the facts before making a decision. As to whether I truly wanted any adventures without Reggie to share them.

I reread the note.

Mr. Felcher,

I should like to engage the services of the Emporium in arranging a private showing of some more recent gentlemanly portraits of two of your young gentlemen. I am uncertain of their names, but I believe you might recall them. Their portraits were on display on the occasion of my first visit to your fine establishment.

The artistic quality of those images was, as you are well aware, quite high. I must commend you for permitting me to experience such a highly satisfying observation of such extraordinary images. I am wondering, however, whether, on this occasion, it might be possible for me to procure new images, beyond those already created. That is, images, for which I might have the opportunity to select the poses to be assumed by the gentlemen.

I find that I may be leaving the city for a period. Perhaps going abroad. Your cooperation in this endeavor, to the end of making it occur much sooner, rather than much later, will certainly be well rewarded.

I had been careful with my writing, the tortoise approach, as it were, so the letter was comprehensible. All it required was a signature, blotting, folding, sealing in the envelope I had already addressed, summoning... requesting Bentley attend me, and sending it off.

I did all that and then regretted what I had done. But not enough to pen another note reversing the first.

Which might have led to a third note reversing the second reversing the first, which would have created an entirely correct picture of my dithering, but which was simply one I was unwilling to share with Felcher.

And if I screwed my courage to the non-sticking point, I could always tell Felcher my plans had changed and I had to leave for the country sooner than I expected.

I was brought out of my ruminations by a barely there knock, and Bentley's entrance. My startlement at seeing him with my envelope still in his hand must have shown... well, of course it did... but Bentley, with that somewhat stiff politeness that still pertained between us, said, "This is not your envelope, my lord."

Of course it was. He'd just now stepped...

Oh.

The clock most carefully brought to my attention that I had been wandering in mental fields far away from Bramwell Road for nearly an hour.

Bentley passed me the envelope, and though I would have been within my rights to have waved him away to read it in private, before our recent contretemps he would have been present. So I let him stay.

Mr. Maus,

Bastard. I could hear the mockery in his head as he wrote that, though at least he did not use my correct name.

From our first meeting I had a sense of the fineness of your artistic talents, which was confirmed by one of my employees, who most enthusiastically endorsed your artistry, following that private discussion the two of you had on the occasion of your first visit to my establishment.

So. Reginald-John-Reginald opens his mouth for gossip, as well as pricks. Not that I really expected him to keep our encounter all that much a secret. I was, I felt, rather good that night, for one's virginity-excising first fuck.

And, of course, the superb nature of those qualities was also displayed with much brilliance at the recent private showing. In light of these previous occasions, perhaps you and I might engage in a private, and somewhat leisurely, exploration of the types of artistic expression you find most appealing? I am sure I could find examples which would be most exciting for you, whetting your appetite, as it were, for more.

Not bloody likely. Although, if I were fully honest with myself, something which I try not to be, I would not be *entirely* averse to experiencing Felcher's tongue for myself. Though there would, of course, be no occasion for actual felching.

But pardon my digression into matters of a more social nature. The earliest occasion on which I can arrange to fulfill your request is 9th November at 9:00 p.m. I believe compensation of £50 would be appropriate, with something additional offered to the gentlemen, purely in your discretion, should you find yourself particularly excited or moved by the portraiture.

Please advise me whether this meets with your travel plans.

Another fucking florid "F" for a signature.

Still, I had what I wanted.

If I truly wanted it. And I do. Or I think I do.

So be it. I shall sing "Onward, Edward's soldiers" as I marched into the Emporium a week from now.

I created a note bearing just the word “yes” and my signature, and prepared another envelope.

Handing it to Bentley, I said, “If you would be so kind as to have this delivered? There will be no reply.”

“Of course, my lord.” He paused at the door. Purely for effect, of course, because he could have said whatever it was he had to say before moving. It did not require his walking several feet away to gather his thoughts. Bentley was a fine and fast thought-gatherer.

“Might I inquire if there are any... plans involving the Emporium about which you might require my assistance?”

It really wasn't any of his business. He was, after all, my manservant, not my director of social engagements. On the other hand, as I was walking on the thinnest of eggshells just now, and would likely be doing so for some time, recent gifts and increased emolument notwithstanding.

“I have arranged for a private showing at the Emporium. One week from this evening. But I believe everything is in hand.”

“Ah. So you have already notified Lord Smythe of this event, or consulted with him prior to arranging it?” He said that as if he knew the answer, damn him.

I somewhat wished I could say yes, but... “No. This is a *private* showing. He will not be attending.”

The disapproval I felt emanating from him was odd. Yes, he had been instrumental in my learning that Reggie's inclinations towards all things Edwardian paralleled my own previously undiscovered inclinations. But Reggie and I had not performed some Edwardian equivalent of jumping a Scots broom and pledged our troth to dual-only adventuring and learning.

Though one might, if one wanted, consider that whole Burton-Mecca-Intrepid-Assistant silliness as just that.

One might... but one didn't have to.

And so I wouldn't.

In the coming week, Reggie and I would do the things we normally did together, perhaps even with the addition of some activity of an Edwardian nature. I would have ample time to set the stage for my unavailability on the ninth, should the question arise.

Though it likely would not. We were not, after all, together every day.

Just most.

I ignored my inner self and focused on just what poses I would put those two in. Particularly the poses involving my participation. I rather thought that first...

Reggie

2 November 1882, 11:15 a.m.

No. 18 Bramwell Road

London

I needed to do this. *Needed*, not merely had a prick *wanting* it.

Though my prick was not *wanting* with quite the fervor I expected when I first thought of it.

Until I began seriously analyzing this issue, I had not realized how much we have been in each other's company over the years. As children, when both of us were at our family estates, which was most of the time, we did not see each other quite daily, but it was rare for more than two days, or three at most, to pass without us at least briefly seeing one another. It was far more likely we spent time together.

We had rooms together at university. And on graduation and entry into the adult world we had always been destined for, the contact between us was naturally different. Two separate family homes when in London. Only occasional travel with them when they went to the estates for a long stay, as we viewed anything more than a few days as an insufferably long stay when the delights of the City were eagerly awaiting our return. And as all the world knows—the world that “counts,” which is to say, the ton—eventually we purchased homes only three doors apart.

I had never thought of it before, but even this purchase of homes did not cause eyebrows, singly or in pairs, to be lifted at us, wondering things we wanted no one to wonder about. Though at that time, of course, we had no idea—stupid, blind us—that there even was something about which our friends and others could have wondered.

I could not recall an invitation I had received to or for anything in years, whether something all manly like a trip to the races or a visit to the latest gambling establishment, or something of a society nature, a ball, a dinner, a house party, where Harry was not invited as well. So when we had been... enlightened to our propensities towards experiencing all the things we could experience in the world of friends of Edward's, it was only natural that we should start off experiencing them together. Just not...

I cut that thought off.

Which led me to wonder, after some *oddness* I have yet to fully understand when we did what we did with other-Harry, what it would be like to experience an Edwardian experience on my own. Technically, fucking *Monsieur Jacques* was on my own, since Harry wasn't there to watch. But he might as well have been, since I found myself somewhat gloating... *while it was going on*, but only to myself... that I was having his arse, and Harry "only" got his mouth. And of course I told him afterwards, which made it essentially a shared adventure.

And the experience I wanted was to be, for a while, other-Harry. Controlling the hands and mouths and arses and skins and body parts of two other men. Without Harry watching me. Without Harry knowing if I bugged it or if I was brilliant, either by observation or by my telling him the tale. The latter was not going to happen.

I considered my just-blotted letter.

Mr. Felcher,

I have conceived a desire for a private showing, but of a somewhat different nature than you have so far afforded. I should like to be present at an actual photography session. Two appropriate gentlemen of your choice, but with the understanding that I might decide on the poses in which their images would be captured. Of course, I would require that samples, if not the full range, of their prior portraits be available at the time, as I do not wish to find myself duplicating your own or some other's artistry.

I had lingered a little over this phraseology, wondering whether it was enough for him to understand I wasn't bloody talking about actual photography, but having the power to decide where their hands and mouths and pricks and arses went in relation to my hands, and mouth, and prick. Not, I was almost entirely certain, my arse at all. After all, I couldn't just write to him, "Find me two men I can use for an hour or two, as I will, without damage to either, in private."

I decided it would have to do, and if, on my arrival, as I was certain Felcher would not decline, I found an actual photography session, I would carefully explain to Felcher the meaning of "subtlety," and how to detect it and comprehend it when I was using it with him.

I would prefer to have this private showing in the near future, as I may well be unavailable for some time to engage in any activities relating to gentlemanly portraiture.

That was not *quite* a lie. I might forego the delights of the Emporium for a time, but I still had my own set of gentlemanly portraits to help assuage any needs I might have.

Please advise me whether this will be possible, and if so, the price you are proposing for these services.

The price he was proposing for the men servicing me. I signed it and then debated how to get it to the Emporium.

I really had no desire to go traipsing around London, or even to the Pig and Whistle, to try to find someone who would deliver the note for me, without asking questions and with assurance that it would in fact be delivered.

Which left me with requesting Bartlett's assistance. The obvious risk, of course, was that he would know of the Emporium, and either its reputation—which even I was uncertain of, as I had never before heard of it in my milieu, and I could hardly go round asking men of the ton what they knew about it—or its reality. Since I knew I could rely on Bartlett to arrange for and achieve delivery, I decided that an older, long-married man, in a staid household nearly at the pinnacle of the ton, at least in social standing, would have no knowledge of the Emporium, nor any way, nor any reason, to acquire knowledge of it. In so deciding, I resolutely squashed any consideration of the relationship between words such as “older,” “long-married,” and “pinnacle” might have to Crenshaw.

Bartlett answered my ring with his customary speed. “My lord?”

I handed him the sealed, addressed envelope. “Please arrange to have this delivered.”

He looked down at the address, considered, said, “If you have no objections, my lord, I shall give this task to Samuel. He is most reliable.”

Samuel? Samuel? Oh, yes. A relatively new footman I had seen on only two or three occasions. These sorts of hiring decisions I left to the able auspices of Dutton and Bartlett, and his assigned tasks had so far not required any interaction with me. Although, as was customary, I was introduced to each new member of my staff, and I had perhaps seen him in passing.

Oh.

Samuel.

A young man, though not all that much younger than me, who was, if my newly acquired, still shaky ned-sense was functioning properly—in a

retrospective mode—was quite probably a friend of Edward's. A dear, dear friend. Intimate, you might almost say.

Well, bloody hell. Was there any significance to this selection? Did Bartlett know about me? About Harry? Had he and Bentley become friends, gossiping intimate details about their employers over a pint at the pub? Had he said anything to anyone else? Would he?

And no bloody way to ask any of the questions.

My pause had become slightly too long, so I rushed to fill it. "Sorry, Bartlett. I didn't quite recall for a moment I had a Samuel in my employ. New, isn't he?"

"About two months, my lord."

"Working out well, is he?"

And now I was talking too much. It was not my practice to inquire about my staff, especially not the most junior footman. I was a good employer, paying better than fair wages, but I had other things to occupy my life than learning about theirs. Among those was learning about Harr... about the pricks, and other parts, of men who were not Harry.

I prudently, albeit belatedly, stopped talking.

"Just so, my lord. Do you wish him to wait for a reply?"

"No. This is the gentleman's place of business, and I am not sure whether he will even be there at this particular time. Delivery to whoever answers the door will be sufficient. It will probably be a man named Reginald."

Bartlett was too well trained, not to say anything of his experience, to blink at that. For the same reasons he did not ask me aloud, "Are you quite serious, my lord?"

I nevertheless responded to the non-question with a sigh, and, "Unfortunately, I am quite serious."

Bartlett nodded and left to do as I asked.

I had no idea whether Felcher was there, when he would reply. It could be soon; it could be days. I decided to see whether it would be soon. I would give him an hour. I had ample resources with which to occupy my time while waiting for the reply.

I had more than enough work to do on various business matters, particularly some recent developments in the railroad investment. Alternatively, I could

locate my well-read copy of *A Christmas Carol*, and start reading it again, as we were heading towards that holiday, though not yet on the steep downward slope that would have me desirous of finishing it on Christmas Eve.

After a half hour in which I lost track of how many times I added the same three columns of figures, and came up with a different result for each column every time, I turned to Mr. Dickens. At the end of the hour, I still had not made it past the door knocker moment. I did not quite slam Dickens on the desk, but it was a near-run thing.

Fortunately, Bartlett entered after, rather than during, my tantrum. He held one of Felcher's envelopes. I recalled it from the last missive. "Another urchin?"

"Indeed, sir."

"Well, they certainly cost less than all the expense of wages, food and shelter for a footman. Perhaps we ought to consider..." My foray into humor fell sadly flat. Hammered flat was probably more correct, given Bartlett's expression.

"It was merely a joke, Bartlett," I said as I took the envelope.

"If I may say, my lord"—as if he was not going to say what he had to say, with or without my permission—"that was rather less successful than your last humorous comment."

Even though he was not at that dinner, Bartlett was still at the pinnacle of servant power in the household, equaled only by the standing of Dutton. In most ton establishments, the lord's manservant stood just a step below the butler, but early on, the pair had worked out a power-sharing arrangement that enabled *my* establishment to function in a most efficient manner.

Bartlett certainly had spies amongst the footmen and the maids, though he would be righteously indignant were I ever to say so, thus it was no surprise he had heard the tale. I refused to call what I said that I thought would elicit laughter, as the humiliation of the failure was enough recollection. My attempt had resulted in dead silence at the dinner table. A kind of rippling effect, spreading down the table to my mother and upwards to my father, so that those at the far ends of each ripple knew only that something untoward had happened but not precisely what, while those near me knew bloody well.

The ton being what it was, by the time all of the gentlemen had finished with after-dinner port—me, in a large measure—and other libations, and

cigars—never!—they all knew precisely what I had thought humorous and about which no one else agreed. Upon our return to join the women, they immediately shared their knowledge with women, who undoubtedly daintily forbore to enlighten the men that they were already more well versed in this knowledge than they. Later, as the guests departed to other entertainments, the word spread amongst the ton at the speed of an express train.

I used an opener to slice the top of the envelope, pulled the paper out, flipped the top up. Felcher had agreed, though I would have to wait a week. Nine fifteen, on the evening of the ninth. And he wanted £70? I had an orgy for £70 the last time we were there.

Bloody hell. It wasn't that I couldn't afford it. It was just that I wasn't certain I would get that much fucking benefit, and I smiled to myself because that *was* humorous, from the expenditure of all that money.

And then there was the need to create "other plans" for that night.

Considering how frequently Harry and I were in each other's company, I would have to ensure that nothing appeared untoward over the next week, and in that time devise an appropriate and reasonably believable excuse for my unavailability on the ninth. Harry, luckily for me, couldn't lie worth a tinker's damn, and accompanied that inability with a willingness to believe any but the most outrageous tales I might tell him.

I had a week to decide on the lie. I would think about that tomorrow.

Harry

9 November 1882, 9:18 p.m.

37 Preston Street

London

My good nature is renowned amongst the ton, and with good reason. I am never not good-natured, except upon those rare occasions when circumstances require me to be. My sangfroid in moments of possible social peril, or at least difficulty, is legendary. My knowledge of the social niceties in even the most extraordinary circumstances is unparalleled.

Thus, my reaction to the door opening just as Ralph slid his prick all the way into Alex's arse, and turning my head away from that delectable sight—the anticipation of which had kept my prick hard the entire way to the Emporium and right to that moment—to find bloody damned Reggie walking in, was the epitome of politeness.

I stood. I most definitely did not leap out of the vastly comfortable armchair to my feet. I quite naturally ignored my half nakedness, which was to say, ankled, drawer-less trousers, and shirttails temporarily tucked up under my waistcoat.

I drew on all my good nature, sangfroid, and social nicety knowledge, and with quiet dignity, most politely said to him, “What the bloody hell are you doing here?”

It was entirely uncalled-for, and, I felt, egregiously impolite to have him simultaneously roar at me in a big-doglike manner, “What the fuck do you think you're doing, Harry?”

Sangfroid to the rescue. Or an equally valid view: first bloody touch in a duel. “Do you have me confused with someone else, sir? My name is Jerry, as I thought you knew. Perhaps you might leave and ask Mr. Felcher or one of the Reginalds to locate this Harry person for you? He's undoubtedly in some other room—a room in which you might be a welcome intruder.”

He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. Breathed heavily for two good breaths. Then, “I meant to inquire... Jerry... what you are doing in the room I paid for, with the men whose services I have also paid for.”

"Doing, sir?" I asked, in the marveling tone of an adult about to enlighten a rather stupid child. I waved my hand as I turned my head to verify the accuracy of my about-to-be-spoken words. Yes. "Ralph and Alex are fucking."

I waved at my upstanding prick so that he would know where to look. "I am wanking."

I waved dismissively at him, before returning my hand to where it belonged. "And you are intruding in a room *I* paid for."

We both acquired a "well, bloody hell" look on our faces.

I looked down and forward and slightly to my left. Reggie looked directly at me, and then down in the same direction I had looked, his passing eyes having something of the effect of a hand stroke on my cock. We both looked at the same object.

The second armchair.

The fucking second fucking armchair.

When I arrived and saw two armchairs, with the usual side table and stacked cloths, I made an ass of myself by not inquiring why there were two armchairs in the room, when there was only one person who had paid to direct this little drama, which featured two actors, nakedness, erectness, and a great deal of sex until I was bloody seeded out.

"Fucking Felcher," I said, not giving a fuck or a damn whether my words breached some protocol about not insulting Felcher in the presence of his employees.

"Fucking Felcher," Reggie agreed.

Why in the bloody hell was I remaining hard through this discussion?

"Well, then," I said, "go find fucking Felcher and get him to give you a refund. Or he can find you another room. This room, these men, are mine."

"Like bloody hell I will." All that Smythe stubbornness came to the fore, which I could have done without just then.

It was only four long strides from where he was to the second armchair, so not nearly enough time and space for a martial march, but damned if he didn't accomplish it.

I was beside the left arm of my chair. Reggie was at the center point of the one I almost, but definitely did not, think of as his. We were facing each other. I

briefly wished for an eight-guinea prick, so that I could thrust my hips forward and annoy him by smearing prick-leak on the front of his trousers. Though, that would probably in reality have required a ten- or twelve-guinea prick and a step. Ah, well.

"Ah... should we leave?" I did not know whether it was Ralph or Alex who asked, as hearing their grunts and moans and other noises of vigorous sex on our first visit, was not conducive to any subsequent ability to recognize their individual voices.

There was no need to decide. Reggie's head and mine immediately snapped in their direction, with all the precision of the guards changing at Buckingham Palace, and we both barked, "No!"

An altercation between two competing... two very competitive... paid-for-the-privilege directors of the drama, each with his own firm convictions as to how the action on this intimate stage should be blocked, was apparently not conducive to the actors staying in character. "Character," of course, being hard and remaining hard.

Unlike my own still-rampant cock. Which was apparently insufficient directorial encouragement to get *my* two actors back in character.

"This will be resolved momentarily. Mr. Katt is about to depart."

"Not bloody likely, Mr. Maus," he replied, as we turned our heads to look at each other again.

I stared, being the polite one of this pair, and he glared, and then he turned to his left, backed the tiniest bit, and plopped his arse down on the chair.

And bent over and began untying his left shoe.

"You are *not* undressing." It wasn't a shout. Not really. Just a firm statement loud enough to easily cross the vast distance of the two or so feet between us, so that he could hear me without straining.

He finished the left shoe, removed it, tossed it to his left in a most *un*-Reginald-Smythe-the-ever-precise manner, did the same with the right, stood.

"I said—" I said, but he interrupted me.

"I heard what you said. Do you need spectacles, Jerry?"

I only gaped a little at this *non sequitur*.

"I only ask because you said I was not undressing, when the removal of one's shoes in circumstances such as these, indeed, in most circumstances,

would seem to be a fairly clear indication that one was, in fact, undressing. Thus my concern about any visual difficulties you might be having in seeing things clearly. Or perhaps, is it a mind problem? You can see, but just not understand?"

All this was while he was removing his jacket, dropping it behind his... behind the bloody damned second... armchair, with no proper Reginald regard for what might be on the floor—especially this floor in this building—that might have an adverse effect on it. Even life-threatening. Followed by his waistcoat. Followed by his braces being pulled off his shoulders so that they dangled.

I had never thought braces could dangle provocatively, but so they did.

I ignored the provocation as he put his hands to the topmost button on his trousers. "No. What I meant, which you bloody well knew, was that I did not wish you to undress. That I was... commanding you not to undress."

"Did you pay Felcher for the use of this room?" he asked as he slowly undid the first button, and then the second.

My eyes could not help following the unbuttoning process, but I jerked them back up to his face to reply, "Too bloody much."

By this time he was at the last button, the pressure of his hands preventing his trousers from doing more than just slipping a bit downward. "As did I. How much?"

"Fifty."

"The blighter. Also, the buggerer! He charged me seventy."

"He must like me more." Childish, certainly, but irresistible.

"He bloody well shouldn't, not after I gave..." That sentence trailed off because it would undoubtedly have ended with something to the effect of "him a damned good arse and mouth fucking on my first visit." Although Felcher's more public activities were patently no secret, Reggie rightfully decided Felcher nevertheless deserved to decide whether or not to disclose what he did in the comparative privacy of a reading room.

His lips firmed. "We both paid, regardless of amount, which I will address with him at a later time. I am, however, by virtue of that excessive payment, co-owner of this room for however long I choose to remain. You, on the other hand, are certainly free to depart at any time you choose, though I would recommend proper attire before departure."

He undid the last button and bent to shove his trousers down around his ankles, giving me a side-view glimpse of a hairy, muscular arse for the most part hidden by wrinkled shirttails. He had no drawers on. Ha. And he berated me about my sartorial choices when we were at *Monsieur Jacques's* establishment.

He sat again, leaned forward again, stepping out of his trousers, picking them up and pitching them aside to land on top of his shoes. Garters and stockings immediately followed. He stood up again, undoing his tie and tossing it aside, then undoing the buttons on his shirt.

This pitching and tossing of garments in the direction of hither, thither and yon was so unlike the usual him; so unlike, even, his almost methodical nudification in other-Harry's room.

I stopped my staring and acquired a glare as he put his hands on the collar in preparation for lifting it over his head and off. I nearly asked him what he thought he was doing, but realized that would only subject me to more unpleasantness about my eyesight and my ability to comprehend what was happening about me. I substituted, "Why are you doing this?"

While he said, "Because I can?" the fine linen slid up and over his head, followed by the customary wiggling of a man getting his arms out of the sleeves, and leaning forward to jiggle it properly off. Erect again, in all ways, he looked at the shirt dangling from his fingers, as if he might fold it with his usual precision, then the fuck-it-all expression appeared, and with his left hand he threw it somewhere in the direction of the rest his clothes.

He stretched, the flaunting bastard, arms over his head, then down, his fists clenched at his collarbones as he rotated right, then left. He dropped his hands, turned to face me, letting his right hand drop to that gnarly, veiny, admirably manly prick.

Which was a ridiculous thought. What else could a prick be but manly since it was on a man's body? But still... Reggie's prick seemed... demanding, powerful, in charge of all its single eye surveyed. Though its vision must have been rather blurry with the tears leaking from it so steadily.

Not that mine is *un*manly. I am, after all, damned well a man. But mine is plainly a more... delicate prick, slender and pale, with almost invisible light blue veins, and of course those five fucking freckles. I suspected that if we were to put our pricks through side by side glorious holes, the cocksuckers on the other side of the wall would inevitably choose Reggie's over mine.

Damn it! He did all that to distract me. I looked from his prick to his face and he smirked.

Bastard.

Without looking away from me, he said, "On your side, Ralph. Get hard, Alex. Get your prick well up his arse. I want it nice and slick and well-opened so I can fuck into it easily.

Which had been precisely my intent, though Reggie was reversing their positions. Not bloody likely.

"Gentlemen, as you were. Which means with Ralph's cock in Alex's arse, to get him ready for my prick."

We glanced together at our actors to see who they obeyed, and not surprisingly found that neither had moved. Both were—surprisingly—quite hard again.

Already at an impasse. I had decided before I arrived I would fuck Alex first, and then Ralph, and I was so damned annoyed by Reggie's intrusion into my private adventure, that I wasn't about to suggest any sort of compromise. Neither, from his silence, was he.

Damn it. And him. And fucking Felcher most of all.

I wanted to seed. I needed to seed. I didn't care what Reggie wanted or needed just then. There had...

Ah. There was.

And the solution would annoy him.

"Rochambeau."

He stopped wanking. "What?"

"Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, Katt? Helped the Americans beat us all to flinders a century or so ago?"

Alas for the wilting of Reggie's prick. A good director would be able to stand strong through all the diversions. Like I was. I would have patted my prick in pride, but didn't wish to embarrass Reggie by drawing attention to his... ah... problem.

"I have some acquaintance with history, American and ours, Maus. What the bloody hell do some battles three thousand miles away, all those years ago, have to do with anything?"

"Nothing." Before his annoyance could become too extreme, I went on. "But his decision-making methodology does."

"That is utterly childish."

"If the shoe fits."

"I won't."

"That tone would be more effective, if you accompanied it with a foot stamp and a little more pout."

He glared at me, but it was not one of his best. He was losing ground and he knew it.

"We could just leave this impasse where it is, excuse the gentlemen who might have been as interested in seeding for us, with us, as we were, and then depart ourselves. Though if that is the course of action, it will clearly be necessary for us to dress together, depart together, and remain in each other's company for at least an hour afterwards."

"You don't trust me not to sneak back and continue?"

"Do you extend that degree of trust to me?"

A snort, followed by, "Not bloody likely."

"You have your answer, then. So. Rochambeau or go?"

"Rochambeau. So. On three?"

I nodded. He got to two, but I stopped him. "*On* three? Or after three? Immediately, of course. I mean, if it's *after* three."

"Really?"

"An important distinction, Katt. You could win by waiting, if I thought you meant *on* three and went, and you meant after and had time to respond."

"Very well, Maus. *On* three, it is."

On three, we both rocked.

On three, we both scissored.

On three, my rock smashed his scissors to smithereens.

Ha! I thought, but did not say, though I let my face say it loudly.

"Ralph, as I earlier said, your prick goes up Alex's arse any time you've a mind to do it."

They were on their sides, naked but for the shoes and stockings and garters they had worn that first time. We looked down on them as cock slid into hole. Alex's prick began to rise.

Reggie's had, as well. He said, "Will it be necessary for us to stand the whole time we are here?"

I could have said it would, simply to annoy, but refrained. As I was about to sit, however, he said, "Really, Maus? Is your chest such an embarrassment that it cannot be displayed to us?"

I had entirely forgotten my *half* nakedness. "Not at all."

I then proceeded to slowly, though not so slowly as to deaden my prick, remove my unloosened tie, drape it across the back of the armchair, remove my waistcoat and carefully fold it before walking to the side of my armchair and setting it atop my equally carefully folded trousers, which were draped across my stocking-stuffed shoes. I did the same with the over-the-head shirt wiggle and jiggle, and then... of course... carefully folded it before placing it on top of my waistcoat.

I did not... I definitely did not... wiggle, jiggle, waggle or otherwise draw attention to my rather fine arse, whose paleness, unlike the rest of me was, I thought, one of its prime virtues, nor the ballocks which visibly bobbed between my legs when I bent.

The sharp inhalation as I did all this... from my co-director, not my actors... might have been my wistful or wishful imagination. I hoped it was not.

If pressed, I would admit only to the slightest bit of a strut, prick in its stone mode, back to my armchair. There was, perhaps, but only perhaps, the slightest hint of an elegant twirl, as I turned my elegant arse, and relaxed down into the seat.

That slight bump of my left hip against the left arm because I misjudged the distance, which thrust me the tiniest bit sideways, to create more of a flop than a sit, did not at all detract from the gracefulness of my maneuver.

Much.

Reggie

9 November 1882, 9:31 p.m.

37 Preston Street

London

Damn. And damn. And damn again.

Not of the joyful variety, nor... quite... of the innermost of Dante's ten, twelve, ninety-seven circles of hell.

The only person I damaged with my taunting, my insisting on Harry-Jerry nakedness to match... surpass in fineness... my own, was me.

If you wanted to examine Harry's body objectively, as of course I was well able to do, given both my beff status, and the astute analysis which I can readily bring to any subject, you would have to conclude it was superb. Carved from the palest of white marble, a symphony of subtleties of milk and ivory, it was so very smooth. And the carving of his chest and belly was not comprised of ridges to accent excessive musculature. He did not have, fortunately so, in my opinion, the kind of musculature only achieved by those inordinately gifted by whoever or whatever decides how our bodies are to be before we are ever born, or those whose bodies were inordinately improved by all the time spent following the dictates of Mr. Ernst and his successors, whether on one of the Ernst Patented Portable Home Health And Vigor Improvement Machines, or those similar torture devices in a gymnasium.

No, Harry was... quietly muscled, with a most unusual outward belly button, that had a kind of swirl to it. Sturdy, dusky pink nipples that projected in little peaks, like miniature mountains, so very unlike my own, which were of a darkish brown and looked somewhat like the end of a pencil eraser had been snapped off, the hair on my chest briefly parted to be able to find the flesh, and then glued on.

And had I mentioned smooth in my mental inventory? I thought I had, but it was well worth repeating. Not a hair from chin to groin except in two places. In his armpits, thick, richly curling, somewhat more vivid than the hair on his head. And then the blazing, tightly curled, flames that surrounded the base of his prick, made a short little triangular push towards that belly button, and dropped to caress his ballocks.

And of course the bastard couldn't just get on with the business of nakedness with the same brisk efficiency I had employed. Instead he had to twist and turn and bend and flaunt and strut. My self wanted to raise the issue of my own stretching as remarkably similar to flaunting, but I crushed him with the carefully reasoned explanation that other parts of my body besides my prick had stiffened, both on the ride here and from the stress of finding a half-naked Harry where I should have found only a naked and well-paid-for pair of men who were not Harry.

Once he was seated, I realized his prick was out of sight. Good. Distraction averted. I could focus my attention on orders to the actors, and enjoying their compliance.

Except my bloody self grabbed control of my lips when I let my attention wander just a bit, and I heard my voice saying, "If we are going to be doing this Rochambeau thing any more, we really ought to be able to see each other doing it, don't you think? Instead of raising our arms in the air as if we were gesturing towards God? So much more efficient if we simply adjust the chairs."

He got up and began to move his. I followed suit, and with some shifting and tugging and testing we soon found the right angle. Which wasn't... quite... directly facing each other.

It seemed that watching their co-directors prancing about, pricks and ballocks bobbling and swaying, was enough to keep our actors in character, Ralph steadily and slowly fucking Alex, whose prick was equally carefully and steadily being fucked into his own fist.

Seated again, our legs logically spread as wide as the width of the seats would allow, only to keep the sight lines open to see our competing hands, we rocked, papered and scissored instructions to our actors that led to multiple changes in where their pricks were placed, and what their mouths, tongues, noses and teeth were used for. Ultimately, Harry rocked my scissors and let Ralph seed Alex's arse, and Alex just followed right along, instead of waiting for Ralph's mouth.

I made a seedy mess of my chest and belly hair in concert with Ralph. In tune with Alex, Harry spurted repeatedly and left a trail of gleaming white blobs of seed in a line from just below his collarbone, to the final, squeezed-out drool just above the head of the nearly soft prick pointing towards that line.

We were quiet for a time, except for the shared sounds of well-seeded men recovering.

I didn't know about Harry and would certainly soon find out, but I wasn't going to do this again. And I wasn't just going to leave him alone with them.

I raised my voice to be sure I was heard clearly. "Gentlemen, I... we... thank you. We appreciate your extraordinary talents in the fine art of gentlemanly portraiture. Although there were no cameras present, I hope this served as a good rehearsal for the next time there are. But I think we can dispense with your services for now."

There was just enough of a pause before he said "Tom" in a stretched-out warning tone, for me to realize he'd almost blurted out "Reggie."

I stood up and stared him down, unmindful of the mess on my chest and the way it was drizzling down the forest paths towards the small sinkhole that was my own belly button.

I said firmly, "No, Jerry. No more rocking, papering or scissoring. Just you and me."

His eyes lit for a moment, my tone sank in, and the light faded. He nodded, said, "Gentlemen, he's right."

I stood, turned to my scattered clothing, and with a bit of fumbling and bumbling about, found my wallet. I pulled out two twenty-pound notes, padded over to where they uncertainly stood, and extended the bills. Their expressions plainly said this was not merely unusual, but perhaps unheard of. "We will make sure your employer understands we were not in the slightest way dissatisfied with your portraiture endeavors. And as we will not be mentioning *these*"—I nodded towards the notes—"I see no reason for you to do so. Do you?"

They readily agreed, gathered up the robes they had worn from wherever they came from, and left by a hardly noticeable door on the side wall.

I walked back to my chair and moved it so that we were facing each other. Harry no longer sprawled, and I certainly didn't when I sat down.

I hadn't thought this conversation was going to be naked. Hadn't thought, really, of how and when it was going to happen. How and when were apparently now.

My speeches are better if planned, if I have or take the time to think out what I want to say, and polish the words and phrases. I tried to take a moment to accomplish that, but there was nothing but noise inside my head. And Harry's expression made it clear he had nothing to say until he heard whatever I had to say.

What I had to say was, "You remember the night with other-Harry, Harry?"

Well, that was a stupid saying to start with. A man gets fucked for the first time, eight-guinea prick or not, he's going to remember it. He only gave me a nod back.

"Another of our adventures together, but not, as you so eloquently phrased it, *together* together. There in the same room, or somewhere at the same time and place, but separate."

Another nod while I gathered my thoughts. Except there was nothing to gather. So be it. I'd would use whatever words tumbled out.

"Always separate, Harry. And I realized something, actually a pair of things. I didn't like other-Harry being the first to fuck you. I'm not sure I would have liked anyone being the first if it wasn't me. And I'm tired of joint but apart adventures."

He said nothing, just stared at me, wide-eyed.

So be it.

"I decided I needed time to think, and what I finally decided was that I needed an adventure entirely my own. One that had nothing to do with you. To see if it was any different, whether vastly better or worse, or barely discernible either way. That was tonight. Only thanks to fucking Felcher, we have once more had an adventure together, just not fucking *together*."

I paused, and he remained silent.

"You know why I sent them away just now, Harry? Because I want to fuck you."

That last was an almost-shout, and he blinked and blinked and shrank a little in his chair. And didn't that tell me something I really didn't want to know?

"Do you remember from history what doctors were like, oh, back in the Regency days?"

His face showed his confusion at the sudden change of subject, and after a bit, understood I wasn't saying anything more until he answered.

"Um... yes?"

"Illness meant your blood was filled with ill humors, which needed to be drained away. So they put leeches on you, or cupped you. I sent Ralph and Alex away so I could fuck you that way. *You're* the ill humor in my veins, so I

figured I could fuck you once, fuck you *out* of body and mind, and then I can be what you want us to be. Just friends.

"Only as they left, I realized another thing. If I ever fuck you, it isn't going to be in the Emporium. And from all this—" I waved my hand to encompass him just sitting there, with not even a hint of an erection, plus the pulling away "—it isn't likely to ever happen anyway. You aren't even hard at the idea."

"Neither are you."

That was not among any of the responses I might have expected just then.

I became a little defensive. Only a little. "I was making a speech. An important speech. My prick was paying attention."

"And I was listening to a speech. An important speech. My prick was carefully considering all the implications, being a somewhat more thinking prick than yours I think. So we are doing that whole sauce, goose, gander thing."

There was the slightest bit of Harry, though the lightness, what little there was, was only in his voice, and not in his face or anywhere on the rest of him. I knew the latter because I examined him carefully—visually only—before reaching that conclusion.

He stopped after he said that sauce thing, so I asked him whether he had anything more to say.

"I'm thinking," he said.

"A novel approach to speaking. For you."

He gave me an eyebrow lift I had no difficulty interpreting: "Bugger off, Reggie."

So I stood in order to be able to properly bugger off. But first I had to get dressed.

"Where are you going?"

"Bugging off, though not in any way I would prefer just now, just as you told me to do."

"How many times in all these years have I told you to do that, with or without an eyebrow, with you ignoring me every single time? Countless. And *now* you choose to pay attention?"

"Harry, you clearly don't want what I want, or you'd have said something by now."

"I'm thinking! you daft bugger."

"And if it takes that much thought, the answer is going to be 'no.'"

"So now you're making the decisions for me, about what it is I think? Do you have a schedule set for when you will communicate my thoughts to me so that I might have them available in case I wish to share your... *my*... thoughts with anyone else?"

He'd gotten all frigid and rigid in voice and body, and still hadn't moved from the damned chair.

"Harry, I wasn't trying to do that, truly. If you need time to decide whether you want... that with me, then fine. We should both take some time to figure out if... *that* is right for both of us. Or if we are going to be merely together and nothing more, for however long our friendship lasts. And if that's what we're going to be, how do we deal with the knowledge that has just sort of popped up tonight, erectionless? Because, you know, Harry, I'm not at all sure I can be just beffs, with or without shared adventures any more."

I began putting my clothes back on, not particularly caring about the precision with which I dressed or the image I might present when I left this so-very-far-from-fine-just-now establishment.

"Let's just... think on it, shall we? All of it?"

I thought I heard a soft "very well" from behind me, but didn't turn to verify. I just assumed he would... I would... think on it.

With no further words, with care to avoid looking at him, I dressed in a careless way and walked to the door through which I had entered. I paused with my hand on the knob, to give him one more opportunity to say something, to say anything, to keep me there, to give me hope, to damn my hopes.

But he didn't.

I turned the handle and left.

I would, indeed, "think on it." Carefully.

And then decide.

A hint of a grin graced my lips. But decide only for myself.

Harry

*9 November 1882, 9:48 p.m.
37 Preston Street
London*

I think he heard me say “very well,” but I wasn’t sure. I would have to hope he did.

Not at all the ending I had planned for my solo adventure.

He said what I had avoided thinking about, both in other-Harry’s room, and since. I actually wanted what he said he wanted, though he might be surprised to learn I equally wanted to be his first.

But *doing* that would have changed everything between us. Telling other-Harry we wanted to be fucked first by each other, and then he could have our arses, hadn’t seemed an option just then. I resolutely avoided thinking about what might have been had either of us had the courage to speak up.

And now *talking* about it has changed everything between us.

In as much of a frightening way as the actions would have done.

So many things we could do, or not do, paths we could take, or not take, each with its own set of consequences.

Or were we simply lost in a vast maze, without a guide to where the center was and not knowing what it would contain if and when we found it?

I got up, dressed in a less haphazard fashion than Reggie, and made my own way to the door. I paused as he had done.

I would, as I’d said, “think on it.” And bloody Reggie had better be doing the same.

But if he decided for me again, I would, this time, truly give him a thump to out-thump every thump I had ever given him. Or all of them put together.

I opened the door and left the room.

THE LAST VISIT

Reggie

17 November 1882, 8:00 p.m.

No. 24 Bramwell Road

London

If I was nervous, and I most assuredly was, I had reason to be. The last eight days had been not merely painful, but steadily building to the excruciating level. And I thought... hoped... Harry might be experiencing at least some level of difficulty as well by our separation.

We had not truly been separated, in any literal sense, as we could not change our regular daily and evening social and other activities so as to avoid each other's presence. But we had no adventures in gentlemanly portraiture together, and for some odd reason I had none alone. I paid no visits to my hidden treasures, and did not even bother with a quick one in my bath.

And there was enough "off" about our interactions while among our friends that, although they could not point to anything specific, still, they were becoming aware of that "offness" and in the near future would undoubtedly start inquiring, with rising vigor as their instincts to hunt and find and tear apart any type of injured creature came to the fore.

But as it was my thinking... if you want to call it that... which had brought about the separation, it was up to me to find a way to end it. Tonight was the first step in that direction. I had even extended the invitation to him personally, rather than through a note, which he might rightfully have torn up unread.

He was somewhat visibly stiff, though not in any Edwardian way, but as we were alone in a gaming house corridor, it did not matter. What did matter was that he accepted.

And would be here soon.

I looked about the room.

Besides the others, there is a smaller secret Harry does not yet know, though I suspect... hope, actually... he eventually will. Perhaps even tonight, though I was not certain the words would come for that.

I like mirrors.

Not hand mirrors. Nor, particularly, the rather spectacular wall mirrors which adorn several rooms here, though they do serve the necessary function of

allowing you to check your appearance to be sure nothing has gone awry since the last time you checked. Five minutes earlier.

Yet another aspect of my life that now had me wondering whether this mirrored inspection was something ingrained in friends of Edward's, as opposed to being a personal peculiarity. I much preferred the former explanation. And I believed it might well be a valid one, as I have noticed Harry doing it just as much, if not more so, wherever we and mirrors might meet in our social rounds.

My former mirror, now relegated to the attics, or wherever Bartlett chose to put it, was a very ordinary, stolid English mirror, somewhat like my stolid, almost-former self. My stolidity has loosened, become more flexible, as it were, but it is not quite entirely gone, just as the propriety pole, though seemingly entirely removed, has from time to time proven not to be permanently so.

The old mirror was tall enough that I might see all of myself, or even someone taller, though Neville, my footman, so very much taller than me, would never presume to venture into my rooms to view himself. Plain, gleaming mahogany frame and back, narrow, not much wider than a slender man's width, and of course able to be tilted forward and back. On rollers so that it might be moved to wherever you needed it. It stayed where Bartlett had first placed it shortly after I purchased the house.

The mirror and I had the same relationship as Mohammed and his mountain. We both went to it.

And from time to time, though not often, since I rarely felt assured enough of privacy to risk it, I went to the mirror and wanked. Once, I even gave the household staff the day off, oddly enough and purely coincidental, of course, on a day that Bartlett was visiting his family. I spent a good part of the day wanking, walking naked for the first time in rooms other than my bedroom, though even there I was only naked while bathing or for the briefest of moments while dressing or undressing. Nakedness is not a done thing amongst the ton.

It was exhilarating, freeing, and ultimately depressing when I had to spend all that time cleaning, to be sure that no one had an inkling of anything other than that I had either spent the day at home, relaxing in my library, perhaps reading, perhaps working on my accounts. While Mr. Arbuthnot is a most excellent, astute and dedicated man of business, I am still the one who makes all the financial decisions. For a spare with no future, except for preserving my

cock and balls in an intact and productive state in case they were ever needed by the family, I have done rather well.

Sometimes, though, when I was desperate for relief, when nothing else would suffice but the pleasure of watching me pleasure myself with manipulations of my prick and ballocks, I would tell my inner self, with its yammering, warning voice, to go to the most desolate of Dante's hells. I would creep from my bed, taking the risk that Bartlett might be awake, might hear me despite my efforts to keep my groans and grunts of self-pleasuring nearly silent. Taking the risk he might see the light from the small candle I used to provide barely sufficient illumination, so slight that my body might just be a figment of my imagination and not a real image. I would go to my mirror and watch myself. And spew. And wonder.

There was no longer any reason to wonder. I knew what I dreamed of, hoped for.

Thus, the new mirror.

It was most definitely not mere mahogany. *This*, a mirror you might call glorious if you were so inclined, was of teak. Inlaid with silver. And almost voluptuous carvings around the edges of the frame. And wide. *Marvelously* wide. It looked as though it might accommodate, for its owner's viewing pleasure, two persons... *men*... side by side.

Or... in other positions. Now that I knew there were such positions.

I did not rush out to find a new mirror after our first visit to the Emporium. All the things I learned that night, all the things I experienced, seemed unrelated to mirrors. I can only conclude I have defective imagination. That all changed after our second visit. The visit in which mirrors, multiple mirrors, were so spectacularly involved. For both of us.

We were not then *together* together, merely jointly journeying. And we still are not.

We might never be, thanks to my never to be sufficiently condemned idiocy of the week past.

But I thought we would.

Though that may only be my hopes speaking. But still, something changed on our last visit. It was... what? Only our fifth? A change that went a step beyond... a *magnitude* beyond... all that had changed in our lives in the weeks since Bentley arranged our invitation to the private showing.

And I didn't understand, had not the slightest comprehension at the time, what that was.

With each new experience, with each new way to joyfully expel seed, I kept telling myself, "This was the best yet; the best I have ever experienced." There were even assurances to my utterly sated inner self that *that* was a veritable Mount Tambourine of seed explosion. But all along I knew that something was missing. Something that would remove the first two words of the "not quite perfect" attached to the "good, but..." "wonderful, but..." "marvelous, but..." descriptions of each and every one of those adventures.

I thought then, though not in actual words, *If only I knew what was missing.*

Or, more truthfully now: If I only *admitted* what it was.

I will have to see if I make any progress tonight towards removing those words—"not quite"—from our future adventures. And we *were* going to have future adventures.

I solemnly stared at the *sartorial* perfection that was me in the mirror, or at least as much perfection as a man such as I might achieve with Bartlett's able, finishing ministrations. My reflection nodded approval, his accepted it with equanimity, as of course he expected no other outcome.

"Lord Smythe should be here shortly. Send him on up, would you? I want to show him our mirror. He will be quite jealous, I think, that he has nothing comparable of his own."

Bartlett of course demurred. "Your mirror, my lord."

That was, in truth, the literal truth. But even though I had scouted it out and had it set aside, and even though a nobleman's decision was the final word in his household, on all things, it still made sense to have your manservant, if not approve, at least not entirely disapprove of a significant change in the apparatus with which he regularly worked.

"As you wish, then. My mirror."

I heard Harry's vigorous announcement of his presence at the front door, since my bedroom overlooked the street, and hence that very door. Bartlett acknowledged his having heard the same enthusiastic use of the knocker, and went to extend the invitation.

He bounded up the stairs with the enthusiasm of a bunch of gazelles all leaping and frolicking about. You could hear it in his steps. That enthusiasm had been sadly missing this past week.

He naturally walked in without knocking, stopped in the doorway. I could see his reflection in the mirror. "You're not ready," he said.

"Not quite."

"Bartlett said you were ready. Bartlett, like Bentley, is never wrong. So what did you do to un-ready yourself and why?"

I ignored that home shot and instead asked him to come view my marvelous new mirror.

He made a mostly mocking point of crossing the room with an intense gaze on... not merely the mirror, but himself and me in it... followed by a careful circling, first peering closely at the left side of the mirror standing just in front of me and a little to my right, then on around, spending far too long inspecting the back, followed by an examination of the right side, and ending with him turning to stand beside it, watching me watch myself in its depths.

I made subtle adjustments to attire that Bartlett had already adjusted into just-rightness. And then my reflection and I turned our heads towards Harry. It was only us moving, of course, nothing special about that, except... tonight we, my image and I, had a certain *juh nezz say koi*, as Harry so often said, about us. The gleam of my lightly pomaded hair, the tilt of my mustache. Something. And then our eyes reached Harry's.

"Will you tie my tie, Harry?" He blinked at me and at the only item of my attire lacking in just-rightness, as he had so clearly noticed upon his arrival. My tie. Shortly after Bartlett left the room it had succumbed to a mysterious illness that left it limp and dangling there.

There was nothing entirely limp and dangling about anything else in the room, I was suddenly sure. I decided to temporarily believe in God, and thank Him for that bit of beneficence.

"It felt a little, ah, tight around my neck."

Liar!

Shut up! There's a reason.

Yet another plan?

I ignored my self's commentary.

"I must have tugged it a little too hard. And now it doesn't look quite right." I gave him my best rueful smile at using "doesn't look quite right" to describe a tie that was just then the epitome of unrightness.

A vigorous yanking will do that.

I ignored my self.

"Would you mind? You tie your own so well, you don't really even need Bentley."

Good Lord, sir. Not even Fotherby would... well, you will be damned. He is falling for that blatant bit of ego-stroking.

I smirked at my self, where only my self could see. I manfully restrained from sticking out my tongue. Harry might have misconstrued it.

"Wouldn't you prefer Bartlett, Reggie?" He still stood by the mirror, but his body was no longer standing in a relaxed pose, but was instead poised, ready to move.

I was, just then, entirely uncertain whether the movement would be away or towards. His face said neither was he.

"Oh, I don't think we need him here right now, do you?"

He blinked, and blinked again. "Ah. No?"

"Well, then, old chap. Get on with it."

He stepped to my left side, and I turned to face him. If either of us looked to the side we could see ourselves. I ignored the fact that there was the tiniest bit of tension in his face as he avoided looking at me, but instead focused on the no-longer-quite-right tie. Ignored, too, the tension initially extending to his hands, creating just a little shaking, as he gathered up the cloth, paused and lifted the ends to the starting position.

Still not looking at me, he inhaled deeply, and let the breath out slowly. Calm now, his fingers were as nimble on my tie as they had been on other-Harry's prick, as they would be on my prick, as well. Or so I was certain, though it had not happened. It was a delicate touch, strong where needed, knowing precisely what needed to be done, and doing it well.

In a trice... in a half of a half of a part of a trice... he was done. He admired his handiwork before lifting his head enough for our eyes to meet.

More stillness.

Then he brushed his right thumb beneath my collarbone, and used his first three fingers to flick across the front of my left shoulder, an away-from-the-mirror gesture to remove nonexistent lint and other imaginary infinitesimal

things from the fabric. After the last flick he paused, leaving his fingertips barely touching me, though his thumb was still pressed solidly against me.

His head was tilted, watching his hand, as he twisted his wrist, extended his fingers and settled in until his palm was flat. His little finger was curled just around the edge of my arm, and I felt it make those lazy circles again.

We stood there, breathing quietly, if not *quite* completely even, with just the bare beginnings of raggedness and all from nothing erotic at all but a flattened hand and moving finger—a finger writing, as Mr. Fitzgerald said, but not moving on. Staying so that, at least for now, neither I nor he had any need to call it back.

The finger stopped. But stayed still. The lightest of pressures still against me, but hot. So very, very hot. The kind and intensity of heat one should not be able to experience when this was not flesh to flesh, but flesh to layered cloth: coat, vest, shirt.

Despite the almost searing effect, his touch was as light as the touch of the wings of that Columbian Humming Bird in one of Mr. Audubon's marvelous books. And as nervous as that bird as well, as if the slightest movement on my part would send him flittering and fluttering away, invisible wings taking him rapidly out of my reach.

I was the very model of a modern major still life.

He raised his head from the contemplation of that still life to look at me. With, of course, that customary, nearly not there dip to remind me he was looking down. No umbrage taken, I just looked back at him, looked *up* at him, then, with a pointed tilt of my own head, and the start of an expression that would mock his forever mocking of my "shortness." But this time there was nothing of that in his eyes, and I let my own expression slide into simple stillness. Simple waiting.

His smile was the merest lift of the ends of his mouth, there and gone.

The outward stroke of his hand from where it rested, ending with a brief curl of his fingers around my arm before moving off, was a caress. True, it was a gesture one man *might* make to another, to a close friend, without connotations of Edwardian friendship, yet I had no doubt that *anyone* who observed us just then would have known it precisely for what it was.

A caress.

We smiled. We gifted each other with, oh, such wonderful smiles.

As one, we turned to stand side by side, admiring our reflections in my wonderful, *perfectly* wide mirror.

Our stillness was infected with silence. That went on. And on. I struggled for nonchalance, trying out a little shrug as if to set my coat more perfectly in place. Not knowing what to do with my hands, I put my right partially in my pocket. I hooked my left thumb over my waistband, near my waistcoat-hidden braces, my left forefinger was out and curled almost enough to touch the tip of my thumb, while my last three fingers went into my pocket.

It was a not entirely successful effect, but the best I could do under the circumstances.

I was nervous. Harry knew I was nervous as he always did. But he was not. As he never was when... dear Lord.

When he had decided upon an adventure and was about to launch himself, launch *us*, into it.

Our eyes met in the mirror, held, and he cried in a voice as full and powerful as the Ascot start, but still only for my ears: "And we're off! And may the devil take the hindmost!"

I knew then, had always known if the question had ever arisen before, that I would never be hindmost when with him. So I nodded my knowledge back.

He smiled at me, oh, such a beautiful Harry smile, inhaled again, and as if the outcome was the unquestioned result of inhalation and *only* inhalation, not intentional movement, our shoulders and arms were touching. So light a touch, a twitch, a sneeze would have parted us.

This was a companionable silence. A silence that did not, just then, need to be broken, but which would soon have to be.

And I had no planned words at hand. At mind. At mouth. Damn.

Harry, the ever-spontaneous, the best friend one could ever have, took care of that.

With only a nearly invisible hesitation before he decided he *would* say the words. The *launching* words. The ones I wanted to say... though, naturally in *different* words, words of my own choosing... but hadn't the courage to say.

"Do you know, Reggie, I think we make a rather good couple." He flushed. "If, ah, if men could, of course, be said to be in couples, which of course they aren't, ah, can't be."

I let my smile be my answer again.

He was correct, of course. It was so very, very obvious. How could I, how could we, have not quite seen it before, though we'd come close from time to time.

We both stood straight, not because of our "taller than" game of looks and words, but because it was the only thing we *could* do just then.

Harry was... something I would never dare to say aloud, even when we were, at least for now, alone. Alone, that is, but for the rest of the servants busy about whatever it was they busied themselves with when I was on the verge of leaving for the evening. I would catch glimpses of it during the course of my departure, their not-as-subtle-as-they-thought way of assuring me that they were indeed earning every single farthing of the munificent wages they were receiving.

Harry was extraordinarily *beautiful*. And how had *that* thought, too, never before crossed my mind? Or as now, punched me in the belly with all the force of one of long-ago Gentleman Jackson's best, knocking the wind from me?

A smile wasn't enough. "Yes, Harry, we do."

How his eyes become the sun at noon when he is pleased!

Harry was, of course, in his very traditional white tie and tails. Superbly fitted black tailcoat and trousers, molding his chest, hugging that supple, muscular arse, I was sure, though I had not yet seen any of that hugging due to the coat's interference. I had not seen it *yet*. A blazing white shirt, stiff collar, though not so high as to prevent him from freely moving his head. Harry talked with his entire body, and if one part of him were effectively immobile, it would be like eliminating half his vocabulary.

He was, though, not entirely traditional. A white waistcoat, perhaps a subtle ivory, was *de rigueur* with formal evening wear. Harry was one of those gingers who could wear varying shades of red well, without his clothes being regarded as clashing with each other or his hair, and therefore being quite vulgar. Harry is so very, very far from vulgar.

I had to smile a bit more broadly at that thought. And qualify the thought. Far from vulgar in his attire and his manners. So very vulgar when his prick is engaged and engaged.

Tonight's waistcoat was made of that brilliant red fabric he acquired from *Monsieur* Jacques. Though if I dared use that word, Harry would have felt

honor-bound to eliminate some of my ignorance by expounding on the *correct* name for this particular shade or color or tone of red, and how one with a discerning eye could readily differentiate between the subtleties. Then he would commiserate with me for my unfortunate lack of discerningness. All with a fond and patently patronizing twinkle in his eyes.

The silly bugger.

Whatever the rest of the ton—or the world outside the ton, though that phrase is nearly heretical—might say, I considered it a *wealthy* red, looking as if it should possess, from the heart out, one of the world's most valuable rubies. The color, the fabric, the cut, the style, had no choice but to go superbly well with all the rest of him. He would not allow it to be otherwise.

I had decided to break with tradition, both the ton's and my own. It was not spontaneous, because you do not simply decide to change your evening wear in the morning, drop by your tailor in the afternoon, and pick it up that evening.

The cut and fit of the tailcoat and trousers were as good as could be expected for a sturdy body such as mine. The color was a dark blue, so dark it was nearly black, but still, discernibly not so. The shirt was, of course white, though not as brilliantly so as Harry's. The collar was high enough to be fashionable, but low enough to be reasonably comfortable. The waistcoat was a rich plum color, and I had added a touch I *could* acquire this afternoon. A set of star sapphire shirt studs, and gold cufflinks set with the same jewels.

The rest of my rebellion was more subtle.

I was not wearing drawers. For only the second time in my life. And this time was far more pleasurable.

But for the fact I might embarrass myself and anyone in my vicinity were I to become aroused, the sensation of the rub of the soft, soft wool of these trousers over my prick and ballocks was astonishing, compared to the everyday wool I had worn at last week's disaster. A sensuous touch that kept me on the edge of completing an erection, since I had not been entirely limp and dangling from the moment he walked in. So far, the combination had not quite pushed me over that edge.

We stood admiring ourselves, our coupleness, until Harry changed things yet again.

"Do you know," he said, "I have an idea that might ease your concerns about being so much shorter than me."

His tone was teasing, his eyes were grinning wickedly, so I let the “so much” pass.

“Perhaps we should stand like this, instead.”

While I watched in some little awe, and growing amazement, and a growing Yule Log warmth somewhere in the vicinity of my heart, he turned, twisted, bent, and when he was settled in, asked, “What do you think?”

I had no power of speech. I was uncertain whether I would ever regain it. I did not care, because I was more than willing, would be ecstatic beyond all measure, to stand this new way forever and a day. And one day more.

Most of his body was turned away from me so that I could see him in profile in the mirror. His back was arched, his coat sliding back and away from his torso, the tails hanging straight down. The curve of his arse, his trousers as tight or even tighter than mine, made my cock twitch. His right hand clasped the lapel of his coat up near the top. The ruby cufflink glittered.

His waistcoat, cut in a vee shape in front rather than straight across the body, as was customary, was a vivid red arrow pointing down at the bulge so very visible in this position.

But the most important part, the single reason I was willing to stand here until forever was finally past, was that his head was resting against my shoulder, his soft hair against my throat and lower jaw.

It looked so very right.

If *felt* so very right.

It *was* right.

What a chance he had taken, to do this. The risk he ran if he had not been right. The uncertainty in his eyes, faint though it had been, was beginning to fade. I needed to wipe it out completely. So I said what I was thinking.

Not the thought about what I might contrive to make his bulge bulge more. The other thought. “I think I could stand here for a very long time.”

“Forever and a day?”

He remembered what we had read. “And one day more.”

We carefully did not repeat the *actual* words. The *rest* of the words.

We smiled and stood and would have stayed that way but for the chiming of the clock in the foyer. It would not do for us, particularly me, to be late to the

ball Father was giving to honor the engagement of my young cousin, Victoria. A delightful girl, actually, but one of a bevy of young ladies named after Her Most Gracious Majesty, and unfortunately not one who was distinctive in any way. It occurred to me that given the unparalleled length of her reign, the Empire must be awash in her namesakes, and those of her beloved Prince Albert.

We sighed simultaneously, recognizing the duty that called with the chimes.

Duty or no duty, I knew what else I wanted, *needed* to do as Harry reluctantly lifted his head away and we both stood straight again. His hands were lowered, so there was no impediment as I turned and stepped so we were face to face, grasped his lapels, careless of the crumpling which was so very unimportant just then, and pulled him to me.

He turned his head away!

Had all of this been nothing more than some sort of game, some sort of mockery?

I let his jacket go, started to step away, but his words stopped me. "Bugger it all, Reggie, I wasn't expecting that."

Well, neither was I. It was certainly not part of my plans for this evening. And so I told him. Reminded him, as well, that it was he with his back arching, head resting... and other things that had brought about a fit of uncharacteristic spontaneosity in me.

"I know. It's just, well, I *want* you to... you know..."

"No, I find that I don't. What is it you think I know about what you want?"

"You were going to kiss me."

"I was seriously consid—"

"Seriously *acting* upon—"

"But then I was so rudely interrupted."

"Not rudely. I have never been rude to you."

"Ha!" I gave him a quite good almost-shout, of the variety that makes the point without alerting the servants to an actual or incipient altercation. "How do you rude me? Let me elucidate the ways—"

"Damn it, Reggie, I smoked a cigar before coming over here, and you know how you are about tobacco. So if you'll just let me get a glass of wine, or something, I'll be happy to kiss you back. *More* than happy."

“Bugger the rules.”

His mouth dropped open. Utter shock at those words crossing my lips and leaping into the air, would have that effect on anyone who knew me, much less one who knew me so very well.

His still gaping mouth did not even clamp shut when I yanked him to me, put one hand behind his head and pulled him down into our very first kiss.

A most, *most* inexperienced one.

Since we recognized our deeply hidden friendship with Edward, and began emulating him outwardly in every way we could, kissing was something we had not done. Not with each other, and from the way we undoubtedly fumbled this important moment, no one else.

I, for one, had never kissed anyone with sexual intent.

I had, on two occasions, had sex with a woman. Whores, of course. There would have been no kissing in any event as I had enough to cope with just in acquiring and maintaining an erection.

Then, too, there were my father's instructions to consider, as he had arranged the first whore for me, just as he did for my older brother. “A man reserves kisses, Harold, for women of appropriate station, and appropriate kisses for each such station. A woman who sells herself... well, who knows where her mouth has been?”

I wanted to say to him that if her mouth was such a concern, what about her cunt, into which he had just arranged for me to stick my prick? But Father said what he meant, and meant what he said, and even if you were not one hundred percent sure you understood, or even agreed, nevertheless you listened, and you obeyed.

But those memories had no place in this moment, this so very *spectacular* and I-cannot-believe-I-did-it moment with Harry. So I did not merely shove them away, I stomped them as some red-headed peasant woman, her skirts rucked up about her knees, might stomp around in a wooden barrel, crushing thought-grapes flat until you could not tell one from another. And then gave my entire attention to Harry.

Harry was kissing me back. He deserved my entire attention.

Tongues.

Go away! I'm busy!

You've heard your gossiping tonnish friends talk about it. Enthusiastically. Though only with their whores and not their wives. Can a friend of Edward's experience less, do less, than one of them? Especially when with someone like him?

I would still have argued, but then I remembered.

Felching.

We were not, of course, felching, because there'd been no seeding. The lack whereof being a point my prick was most pointedly making just then. But a tongue had been used then on an arsal—Was that even a word? Had I succumbed to a terminal case of Harryitis?—orifice, to the obviously great delight of tonguer and tonguee. This was just a higher orifice. And one with a reciprocal tongue which could... could... reciprocate!

Now why hadn't my self pointed that out?

My self sullenly said, *I would have. You just didn't give me time.* And then slunk away.

I didn't give my self the derisive *Ha!* my sluggard self so richly deserved.

Instead, I opened my mouth, and hesitantly put the tip of my tongue to his lips. When he did not react in horror, I used that tip to caress, to hint, to suggest, that perhaps he might want to reciprocate, and try something new? Newer, even, than what we were doing?

Harry-the-ever-adventuresome did just that.

Who knew that tongues exploring another's mouth, touching teeth and gums and inner cheeks, and tongue most of all, could be so very arousing? Could make your prick even harder?

Everyone in the world but us, apparently.

But we were rapid learners. Eager students.

We licked and touched and stroked, and had our arms about each other, pulling our bodies and straining cocks so close together we might have seemed to be trying to melt into one another.

It was when I felt a tiny spurt from my slit that I realized this could end in only one of two ways.

First, we could send a note round to Smythe House to tell my father and family, quite politely, of course: "*Bugger off!*" And stay here to see where this wonderful thing called tongue-kissing, and kissing in general, might lead.

Of course, that would lead my father and the rest of my family to enact, as Harry might have viewed it, a remarkably vivid imitation of the Red Queen, as they shouted in unison to both of us, "Off with their heads!"

Or, no, actually they would only shout for the lopping-off of mine. They were too fond of Harry to ever believe such a social solecism could ever be his fault.

Second, and most regrettably, most, *most* regrettably, we could stop, regain control of ourselves, get our pricks under control, attend the ball, and then later—though "later" would, I was sure, unquestionably translate into the Edwardian, ah, *tongue*, as "Let us get out of this place at the earliest conceivable moment consistent with honor and family obligations, and possibly a few minutes sooner than that"—we would resume this most fascinating new means of communication.

As the one who was obviously being required to shove a propriety pole up his arse again—a course of conduct I could not ever envision Harry engaging in—I broke the kiss off, and pulled my head away.

I was not quite stupid enough to immediately relinquish the feel of his body against mine, the feel of his cock, his so *very* hard cock, against mine. We were both panting, our breaths mingling, our eyes, I was sure, mutually glazed. Harry made the slightest move closer, to resume the kiss, but I had moved my hands from his back to press flat against his shoulders. That slight bit of pressure stopped him.

"We can't," I said.

He sighed at me, just an ordinary sigh of disappointment, not freighted with meanings more than that. "I know."

"But later..."

"Oh, yes, indeed. *Later*."

We simultaneously stepped back, still connected by our eyes, even though not by anything else. Neither of us wanted to break that connection.

But Harry did. He bloody *went away*.

And all I could do was wait.

Fortunately, these visits to some... everland? neverland? ...never occurred where, in his "awayness," he might fall down a flight of stairs, walk into walls, or even worse, commit the ghastly gaffe of bidding "cop" in solo whist when he

doesn't have a single trump. While he was "gone" I recalled the night, some years ago, when we were looking up at a crisp, amazingly clear spray of summer's night stars against the black, and he'd raised his hand, and pointed. And said, "Up there, Reggie. See that star? The bright one? Well, two to the left, turn right, and straight on 'til dawning. That's where I go, when I go away."

I patiently waited for him to find his way back, having always feared that if I tried to force a return, with a bump to his hip, a jostle to his shoulder, or simply by bellowing his name as close to an ear as I could possibly get, I might so startle him that part of him would be somehow left behind, like a little boy lost forever. My patience did not, of course, prevent my subsequent harassment of him about the fact of going away or the length of any particular visit... or the odd pronouncements he made upon that return.

This return was accompanied by new heights of unusualness. He spoke in Latin!

Harry's loathing of Latin was obvious to all in school, including his teachers, though he persevered, and with a degree of due diligence achieved a rank that was not at the bottom of the class... quite. I doubt it was Professor Hambly who succeeded in drumming at least a little Latin into his dear little head—by which I do not mean *that* little head. I would, instead, charge young Atherton with the crime of instilling that little amount in Harry's head. Atherton was, after all, one who made it his goal to become the most proficient student ever in the history of Eton in learning, or devising, every possible crudity or vulgarity that that language might allow.

Upon occasion since graduation, and moving on to university, Harry has blurted a bit of it, and as those blurts tended to be the verbal equivalent of a sulphuric fart in a crowded ballroom where the originating arse is immediately known, were I arguing at the Old Bailey I would, after putting those facts before his lordship and the jury, gesture dramatically at Atherton in the dock, proclaim him guilty, and rest my case.

"*E pluribus unum*," Harry said, still somewhat vacant eyed, not fully returned. Besides the oddity of his knowing the phrase, he actually pronounced it correctly.

Given my general stodginess, it is perhaps not surprising that I had an affinity for an ancient, and it might be said, somewhat stodgy tongue of comparatively little use in the modern world, unless you wanted to be able to

understand a Catholic mass, instead of sitting, standing, kneeling and whatever else is done, on cue.

Out of many, one. Or if you wanted to be loose with your translation, *one from many.*

Before I could say anything, he said it again. “*E pluribus unum.*” This time there was no “shop to let” sign posted in his eyes.

I opened my mouth, but he silenced me with a finger to my lips. “*You’re my e pluribus unum, Reggie.* And I must be yours as well.”

He grinned at me then, all Harry-like, which is to say, a grin of the most marvelous brilliance, like sunlight dancing on the redness of his hair, each tiny tap making spikes and sparks and bursts of bright light go everywhere.

My response was, of course, equally brilliant. “I... uh... um... *what?*”

He lifted a hand to caress the side of my face and use his thumb to muss my mustache from its precisely waxed perfection. “You’re the *one* from the many men I might have chosen.”

He stopped and blinked and flushed just a little. “Well, I mean, not really *many*, if ‘many’ means a lot, because, actually, I, uh, haven’t had many men. Not that I *couldn’t* have, you know. I could have had, uh, many men. Easily. If I wanted to. But I didn’t, so, um, I didn’t. If that makes sense? It’s just... I didn’t want many men, so I didn’t go out and get them. Though I could have, just so you know.”

“Just the right number?”

It was his turn to look askance.

“Not too many men, not too few men, but just the right number to decide I was your one from many?”

“Why, yes. Just so!”

“And you’re mine as well. But just so you know, too, *I* could have had many men. More ‘many men’ than you, despite this ugly prick of mine. If I’d wanted to. But I didn’t, so I didn’t.”

“Oh, Reggie,” he said with a smile, and a sniff, and a hint of a glint of a tear or two. “*Of course* you could.”

Well. After all these years of Harry interpretation, I found myself uncertain whether he was patronizing me about the number of men I might have had, or agreeing that I could have had as many as I wanted, had I wanted to.

I dislike uncertainty, and Harry, knowing that, would deliberately leave me decidedly uncertain if I queried him. So I didn't. I just accepted the latter version as the correct interpretation.

And then I kissed him to celebrate my interpretation.

I could become quite addicted to kissing. In fact, I rather thought that was going to happen, and far sooner than an opium eater would discover he could not exist without his daily dose. But only so long as Harry's were the lips against mine.

I shouldn't have done it, of course, what with the ball and all, but at that moment I was in a bugger-the-ball frame of mind. Though only temporarily so. So I kissed him thoroughly and well, and was kissed that way in return. And when one of us finally initiated the necessary separation, so that we could finally... *finally*... leave, as we had to, the bastard murmured, "I do wish you'd stop saying that about your prick. Your prick is just fine. I *like* your prick. After all, I picked your prick, didn't I?"

"You *picked* my *prick*?"

"Well, of course I did," he replied, with the "you silly arse" entirely understood. "Even a new friend of Edward's, such as I, could not possibly fail to be aware of the prick factor in deciding whether you were the *unum* in my *pluribus*."

He paused and smiled even more. "Oh. Did that sound as delightfully deviant as I think it did?"

I smiled back. "Well, for a mind such as yours, devoted to deviant diversions and distinct deviosity, it was... acceptable. Just not one of your finer efforts." He dimmed a bit at my decree, but brightened again when I asked, "Now, about this 'prick factor'?"

"Oh yes. Length? Capital! Thickness? Marvelous. Bell-end? Superb. Slit? Nicely long. Ballocks? Remarkably hairy and heavy, extraordinarily full. Staying power? Unequalled. So very you. All of that."

I could not help but blush at that, and then the blush spread, I was sure, to my entire body, as he grabbed my not-covered-by-drawers-just-trousers prick and squeezed. Whatever remaining blood I had in my brain for thinking promptly drained south. What else could I do but grab him in return and squeeze as well? And gasp a little. And perhaps allow a hint of a moan to pass my mustache.

But then we both realized that if we went just the slightest increment farther, we would have crossed the border into unquestionable bugger-the-ball territory. And while we were certainly going to be ball-buggers later, making an early escape, we could not avoid it entirely.

Our eyes said the “damn!” we were both thinking.

With another mutual sigh, which combined both regret and eager anticipation, we released each other, and turned to stand again side by side. We of course shared a mutual eyes to groin inspection glance and grinned, albeit ruefully, at the definitely upstanding, you might even say, outstanding results.

Results not at all appropriate for a family ball.

Something had to be done.

Mrs. Pryce.

Sometimes my self had marvelous ideas, not that I would ever let my self know that, lest my self acquire an inordinately swelled head. Of the intellectual variety, not the, ah, cockical variety.

“Mrs. Pryce.”

“What?”

“Walking in on us right now. Her horror. Her embarrassment. *Our* embarrassment.”

Harry's face expressed all the aghastness of which it was capable. “Bloody hell,” he whispered.

Game. Set. Match.

Our cocks were down and into an acceptable status for going to a family ball.

We adjusted ourselves with no sexual intent. Checked each other in the mirror. Tweaked our bow ties which had become the slightest bit *smushed* in our kissing encounters. With a whirl and a twirl I maneuvered my mustache back to match our sartorial splendor.

And then with a grin and a wink at our images, two Cinderellas left *for* the ball, with absolutely no need for leaving any damned slippers behind when we *left* the ball.

Reggie

18 November 1882, 1:17 a.m.

Reggie's Carriage

London

"We must talk."

I said those words to Harry, once my carriage was in motion, after giving directions to Frank to take us to a gambling establishment that was a good distance across the city, and therefore some travel time away. If we kept our voices low, we could converse as needed, and if, by the time we reached our destination, our conversation was done, then an aristocrat's whimsical decision to waste his driver's time by a changing of the mind and directing him homeward instead, was, well, merely an example of a nobleman's inalienable right to whimsicality.

I was, of course, fully cognizant, as was Harry, of the import of those words. Our married friends had on more than one, indeed, upon *numerous* occasions, bemoaned the fact that those three words, particularly uttered by a wife, forecast with utter certainty something dire, and in nearly every circumstance, about topics or with outcomes not at all favorable to the husband.

"I quite agree," he replied. And then he proceeded to slump and slouch and turn and wriggle until at last he—most, *most* agreeably—rested his head again on my left shoulder. The *same* left shoulder he had used in front of the mirror.

Was he hinting that we should *kiss*? In a carriage? With Frank sitting not all that far away above us, driving? Surely not.

And why not?

We might be seen, that's why not! I sat very, very still.

Did it hurt much, ramming that wide propriety pole up your arse again? Just when you'd gotten used to its absence?

While I was trying to determine the proper response to my self's reasonably astute assessment of the facts, while at the same time not admitting the slightest degree of accuracy, Harry changed things yet again.

His left hand just... just *slid* across the top of my left leg and came to a stop. His fingers were slightly curved, slightly pressing, while his thumb was making

lazy circles on my thigh. Now why did I suddenly have an image in my head of a hawk doing the same thing in the sky?

"Perhaps," he said, tilting his head up just a little, so that I could feel his breath drifting softly across my face, bringing with it a scent of the spiced, and rather potent punch he had imbibed perhaps a wee bit, as our Scots friend Fergus might say, excessively. "Perhaps we might postpone this talk? For just a little while?"

He emphasized his words with slight squeezes to my thigh. Which did marvelous things to my prick, albeit things which were utterly inappropriate for the time and place.

"My dear Harry..." My voice trailed off. He stopped squeezing, stopped thumb-circling. Perhaps even stopped breathing. I had never said that to him before. I had used those words once, but only as a salutation to a note that was, looking back, not quite consistent with what the words meant, or should have meant. But saying them, here and now, imitating one of Harry's famous blurts, was... entirely different.

But right. So very right. He was, indeed, my *dear* Harry. Though that had not precisely been established to my satisfaction. Thus the need for the talk I had proposed. I was about to point that out when my indeed dear Harry changed things. *Again*.

"Truly?"

"Truly."

He sort of *rubbed* his cheek against my shoulder, as he said, "My dear Reggie, my *very* dear Reggie, the time has come, as the walrus most assuredly did not say, to *not* talk of many things. Perhaps... not even talk at all?"

His hand, his subtle as a serpent hand, slithered between my legs and cupped my cock and ballocks. A prick which, not surprisingly—at least not to me—had been quite erect from the moment his head rested on my shoulder.

I briefly contemplated putting my right hand over his, to put at least a pause to what he was doing, but realized that if I did so, I would, in all likelihood, simply squeeze and caress his hand, and press it against my prick, thus encouraging his brazenness, his defiance of not only convention, but the manners and morals of the ton.

Well, not precisely the *morals* of the ton, since, as a whole, morality was a thing entirely absent from that realm. Though I could, quite logically, only

speak with respect to the men of the ton. And in that respect I was unquestionably accurate.

Bloody hell. My self was accurate as well. How had Harry not noticed when, as we left Smythe House, I paused at the bottom of the steps, bent forward and shoved that indeed-thick propriety pole up my arse again, after all his efforts, all *our* efforts, to remove it permanently.

I put my hand over his. "You are squiffed, are you not, my dear Harry?"

He nodded, and rubbed again, both hand and cheek. "Quite."

He rubbed yet again. "Quite, quite, quite. Do you object?"

Considering the way my groin was enthusiastically cooperating in his ministrations, I thought it was fairly clear that any propriety-pole-based objections had long since been given over. Nevertheless, I reassured him.

My voice was fully under my control as I did so. Not panting at all. "No, of course not. Squiffed a bit myself, don't you know."

He squeezed and stroked, and I uttered a sound which could not—in adherence to the requirement of our dear Queen that her noblemen must always, at every moment of their lives, be engaged in the promotion of truth, justice and the British way—be described as anything other than a moan. An unfortunately loud one, which I bit off. Biting my lip in the process.

Damn, but that hurt.

On the other hand—Harry's—any hurt was irrelevant to the pleasure being given.

"Do you remember Pemberton?"

I didn't really, other than the fact he was a man residing far closer to the fringes of the ton than the center, where we lived. That being the truth, then naturally, as the ton required, I lied. "Of course."

I hoped, by the pressing of my hand against his, to distract him from irrelevant conversation and to focus his attention on *relevance*, i.e., my bloody hard and leaking prick!

"His carriage ride?"

What in the bloody hell did the bloody ride of some man named Pemberton in some bloody carriage have any bloody thing whatsoever to do with...

Oh.

That carriage ride.

Ah. I recalled more than I thought, what with that little jostle to the memory. So *Pemberton* was the name of the author of the infamous carriage tale.

His wife would undoubtedly have been mortified had she known that her husband, that fine, upstanding baronet's son, once he became cup-shot, a not infrequent occurrence on his part, had regaled anyone who would listen with precisely how he had fucked his wife in his father's carriage. *Precisely*. With every detail of cunt and cock, thrust and response, and immensely powerful seeding.

I briefly wondered if anyone other than me had ever wondered about the fact that in all these tales of fucking and being sucked, the narrators *always* produced a previously unheard-of, quantity-wise, amount of seed, indeed, an amount in quantity and quality quite unparalleled in the whole history of seeding.

All well and good. Pemberton and his wife were at least married. While their carriage activities would not be sanctioned by most members of the ton, still, they had the right to join cock and cunt in whatever private, or quasi-public environs he might choose. I rather doubted his wife had much say in the matter.

But still... Surely Harry could not be proposing sex in a carriage without marriage.

Oh.

He was.

Oh, yes, indeed, he most certainly was.

I... very well, I admit I whimpered when Harry interrupted my ruminations with another squeeze, another stroke, another juggling of my hidden ballocks in his palm.

Ah.

Given his squeezing and stroking, it was clear his intent was to induce seeding by stroking, hopefully into the handkerchief he always carried, so as to avoid making a mess of my clothes, and if I must say so—since if I do not, who will?—*his* clothes, and I could state with some degree of knowledgeable accuracy, the carriage seats as well, that would inevitably result from the unrestrained distribution of my seed, hither, thither and yon.

I could live with that. Most enthusiastically *enjoy* that.

Though not if he were to continue doing what he was doing so that I seeded in my trousers.

Unacceptable. Completely unacceptable. And so I planned to advise him as soon as I could figure out the right words to explain. Or better yet, how to speak.

Ah.

My dear Harry, my *very* dear Harry, was so clever.

Most regrettably, he had to lift his head away from my shoulder, but I could forgive that, as his doing so was for the purpose of moving into a position in which both hands could engage themselves in the delightful—to me, at least—task of unbuttoning my trousers. And hauling my prick out into the London air. My cock cringed, as any cock with any degree of sensitivity normally would—my cock being unusually sensitive—when exposed to such unpleasantness. But when the potential for seeding, glorious seeding, was weighed against the known adverse effects resulting from exposure to the city's air, cock cringing was irrelevant.

My prick reveled in its freedom from confinement. Rejoiced, indeed, *wept* with the fervor of his rejoicing, as Harry stroked up and down, up and down, swirling his fist around my knob when he reached the top.

Would I ever become accustomed, blasé, even, about Harry's changes to what I expected, what I believed was to happen next?

I doubted I ever would.

I did *not* expect Harry to lower his head and swallow my prick.

Very well. To be precisely accurate in my narrative, he did not *quite* swallow it in one not-all-that-long motion, as that would have taken more skill than he then possessed. But with a brief moment of gagging, some fits and starts, he achieved his goal.

Who was I to deny him his pleasure in achieving a not-quite consummation, he so unquestionably devoutly wished, by suggesting that what he did was not necessary?

My self said, my prick said, and I, perforce, had to agree, that swallowing my prick, forcing his throat to accept something far, far wider than it had ever done before, much like that Dickens saying, though without all that *gravitas*, was something most desirable. Oh, *most* desirable.

I whimpered and moaned and perhaps even whined as he worked my prick with his mouth. His fist alternated, on no schedule I could discern, between stroking my prick in time to the movements of his mouth, and mauling, so very pleausurably mauling, my ballocks.

Then the bastard lifted his head from my prick, leaving it forlorn. Abandoned, cruelly, cruelly abandoned. I would have remonstrated with him over this abandonment, but he forestalled me.

He lifted his head, nuzzled my jaw, and murmured close to my cheek, "Do you really want to give Frank some idea of what I am doing to you? What *we* are doing while he drives your carriage?"

"Good Christ no!" I blurted.

An excessively loud blurt. Precisely the kind designed to attract the attention of your servants.

"What, my lord?" Frank's deep, somewhat booming voice came down from on... well, not *entirely* high, as one might ascribe to, for example, the tower in which Big Ben resides, but still, at least *above*.

If I were Catholic, I would undoubtedly have rushed off to the nearest church to light dozens, no, *hundreds* of candles, to give thanks that Frank merely called out, and did not turn to lift the ceiling hatch right by his buttocks, that I had so foolishly installed in the interests of efficiency in communicating with my driver.

"Nothing, Frank! Everything is fine. Go on, go on," I called out.

Harry lowered his head, and swiped at my knob and slit with his tongue. He murmured, "You will be quite quiet now, won't you?"

"Not if you don't bloody get on with it," I muttered back.

He gave me the response I deserved for making the emptiest of all possible empty threats, at this best of all possible moments in this best of all possible worlds: he ignored me. And then he swallowed my cock.

He *swallowed!* my bloody cock.

All the way down. All at once, until his nose was smashed into pubic hair that even I could tell from my own *somewhat* on high position, was redolent with the odors created during a long bloody evening of your prick and ballocks, and indeed, the rest of your body, being hidden from the night air—air so frequently maliciously maligned as being insalubrious merely by existing—by

layer upon layer of cloth, and pressed about with the heat of all the bodies enduring the crush of one of the Smythe balls.

Ah. Smythe *balls*. What a wit I was.

I smiled as I inhaled deeply through my nose and wondered why I had not previously realized how bloody erotic my own smells were. And Harry concurred as well, as I could hear him inhaling through his nose—well, of course, he had little choice but to rely on his nose for the acquisition of air, as his mouth was otherwise occupied—and he was certainly not pushing away in disgust. I wondered, too, if he could smell what I could not, from so far away. I had decided a little dab of cologne would do me, and placed it at the base of my cock just before caging him in my evening wear.

As his head began to rise and fall, I wondered if his ability to do what he was doing was a natural talent, or whether he had learned the skill through far more practicing at sucking pricks than I thought he had done since our first Emporium visit. That thought might have led to a fit of unfounded jealousy. Had I indulged, it *would* have been unfounded, given there was no foundation for me to feel that emotion when previously we had just been together in our adventures, but not *together* together. But what he was doing swept away all possible thought and put me firmly, so very *firmly*, in the realm of no thought at all.

Just feeling.

Powerful feelings that desperately wanted to express themselves with a shout, with several shouts, perhaps words, or, more likely, just inarticulate, loud noises betokening utmost appreciation for the talents being displayed on my dick.

While I *could* help myself and not shout, though I allowed a brief grunt and a tiny moan to escape, I could *not* help myself from beginning to thrust up into the tight, wet heat of his mouth and throat. As I thrashed my head back and forth on the squabs, starting to pant, I knew I wanted something more, though I was not at all certain he would grant it.

I wanted to *fuck* his mouth.

I put my left hand on the back of his head just as he took me all the way in again. He did not move. With another, with one of the available mouths kneeling before me in a reading room or kneeling or squatting on the other side of a glorious hole, I would simply have taken what I wanted. I could not do that to him.

"May I?" I whispered, tilting my head as far as I could, without my body movement dislodging him.

He nodded, a movement which caused so many delightful feelings in my prick.

I put both my hands on his skull, careless of how doing so might disarray his hair, the move calling up a sudden image in my mind of how he would look when we got out of the carriage, his eyes wide, his face flushed, his hair every which way, and his lips all puffy from the way I used them. Perhaps with just the tiniest spot of my seed glistening at the corner of his mouth.

I held him still, and *fucked* his face with all the strength I had available in the position we were in. I offered up a muttered litany of thanksgiving for the gift I was about to give myself, a series of heartfelt prayers, a breathless *ohGodohGodohGodohGod* I desperately hoped only Harry could hear. Harry, dear Harry, mouth-fuckable Harry, braced himself with a right elbow pressed into the seat, his left hand flat against the seat next to my thigh, and gave himself up to me.

I have always prided myself on my ability to delay my seeding, to override nature's demands for rapid gratification, until *I* decided the time was precisely right.

Within seconds I surrendered that pride and gave myself up to the moment.

I had no idea how many strokes it took, how many times I shoved my prick deep, so that my knob was unquestionably in his throat. Three? Five? Eight? Whatever the number, on the last I punched my prick up, pressed his head down, and let loose a load of seed in much the same way a fire wagon pumps out water in vigorous blasts to put out a fire. As my fire was quenched just then through those same vigorous blasts.

When I was done, I sagged, boneless, against the seat back, before I realized I had not let loose!

My seed, yes, but not my hands.

Which I immediately did, of course. But he wasn't moving. Dear God, he wasn't breathing. I'd choked my Harry!

And then the bastard *licked* my somewhat softened knob. And licked it again, his tongue swirling round it in his mouth, before slowly, slowly, slowly, pulling off.

As he used his braced left hand, and right forearm to lever himself up, he gave my prick a parting flick with the tip of his tongue. We were not in a well-lit area, so I could not see him, but I was certain he was smiling.

When he was upright, he was still turned towards me, right palm then on my thigh, left hand up and pressing against the squabs by my shoulder. It was awkward, but that did not really matter, as he leaned in, unerringly accurate, and pressed his lips to mine. I quite naturally opened my mouth, having earlier, thanks to my so *very, very* dear Harry, discovered the inordinate delights of tangling tongues.

And then I discovered Harry had not swallowed my seed. Or at least, not all of it, because some of it, surely most of it, had gone directly down his throat, of that I was certain.

But still, he had managed to retain a prodigious spurt or three—I am most excellently prodigious when spurting, although, apparently, I am *most* prodigiously so when Harry is the cause thereof—and was *sharing* it with me?

Was this the done thing?

You could, certainly, consume your own seed if you were, ah, bendiferous enough. As Bentley certainly was, although I was certain he would neither confirm nor deny he was the subject of those photographs. I recalled for an instant how the photographer had somehow, by impurest serendipity, given the subject matter, managed to capture “Bendy Ben’s” *long* and spit-shining prick just pulled out of his very own mouth and throat, and a single... *large*... drop of seed was visible, about to finish its fall, past his lips and onto his tongue.

While I had never considered it before, I supposed you could wank into your own hand and lick the seed up, well, the seed that had not overflowed those narrow confines, if you were me. Or fingertip it up from your belly, a swipe and a slurp at a time. A somewhat lengthy undertaking. For me.

Ah, the wonders of multiple-tasking yet again. While I was considering the ramifications of this new experience, I was quite definitely cooperating in it with a deft tongue-dance of my own, which led to me tasting myself for the very first time.

Though I could not say I was tasting just me, as the tastes were inextricably mixed with the scents, and tastes, and touches of Harry.

As we finished the sharing, and our mouths parted, I considered, too, whether this was just a one-off thing. A sperm of the moment matter not to be repeated.

I adapted Harry's principle to current needs. Harry's left hand having migrated from squabs to shoulder, I moved my right arm under his left and up and around, so my hand could curl around his neck and pull him close, for just one more, perhaps two, certainly no more than three, of his kisses. And as I did, I asked myself, "W. W. E. D.?"

Indeed, what *would* Edward do if, ah, *faced*, with this inquiry? Or what had he actually done, as I think we somehow supposed that as the one after whose conduct ours through the centuries has been identified, he experienced it all. And if not quite all, then we assumed he would have been willing to try "it" at least once.

Or twice.

Thrice is not trying, but is, instead, habitual.

I expected us to reach thrice-plus, quite easily. With whatever it was we decided to do, so long as enjoyment resulted.

With great reluctance our lips finally parted, and we realized the carriage had stopped.

I contemplated wondering how long it had been since we stopped, considered a possible panic that Frank might have lifted the hatch when we didn't immediately get out, and seen us. I quickly rejected contemplation, wondering and panic, and in lieu of all that, decided that what Edward would do was to say, "Bugger it."

So that's what I said.

"Uh, what?"

Oh. I said it aloud. What a very *Harry* thing to do, to think a thing intended to be only a thought but still speak it aloud.

I glanced about. We must have stopped in an area with at least some street lamps, as bits of light were poking and pushing about, trying to get through the closed curtains. If Frank were to open the hatch, those bits and pieces would become a stream, waterfalling down on us and displaying me in all my wilting glory, though Harry's position would for a moment shield me. And that position would cause the same sorts of problems as a prick display would.

"Tuck me up!" I muttered in Harry's ear.

"Fuck you up?" he asked in a reply mutter. I whacked the back of his head, before we untangled our arms, and he began putting my prick away. He was marvelously adept at it. Had he... No. I would not go there.

"Frank!" I called out when I was as decent as a friend of Edward's could be who has just been gloriously sucked and whose prick, in addition to wild applause and shouts of "Bravo!"—or, as we were Edwardians, should that have been "Brava?"—was demanding at least one encore. If not several.

"M'lord?" he enquired, indeed lifting the hatch, with all the foretold waterfall of faint light, yet not so faint as to not illuminate two long-time friends sitting side by side but so far from touching that it would require Frank, a driver of unparalleled skill, to forget his skill and take a turn with such vigor that we would be thrown together.

I looked up at him, considered, and quite easily threw Harry under the wheels. "Frank, Lord Fotherby is, how shall I put this delicately, quite squiffed? No, no, to be accurate, I would have to say he is not *half* seas over, but *full* seas over. Indeed, I wonder how he is managing to stay upright in his seat. Why, I do believe if he were even lightly touched, he would fall right over."

I poked Harry's shoulder, lightly, as promised, and perforce he collapsed. Only I heard him exclaim as he slipped out of sight, "I will get you for this."

"You see?" I said to Frank, and shrugged one of my best helpless shrugs. "I could not in good conscience allow him to go in there and gamble, though as you know, his lordship will always vehemently insist he is quite capable, even when the rest of the world knows he is not. Home, Frank, would be best, don't you think?"

Normally, of course, a nobleman does not *consult* the driver of his coach about the choice of a destination. He simply directs, and it is done. Frank joined the Smythe stable, ah, staff, when he was, he thought, though he admitted he could not be sure, about thirteen. I was only fourteen at the time. So he had grown up with Harry and me, not as an actual friend, of course, because that simply wasn't done, but as close as it is possible for you to be with one of your servants. That long-standing relationship gave him a great deal of latitude, verbal and otherwise, not available to others who worked for me in the stables. Or, indeed, many who worked in the house and were generally regarded, or at least considered themselves to be, far higher in the servant hierarchy than those who dealt with horses and mucked about with all the manure that went with them.

Those "superior" servants, of course, were either entirely unaware of, or had, through long intimacy, become inured to, the vast heaps and piles and veritable mountains of manure that could so readily be found, if you cared to look, in the highways and byways of the ton. Metaphysical *and* physical.

"Right you are, m'lord. Dunno as I've ever seen his lordship quite so squiffed before. Anything wrong?"

"Just powerfully potent punch."

"Ah." Frank nodded his head with great understanding. "Your da must've been at it, again."

"Uh, what?" My tone betrayed my surprise at his words, and a slight stiffening, of entirely the wrong kind, in Harry's body, where his buttocks so very lightly, but warmly and comfortingly, rested against my leg... such an odd outcome for a tilt and fall... said he agreed with me.

Frank's tone didn't venture very deep into the long-standing retainer's territory of the you-really-didn't-know? tone, but far enough.

"Beresford, your da's butler"—I refrained from reminding him that Beresford had butted for my family since before I was born and therefore I knew very well who he was—"mentioned down t'the pub one night, a while back, as how Her Ladyship oversees the punch herself, preferring to have it taste very bland-like. So sometime between the end of dinner and the arrival of the first guests, your da finds a moment when no servants are around—courtesy of Beresford sending them off, though I doubt yer da knows that—to tip a bit of vodka into the bowl. And it seems like your brother has taken to doing the same thing. Dunno if each knows about the other, seeing as how they accept ackker... ackle..."

"Accolades?"

"Aye, milord, acklelades, from their particular friends for the quality of the damned fine punch." I "heard" the fond smile on a face in shadows. "Don't 'spect 'is lordship there will be much in the mood for acklelading anyone come morning."

We shared a chuckle over that, as Frank clucked at the horses, and we began moving again. He put his hand on the hatch, started to close it, paused. "Ah, your lordship, there's been some construction on the best way home, which means the streets'll be kind of rough and bumpy for a ways. Y'might want to lift his lordship back up, and keep him there, so's he don't cast up his accounts. Or if 'e does you kin mebbe make sure he don't hurl on the seats."

I sighed the sigh of a put-upon friend. "The things one does for one's friends, right, Frank?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, m'lord. Yes, indeed. Indeed, the tales I could tell..." His voice trailed off as he shut the hatch and focused his entire attention on safe driving for his delicate passengers, or one delicate passenger.

Once assured the hatch was down, Harry sat up again, a bit miffed to go along with the squiffed. But while I could not resolve the squiff, as only time, pissing, and possibly accounts-casting could do that, I could easily resolve the miff. I lifted my left arm high, twisted so my right hand could curl about his right bicep, and before he quite knew what I was about, I *yanked*. He fell right into the best of all possible positions in this best of et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and I lowered my left arm behind his head, lightly squeezing his left shoulder and doing a tiny bit of thumb-circling of my very own.

He relaxed and stayed there for the ride home, our positions a variation on the mirror pose that started this marvelous evening off. No one could take offense at how we sat, for after all, I had my driver's permission to sit just so.

I sighed.

Harry murmured, "Hmmm?"

I whispered to the top of his head, "Years of opportunities to, ah, sit like this... wasted."

He whispered back, "Years of opportunities to, ah, 'cuddle' is the word I believe you avoided... ahead of us."

"Men d—"

His left hand was once again between my legs, holding my ballocks, but somehow the grip didn't feel quite as friendly as it had before. "Be very careful how you finish that sentence."

"I was only going to say," I said, doing my best to sound quietly affronted, "that men, ah, do not, perhaps, cuddle quite as often as they should. In a general sense."

"And in a *specific* sense?"

"Oh, I quite think future cuddle opportunities will, if not abound, can at least be sought out and arranged, in the absence of *spontaneous* cuddling."

He laughed softly, and his ballocks-squeeze was definitely of the friendly variety. Unfortunately, he had to move his hand away. Getting caught in *that* position would eviscerate the "permission" we had been given to sit so close.

The ride was indeed as bumpy as Frank had predicted, even compelling Frank, after a particularly bad stretch of bumps and bounces, and tilts and lurches and sways, to call down to inquire about how "his lordship" was doing. "Bearing up like a trooper!" I called back. "No shooting the cat for him."

Harry punched me. "I would *never* harm a cat!" he said, and punched me again.

I restrained him, and with a quick glance to be sure of safety, hatch-wise, I kissed the top of his head, and explained. I had only learned the phrase myself when I took a brief voyage on a yacht I was contemplating purchasing, only to have an unexpected squall rise up, with unconscionably high waves. Which led to equally unexpected seasickness that not only put paid to the purchase, but left me leaning over the railing, repeatedly shooting the cat, as a sailor so kindly advised me I was doing.

By the time punching and explanations had ceased, we were at Harry's house. Regretfully, he pulled away from me and reached for the handle of the door. I quickly leaned forward and batted his hand away. "Squiffed, remember? The only way you can open that door yourself is if you plan to fall out of it."

"Ah."

At that point, Frank had clambered down from his perch, opened the door, and pulled down the steps. With a sharp "stay put" squeeze to Harry's thigh, disguised as briefly bracing myself, I exited first, and then turned, so that both of us could help his delicately, delightfully squiffed lordship alight from his conveyance.

Harry then displayed his talent, one he had undoubtedly been born with, as an extraordinary dissembler. One of the Empire's finest, I was sure, had there been any way to compare the variety of dissemblers in and out of the ton, and bestow upon the winner some variant on the Blue Riband awarded to passenger liners with particularly fast transatlantic crossing times.

As he stepped, or rather, staggered down to the safety of level ground, he wiggled, he wobbled, and he even warbled a bit of a vulgar ditty a lordship should have no knowledge of, but he agreed to "shush!" when we jointly begged him to abjure singing, both then and forever. He straightened, shrugged off our elbow-holding hands and declared his independence from the necessity of assistance in making his own bloody way to his own bloody front door.

He turned to give Frank a slight bow of thanks, but started to fall forward. Frank's hands caught his shoulders, and mine gripped his upper arms. We push-

pulled him upright again, and then he sagged back towards me, requiring me to hold up most of his damned weight. He was giggling inside, the bastard, a tiny tremor in his body the only telltale of the fun he was having with this. With the pair of us.

So of course I let him fall on his arse.

Given the depth of his sag, it wasn't all that far. Though frankly, I hoped it hurt, at least a little. And fortunately, an "Ouch! Damn it!" sounds fairly alike, one way or the other, whether said at the heights of sobriety or the depths of drunkenness.

Then he shifted, as if this pain in the arse lordship was going to rub a pain in his arse, but to be consistent in his dissembling, he'd have to topple sideways. I briefly considered letting him do so and possibly hitting his head on the pavement, thereby addling what few brains he was displaying at the moment. You have to be magnanimous in dealing with the vagaries of your best friend, and so I stooped to conquer his silliness.

I yanked him back to a sitting position, squatted, remembering long ago lessons about lifting one's legs, or something, tucked my hands in his armpits and with a sternly lilting "Upsadaisy, your bloody lordship!" I hauled him upright. Again. Then moved my arms so that they were around him, my left hand grasping my right wrist to keep him in position.

Damn.

The bloody bastard planned this. Even with the propriety pole gone from my arse, I was apparently still predictable, at least to him.

We were now in a position in which his arse was publicly pressed against my prick in a manner anyone observing might find ludicrous in the extreme, perhaps even worthy of laughing out loud, but not at all degenerate or depraved.

Except for the degeneracy and depravity, blessedly invisible to Frank and any other late night nosy neighbors, of his "drunken" efforts to stand on his own, which somehow required his arse rubbing against my prick. Who did not need any such encouragement to stand up and demand attention.

Damn him.

Both prick and best friend.

"Ah, Frank, why don't you go on home? I'll manage to get his lordship inside his front door and dump him in the hands of his servants, who are *paid* to endure this kind of aggravation."

Frank smiled back at Harry's sort of flopping hand-wave of permission given. "You sure, your lordship?"

"Yes, thank you."

We stood there, me supposedly holding him up though he was almost fully supporting himself, and Harry continuing to wave until the carriage was around the corner and heading to the stables we shared with several other owners.

"You bastard," I muttered in his ear. We were at a right angle to the walkway to the steps. I quickly shifted us to the right so we faced the house, let him partially loose, and then continued the farce by putting his right arm over my shoulder and holding his wrist, and putting my left arm around his waist. "You better cooperate in this, because if I have to carry or drag you to and up those damned steps I swear I will let you go at the top and watch you slide right bloody back to the bottom."

I wouldn't, of course, and he knew I wouldn't, but the game had to be played.

He snickered and cooperated in a walk which would have played well to the cheap seats in a vulgar music hall pantomime.

"You shouldn't have pushed me over, you know," he said as we started up the steps. "Lady Payback. Bitch. All that."

I laughed. "Quite right, Harry, quite right."

As we reached the stoop, I ostentatiously braced him, in case anyone was peering at us through neighborly drapes, and made ready to make the great sacrifice of reaching into his trousers and feeling around, quite *vigorously* feeling around, to find his latch key.

It was not necessary to make that sacrifice.

Damned Bentley opened the door before I could. He stared at us and then smiled. "Quite a performance, my lords. Not worthy of the stage at Albert Hall, of course, but it would do for a music hall. A quite small one. In a less than refined part of the city."

He held the door wide. "*Exeunt omnes*, upstage center."

We stepped inside, into the dim foyer and out of sight of observers. With a degree of unnaturalness I hadn't expected—when had it become *natural* to have my arms around him?—I let go of Harry, who stood easily on his own.

"Tomorrow?" I asked.

"Tomorrow, certainly," he replied.

For all that Bentley knew or suspected or even might have suspected about us, I was certainly not going to do anything whatsoever in his presence. Such as foolishly asking him to turn his back so I might kiss Harry goodbye.

With the slightest bit of an awkward pause, we nodded to each other, and I left, closing the door so that Bentley need not be bothered.

Harry wasn't aware yet, but we were going to talk tomorrow. I had made a decision during the evening, without really thinking about the topic in detail. A decision for both of us, actually. Now I just had to persuade him that I hadn't made a dual decision, just a single decision, and I was merely trying to persuade him to make it dual.

Now how the bloody hell...

Sometimes I amaze myself. Truthfully, more often than anyone would believe if I told them.

If my logical arguments did not sway him, I could just say...

Yes. I rather thought that would do.

It's good to have a plan.

Harry

18 November 1882, 7:55 a.m.

No. 18 Bramwell Road

London

"My head hurts."

"Indeed, my lord."

Oh, I heard that *as it should*, even if Bentley didn't say the words aloud.

"My eyes hurt."

"That is, I presume, why you have yet to open them."

"You hurt my shoulder when you shook it." I continued my litany in a forlorn hope he would become so annoyed with me he would tiptoe away and leave me to enjoy my misery.

I have such rotten luck.

"Undoubtedly why I did it," he said.

"Yes, but *why* did you do it? I could have slept longer." I was not truly whining. A nobleman does not whine. He perhaps playacts that he is, but he would never in truth actually *whine*.

"Unlikely, my lord. You are, I am sure, about to have a visitor."

"Why on earth would anyone be visiting at whatever abysmal hour this is."

"Seven fifty-six, my lord."

"In the *morning*?"

"Indeed, my lord."

He was apparently attempting to win a Blue Riband for the number of "my lords" he could legitimately insert into a conversation. As the Duchess might have said, though the subject was not sneezes, "He only does it to annoy, because he knows it teases."

I groaned. When I received no sympathy, I groaned again, slightly louder. Still nothing. Ah, well.

"Well, send whoever it is away when he arrives. I have had less than five hours of sleep, and you know I require a minimum of eight, preferably nine."

I punched up my largest pillow and gave Bentley my back. One shouldn't give the cut direct to one's servants, but really, enough was enough.

"I doubt your visitor will be concerned, my lord. He will undoubtedly say something pithy about figs and caring if the subject of your sleep necessities is raised."

Ridiculous. I knew no one who would be so insufferably...

Oh.

So I said that word aloud.

"Indeed, my lord. You mentioned milady Payback on your way up the stairs some hours ago, as you may recall. I believe she will be visiting you this morning."

"Good Lord!" I bolted upright, the bedclothes falling to my waist, revealing my upper nakedness, but fortunately concealing the rest. Including my morning wood. Which *hurt*. And not in the way one likes one's wood, at any time of day or night, to hurt. "The knocker!"

There was a pause before Bentley responded. A deliberate pause. An unseemly, excessively *long* pause, when he bloody well knew, or should have known, or could readily have known if he had applied his mind to it, precisely what I was talking about. "What about the knocker, my lord?"

"Get rid of it!"

"My lord, such a fine knocker. Such a brilliant brass, in the first stare of fashion. You selected it yourself because of your quite correct dislike of the original that came with the house. And we..."

As I could not quite bring myself to display my prominent woody endowments by leaping from the bed and rushing, well, to be rather more accurate, staggering to the door, to shout for Neville to rip the bloody thing off, I hugely inhaled and opened my mouth to shout out a most noble command to rip the damned thing off!

I was too late.

He did it before, and he was doing it again.

The bloody bastard.

Why had I allowed him to persuade me that my bedroom should be at the front? Like his. So that it overlooked the street? Like his. So that the bloody, buggering front door was directly below?

Once, when we were little, we had played at the siege of Constantinople, which had been mentioned in our lessons. We devised a battering ram, and though we broke the door to the stables open, we nearly broke our heads as well. The noise below was as loud as it was then, though not accompanied by the whinnies of frightened horses.

He was using it as rapidly as possible, undoubtedly to try get as many hard knocks in as he could before my damned servants opened the door. *Finally* opened the door. Which, it appeared, they believed to be a matter of no great urgency at all.

I could picture him standing there. There was too much force to those bangs for him to be merely in front of the door, entirely upright, arm raised, and using his forearm and clasped fingers to bang. No, if I could have seen him from my window, even without considerations of woodliness and Bentley visibility in getting from bed to there, I was certain he would be standing slightly back, tilted slightly forward, so he could use more of his arm and shoulder to give even more force to his unseemly, neighborhood-arousing knocking. His arse would, of course, be shoved out towards the street, just a little. For balance, of course, not for the purpose of inciting passers-by to admire the delectableness of that arse, the heft to it, the musculature visible even under the trousers.

My mental admiration of the unseen arse naturally did nothing for the wood effect under the bedclothes. I moaned again into the silence. The blessed, blessed silence brought on by the cessation of the banging.

“Bentley?” I tried the feeble tones of one sore afflicted, perhaps nigh unto... well, one couldn’t pretend death, but perhaps the agonies of near death.

When there was no response, and the ploy of that tone should have elicited at least some bit of snarkery from him, I at last opened my eyes. The room was at least dim, unlike the last time Reggie had barged in. But no one was there except for me.

I somehow did not believe Bentley had surrendered and decided first, to allow me to go back to sleep, and second, to persuade Reggie to return at a more reasonable hour.

I was right.

Reggie, the damnably cheerful Reggie, just barged in once again. I had been, I found, far more squiffed than I thought I was last night, given the present state of my head—Big Ben *bonging* and my brain box banging about—and my mouth—all the Queen’s horses, all the Queen’s men, the full staff at

Buckingham Palace and both elephants from the zoo, stomping through, with a number of them leaving gifts behind.

"Arise, arise!" he fairly shouted, his grin trying to shove his mustache up and away so it could be more visible to the world, or perhaps just to me. "Time to do that whole lark at break of day, arising and singing thing you do so well."

He was an arsehole, he was and so I said, if not loud—I dared not make it loud—at least clear.

"Malignery," he said, clasping his hand to his chest, accompanied by a *faux*-if-ever-there-was-one stagger. "Did you ever in your life hear such malignery, Bentley?"

"Indeed not, my lord. I knew my lord had a way with malignery, but not that he had progressed to such mastery."

I groaned. "Have neither of you any sympathy for my suffering?"

Rude Reggie checked some of his pockets, patted others, before looking at Bentley and saying, "I must have left mine at home. Do you have yours, Bentley?"

"Most regretfully, sir, I've lost mine and have no idea where to find it."

Reggie turned back to me. With far too much cheer for the hour and the size of the room, he said, "Unfortunately, no. If we should recover any, and *if and only if* the proper occasion arises, we will of course generously share our sympathy with you."

I gave him the grunt that deserved and was about to begin sliding back down under the covers when he asked, "Are you awake?"

Of course I was awake. That was the whole point of my ire: awakingness combined with a desire to go back to a state of non-wakingness, and being prevented from exercising my nobleman's right to do the latter. "I am."

"But you are not sitting up."

"What a clever observer you are, Reggie. To divine what is present in front of you, and point the obvious out for the whole world to note. As it had already done."

"You are never truly on the route to fully awakened until you sit up. I suggest you sit up."

"And if I choose not to?"

He moved over to the foot of the bed, reached out, and grabbed my ankle through the bedclothes. "Consequences, my friend, consequences."

One of which was an even more hardened prick from his touch. I apparently had sexually active ankles.

"Which are?"

He shook my ankle, then tugged on it. Not quite as arousing as a tug on my prick would have been, but still...

He shook it more vigorously, which brought my attention back to him. "You went away just then, but appear to have returned."

I had been on my side, facing away, but with the grabbing and tugging and yanking I had become somewhat twisted. My torso still turned, but my arse nearly not, as my left leg had been pulled closer to the edge. "Your point?"

"A simple one for such a simple soul as you, my friend. I will firmly grab and yank and you will be somewhat sitting up, with your sorry arse seated on the floor after a drop of—How tall would you say this bed is, Bentley?"

"About two and a half feet from floor to mattress, my lord."

"A fount of information, Bentley, as always. Thank you."

"It's nothing, my lord."

Buggerer Reggie looked back at me. "So. Your arse on the floor after a fall of two point five feet, or sitting up yourself, with your arse on that most comfortable mattress."

My arse deserved comfort. Though the alternative might have left my arse being comforted... Ah, no. Not by Reggie. I jiggled my leg, but he kept his grip. "It is rather difficult to sit up when half one's legs are under the authority of a will not one's own."

"You'll manage," he said, without loosening his grip.

So of course I did, though of course I grabbed a thick pillow in the process and covered my lap with it. I patted the pillow, to be sure Bentley understood, first, why there was a pillow on my lap, and second, where he was to deposit the tray with my morning tea. If and when he bloody procured it.

Bloody hell!

It was a damned good thing that pillow was on my person, because as Bentley walked out on a mission of tea mercy, Reggie's grip turned into a

caress of my ankle, and a squeeze of my sole and arch, a tilt of my foot upward, and a strong thumb pressing and rubbing just below the ball of my foot.

The sound I made was not a whimper.

My prick did not lurch.

Reggie let loose my foot, and gave me a wicked grin. First at my pillow, and then at my face. He pulled his watch out, flipped it open, flicked it shut.

"It is now eight fourteen," he said. "I will be generous and give you until ten forty-five to be fully awake, functional and dressed."

"How?"

"Good God, man, were you truly so squiffed last night you've forgotten how to dress yourself? Bentley will need another rise in his wages if he has to cope with the entirety of that event."

His look said he knew he was being a bastard, and that I knew he was, and that he knew I knew he was, and so on, so I did not challenge him. Being the better man, I rose above it, and said, "The *manner* of dress, Reggie."

"We shall be out and about, though not to any ton haunts. Well, except for a visit to the establishment we recently became acquainted with, to the extent that location might be so described."

I scowled at that. If I was going to be forced to become awake, functional and dressed, when I still mostly preferred the alternative of a return to sleep, the Emporium was not a destination I would choose. And so my face said to him. Eloquently, as my face always was.

"Not to worry, my friend. There is quite a good reason for this visit, and I think you will enjoy it. Perhaps not completely so, but more so than not. I will explain later."

I started to tell him he'd damned well better explain immediately, but he wagged his finger at me. "Ah, ah, ah, Harry. Remember? Awake. Functional. Dressed. Three prerequisites you haven't met yet."

With that, he turned and walked out of the room, with a sort of insouciant, silly "Ta, now!" which was something the blighter never said.

I wondered...

I reached beneath the pillow, beneath the covers, and at the sound of the door opening, immediately converted any thoughts of possible wanking of the

fast, faster, fastest category into a vigorous scratching of a nonexistent itch on the outside of my right thigh, so that the back and forth movements could not be mistaken for anything else.

To ensure the understanding of all concerned, I said, "Itch."

"Indeed, my lord. Do you think you have scratched it enough to abate its ill effects long enough to enable you to drink your tea?"

"Ah, I do believe that has done it."

I perforce sipped and thought. Under all the circumstances, Reggie had not really been generous with the allotted time. Particularly the functioning requirement. But as the saying went, "Needs must when Reggie's devil dick drives."

And I was quite certain I would let Reggie's devil dick drive me just about anywhere it wanted.

I began doing as he asked.

Reggie

18 November 1882, 1:30 p.m.

37 Preston Street

London

Harry was not sulking. Someone less well acquainted with him might have interpreted his looks and slouch in the seat of the cab, and indeed, the same for a good part of the morning once I arrived at 10:45 to pick him up, and into lunch, and on to the Pig and Whistle, and into the cab, as a massive sulk. It was merely the aftermath of my idea. Which he ultimately agreed was appropriate. Necessary, even. But he was enjoying his sulk too much to quite give it over just yet.

An exchange of notes had confirmed that Mr. Felcher would await our pleasure at 1:30 p.m., the precise time at which we each let down the steps and exited our respective sides of the cab, which had picked us up from the Pig and Whistle. With remarkable synchronicity, we each turned back to reach inside and pick up the small, locked chests we had placed between our respective pairs of boots for the ride here.

I did the honors with reference to the fare as Harry walked around the front of the horse—we had long ago learned *that* lesson—to join me on the curb. It then occurred to me that “our pleasure,” as Felcher had phrased it, might well turn out to be his displeasure, potentially his vast displeasure, which would then lead to a lack of transportation back to the tavern. A displeased businessman clearly does not offer free rides to those who have incurred his ire.

Before the cab could drive away, I signaled the driver to wait just a moment and leaned in to share my concern with Harry. Instead of offering me the spontaneosity of an assurance that we could find a cab with minimal effort, on a street far from the well-traveled hansom routes, he actually agreed my plan was a good one. I was not certain he had ever agreed to one of my plans without first finding all of its real and imagined, *mostly* imagined, flaws and reciting each and every one before agreeing to go along.

I asked the driver if he would be willing to guarantee his return at a specific time, for a fee of two pounds, paid immediately. If we did not come out of the door within fifteen minutes of that time, he could depart and keep the two quid. If we did, the return fare would be another two. If we were delayed beyond that fifteen minutes, but showed up within another fifteen, he would earn an

additional four pounds instead of two. It took him a moment to work that all out in his head, finally realizing that returning and perhaps waiting up to a half hour would earn him, even at the minimum of two pounds, more than he would ever be likely to earn in days or even weeks. And there was the possibility that he might find himself briefly wealthy, if he received the full six pounds. He agreed.

The line today was not long. Cold, with fits and starts of rain that might be sleet, might be snow, is not precisely conducive to persuading most men to leave comfortable quarters, sally forth for a long walk or carriage ride, and endure this weather, all in the not unreasonable hope or belief that at the end of the journey he might put his prick in a warm hole, generally *quite* briefly, gift that warm hole with hot seed, and then return home through all that weather again. Not forgetting, either, that admission into the sacred precincts of prick-putting would as like as not cost as much as, or more than, the cab ride to the Emporium and back.

We might have pushed our way to the front, and even if the guardian was not giant-Reginald of the many fuckings, or Reginald-the-lesser-giant, or even Reginald-the-bloody-blond, the amount of money we had spent in recent weeks would surely have ensured our immediate entrance. We decided with a glance to wait our turn.

It was, of course, Reginald-John-Reginald, the bloody blond for whom I still felt such... disdain? jealousy? Yet at the time those feelings began, I had no logical basis for either emotion. And now I *had* such a basis, since Harry was, after all, indubitably and permanently *mine*. And only mine.

I might have made a sound, a small sound, just a bit of a bite of a sound, at the way Reginald-John-Reginald looked at Harry.

Harry, the silly blighter-bugger Harry, looked at me, grinned, cupped his left hand to his ear, ignoring everyone near us, tilted his head, and said, "Hark! I hear a big dog bark. A mighty mastiff, mayhap?"

The blond Reginald gaped at him. I explained the problem. "Jerry here was squiffed last night, quite possibly more squiffed than anyone else in the history of being squiffed, and it hasn't entirely worn off. Just ignore him. Mr. Felcher is expecting us."

"Indeed, he is, gentlemen." He looked at the boxes we were holding... *not* clutching to prevent anyone from grabbing and running with either or both... and offered to take them for us. Our "no" response was perhaps just the smallest sliver more abrupt than it should have been.

Another Reginald, a new one, led us to Felcher's office. He rose from the ornate chair behind the desk, and came round to greet us. "Welcome, gentlemen, welcome. Back so soon for more, are you?"

He then noticed the boxes we were carrying, and the locks on them, and his broad smile went backwards until it became something of a frown. He turned abruptly, went to his chair, sat and gestured that we do likewise, in the two chairs opposite him.

"What can I do for you, *my lords*?" There was only the slightest hint of menace in the latter words.

I looked at Harry; he looked back, and gave me a slight nod. I turned to look at Mr. Felcher, and then we both leaned forward, to place the boxes on his desk. We removed the keys from our waistcoat pockets and set them on the appropriate tops.

"Mr. Felcher," I said, "we deeply regret the necessity, but we must return the items we have recently purchased."

His face hardened in no pleasant way. His voice was more so. "All portrait purchases are final."

"Under most circumstances, sir, I am sure they are, but here we are, and here they are." I nodded at the boxes. "We are not, however, seeking a refund."

That caused the tension in his body to ease off, but he was still far, far, far less than happy with the pair of us.

He looked from the boxes to us as a pair, to each of us individually, to the boxes again and then up. "May I ask why?"

"Certainly," I said.

I shouldn't have done what I did just then, but I did. I stayed silent. Finally, Felcher said, "Well?"

"Well, what, sir? You asked if you could ask a question, I gave you permission and you haven't asked a question yet."

He regained his composure and with somewhat bitten-off words asked why we were returning the portraits.

He became even more unhappy with us, when I said, "Mr. Felcher, I said you could ask the question, but I didn't agree to answer it. Our reasons for our actions are private."

We stood, and I extended my hand. "We appreciate all the... adventures you have provided us, sir."

I could see he wanted to leave my hand there in the air until I realized his rejection, but his business sense asserted itself. We hadn't said we didn't plan to return—we didn't. We hadn't said we would never buy anything more—we wouldn't. Hope springs eternal in the portrait artist's chest, as Alexander Pope never really said. He shook my hand.

He rang the bell and new Reginald arrived to escort us off the premises, though he probably thought he was just guiding us to the exit.

Outside, our arrangement with the driver proved successful. We clambered in after I directed him to return to the tavern. As we settled back in the seat, I patted Harry's knee, carefully out of sight of passers-by of the pedestrian sort, in both senses of the word, or those riding or driving. I reminded him of the argument that had clinched his agreement to go along with my proposal that we divest ourselves of our investment in Emporium merchandise.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his gentlemanly portraits for his friend. Especially his beff."

He smiled and agreed.

Of course, I wasn't really sure just how great my love was, since I didn't exactly lay down *all* my portraits. I kept two very special ones.

And I would tell Harry that. Soon.

I considered the fiftieth anniversary of that first kiss to be soon enough.

Harry

18 November 1882, 2:00 p.m.

*Cab en route to the Pig and Whistle
London*

Reggie was right, of course, about returning our collections. We didn't need them any more, since we had... well, *us*.

So that kind of distraction was unnecessary.

But still...

I don't like to keep secrets from Reggie, particularly since I tend to be fairly damned bad at doing so. Murder will out, it's said, and so will secrets.

So, sometime soon, I will confess and let out the secret that I have kept three of my collected portraits, including the one I first came across. That latter will, perhaps, set him laughing and make him less likely to be annoyed with me.

I considered the fiftieth anniversary of my inducing Reggie to kiss me to be quite soon enough.

THE LAST INTERLUDE

*19 November 1882
37 Preston Street
London*

"They brought everything back!" Felcher's fist accentuated the shout by slamming down on his desk, and then Felcher's feet, knees and thighs assisted by pushing him upright, and his chair back and away into a sadly bruised and battered bookcase, which had experienced this all before. More than once. Felcher loomed over the other occupant of the office.

If asked—though no one would dare—Felcher would freely admit he loved to loom. Given his height and his well-earned reputation for ruthlessness, he usually loomed quite well. Especially when everyone over whom he loomed in this office knew quite well that both the second-largest, and the largest-of-all, Reginald were within easy range of a bell pull, or even a shout.

Unfortunately, this particular loom was not going well. Not well at all.

The "loomee" sitting all too casually in the second chair wasn't cooperating, wasn't joining in the spirit of the thing. He wasn't cringing or cowering, or signaling submission in some way. Instead he looked... bored? Impatient, with an expression that wondered, "Are you quite done yet?"

The man in the chair let the silence run, accentuated as it was by the inherent awkwardness adhering to an unsuccessful loom. He then broke it. "Do be seated, Felcher."

Felcher flushed, feeling the weight of heavily turned tables descending upon him. He should have known better, but then he didn't really know how he *could* have known better since looming had always worked before. Although, if he thought about it, which he did begrudgingly in the process of turning, pulling the chair back into place and sitting, there had been a hint or three during the course of their business relationship that should have given him a hint that his usual tactics might not be quite as effective as they "usually" were.

"Really, Felcher, what did you expect?"

"What the bloody hell do you think I expected? Two youngish lords, their minds as closely buttoned-up as their layers of clothing, discovering they are neddy boys who live in a society where they dare not publicly express any of that, even though it is still not illegal? Discovering the ideal method to express every single fantasy they might conjure, through my photographs for wanking, and visits to the Emporium for anything else they might desire? All without risk? I bloody well expected to make a bloody fortune off them over a long period of time!"

"First, either you or your spies weren't paying much attention when they visited here, or you, or they, would have seen what was happening. They have each other now and don't need your photographs or your Emporium."

"Bloody hell. And there goes the entrée into other friends of Edward's amongst the upper ranks of the ton. More money lost."

"You have lost nothing. Granted, it is certain that neither of them will be obtaining entrée for you to White's or an invitation to a ball at Buckingham Palace. But they will still provide you with an opportunity to make money. A great deal of it."

Felcher relaxed slightly in his chair, but did not lessen the level of frowning. "And just how did you reach that astonishing conclusion?"

The man shrugged. "It just requires a modicum of creativity. Did they ask for a refund?"

Felcher looked affronted, as only a businessman can who has never given a refund, and has no intention of ever doing so. "They did not."

"Then you made a profit off their purchases."

The "A little" was a more begrudging response than the sitting had been.

The man in the other chair laughed. "*More* that a 'little,' Felcher. Without seeing your books—the real ones, not the ones you show or may be required to show Inland Revenue—I am sure that the first few sales of any one photograph cover the cost of making it, both in terms of what you pay the men who fuck and suck and do so many other things on command, and the photographers who take the pictures and develop them. You have no advertising expense, given the inordinate illegality of what you do. Thus, except for the physical costs of reproducing a particular photograph, all of that income is pure... impure? ...profit.

"You have the complete set... no, I rather doubt you have the complete set back from either of them. I suspect they will each have kept just one photograph. Even so, you now have the opportunity to sell *literally* the same pictures twice, making your profit even more impure. And then there is the vastly greater profit to be had in another way."

Felcher was not a man easily boggled. In fact, he had never, to the best of his exacting and accurate memory, boggled once as an adult. He discounted the possibility of boggling as a minor as the minor thing that it was. He boggled then. Visibly.

The man in the chair restrained a smug smile. "Shall I tell you how?"

"To make this vastly greater profit?"

The man nodded.

"I can probably figure it out myself."

"Indeed, you might. Eventually. But consider all the potential profits lost while you spend your time trying to discern this idea, while devising and discarding numerous ones that will not work. As opposed to having the idea, in full detail, offered to you here and now."

"For free?" Felcher's tone suggested he already knew the answer to his question, but he asked anyway.

The man laughed. "Come now. You know me better than that. Fifteen percent of every pound, shilling or pence taken in from the scheme. And access to the *actual* books so that I can be assured of the accuracy of your accounting."

"Fifteen percent for an idea? Ridiculous. An idea is worth, at most, three percent."

The man sat upright in the chair, fixed a stare at Felcher. "As I said, you *know* me better than that. You already know what my ideas are worth. Need I remind you of 'The Monk and the Masked Slave?' You thought you would have very little success selling that series of photographs of a man of the cloth—a great deal of cloth, which tended to get somewhat in the way—fucking, sucking, arse-eating and a great deal more with a masked slave. I gave you that idea."

Felcher feigned outrage. "I paid you a hundred pounds."

"As we agreed. And only *after* you saw how many men would want to wank to images of a white monk and a black slave doing all those things. Which led

to 'The Monk and the Farmer,' 'The Monk and the Nobleman,' 'The Monk, the Bishop and the Vicar,' and, oh yes, 'Three Monks and a Lady Who is No Better Than He Should Be.' You have made thousands off that idea and the ones it spawned. I practically gave the idea away."

"Very well. You have a point. Five percent."

"Felcher, you are a delightfully parsimonious bastard. I will settle for ten percent. Do we have a deal? Or no deal?"

"Deal."

The man sat back again, a picture of utter relaxation. A pose, only, as it was his turn to use tone to make a point. "I am, of course, not a member of the ton, as is more than obvious. But I do have access to the ton in a way you do not, so I suggest that you do not so much as *think* of not abiding by our bargain. We have a relationship that might be described as a mad one: mutually assured destruction. I am entirely willing to risk that I can escape that destruction if necessary, but quite frankly, you are unlikely to be able to do so."

Felcher glared, but nodded. He had, after all, been thinking along the lines of subtly altering the records if this venture proved even more profitable than the monk series.

The man smiled at the surrender, but not a mocking one that would have served only to exacerbate the pain of having to give in. "I think, my friend, if I may call you that, that you are about to kick yourself."

Felcher's expression was more than sufficient to say, "Indeed?"

"You are going to sell Lord Smythe's and Lord Fotherby's 'private collections' again. And again. And again. You might call the first "The Private Collection of a Noble Man of the Ton, as Attested to by Lord X." A similar title for the second collection. Quietly spread the word that these collections provide insight into the foibles and follies of the ton, baring their most corrupt and depraved secrets.

"And of course you can always create a new collection, if you wanted to, ah, slightly bend the truth of its origins. 'The Perversions of the Privileged, the Authenticity of Which is Attested to by a Perverted Noble Man of the Most High Degree.' Fill it with the most perverse pictures your—"

"Our?"

The man smiled and nodded. "Agreed. *Our* minds can devise. The collections will be bound in fine, tooled leather, in several volumes suitable for

placement on any library shelf, with an innocuous title picked out in gold leaf on the spine. Your potential customers will not be allowed to take any of the volumes into a reading room to wank, as they might ordinarily do. They may select one picture and one picture only if they want to, ah, test the effectiveness of the images in achieving their desired goals.”

The two men laughed.

The one in the chair finished. “With this kind of exclusivity, this kind of restriction, if they want the rest, they will buy.”

Felcher laughed again, loudly. “An excellent bargain, Mr. Bentley.”

“I rather thought you would think so. I shall be in touch when I need some funds.”

The two shook hands. Bentley left, smiling to himself. Felcher would be astonished, perhaps somewhat dismayed, at the good use to which these ill-gotten gains were being put.

An actual smile lit his face, as he walked down the street, causing more than one man he passed to feel an unusual surge of... attraction? Lust? Tentative desire? A most decidedly peculiar feeling for the men who were not friends of Edward's.

But the smile was well-warranted. His gentlemen were together. Well, nearly so.

And if they did not manage to get the rest of the way themselves, he was more than capable of designing an appropriate nudge.

AFTER THE FINAL VISIT

Harry

22 November 1882. 11:45 a.m.

No. 18 Bramwell Road

London

Bentley looked at me in that way he has. The one that does not bode entirely well for my equilibrium.

“My lord,” he said, all fine and friendly in that more than a servant, but less than one’s best friend forever mode. “I should like to give you a gift.”

I admit I was startled.

No, astonished.

No, *gobsmacked!*

Your servants did not give gifts to you. It was simply not done. The beneficent, the bestowers of vails, the givers of gratuities which had not actually been earned, were always of the nobility, the class above, their bounty doing that droppeth as the gentle rains thing on the classes beneath.

But still, now that the unheard-of had been heard, it would be ungracious not to listen, wouldn’t it? Naturally, even though I was doing him the courtesy of hearing him out, it would never be proper for me to accept whatever small item he was able to afford. I would simply have to let him down gently.

“I shall require a hundred pounds.”

A *hundred* pounds? That was more than the annual income of a vast number of residents of London. Of the whole country. What could he possibly be purchasing to give to me that would require such a lavish expen...

Wait.

He said “require.” As in, “require a hundred pounds.” As in, “someone other than myself will supply the funds.”

“Ah, Bentley, did I understand you to say that in order to give this gift to me you would ‘require’ one hundred pounds?”

“Indeed, sir.”

“And would this ‘require’ of which you spoke be of the same variety of ‘require,’ as when I send you on an errand to acquire something for me, and you tell me you will ‘require’ a sum certain in order to do so?”

"Indeed, sir."

I paused and considered.

Had Bentley gone quite mad?

I attempted to study him, to discern his malady, without him noticing what I was doing, which was, of course, quite impossible, as we were both in the same room looking at one another.

I opened my mouth to opine... and closed it again.

Perhaps the explanation was not outright insanity, though most of the nobility would certainly say it seemed to be so, based solely on the outrageous demand for funds. Perhaps... a milder form of madness?

Something like... something like... why, yes. Bentley had had a sudden attack of woozums of the brain, rather than of the tum-tum.

While I had never heard of such a version of the affliction I had from time to time experienced as a child, it would definitely explain this rum start of his. The only problem was... what to do about his condition? I could hardly follow in my nanny's footsteps, updated by several decades, by sitting Bentley on my lap, clasping his head to my manly bosom, petting his hair and singing a comforting song, interspersed with the occasional murmurs of "there, there" and "it'll be all right."

"Are you feeling quite all right, Bentley?"

"Indeed, sir."

"No feelings of..." I could not quite find the correct words and so raised my hand and used my wrist to wave it round and round and round, up about head height.

"A sort of woozum of one's brain, instead of one's tum-tum, my lord?"

"Exactly!" What a perspicacious person he was, despite this sudden onset of something or other.

"No, indeed, my lord. Right as rain, my lord."

"Ah. I see." I nodded, with a solemn expression, to show him that I indeed saw. Though if I were compelled under oath to tell the truth—quite probably the only way to ensure that a member of the ton is not lying, though even relying on the oath is a chancy thing, at best—I could not have said what it was I saw.

Perhaps I could gently lead him to understand his error.

"Ah, Bentley, do you recall the definition of a gift?"

"Indeed, my lord."

"You understand, then, that a gift is a thing, no matter how modest it might be, that you give to someone else for free?"

"Indeed, sir."

I was certain that I was somehow being made a May game of, but could not quite discern how. Nevertheless, I moved forward, holding the course.

"You see, then, what I am getting at? If you pay for a thing, even though someone else might hand it to you after the purchase is made, you are not receiving a gift, you are being given something you already own."

"Ah. I do see, my lord. I quite understand how you misunderstood."

"I, ah... what?"

That last was *not* a squawk. I had eschewed all squawkery for the rest of my days.

"You *misunderstood*, my lord. You see, I do indeed propose to give you a gift. Multiple gifts.

"First, there is the gift of my intellect, in making the initial determination that you needed a gift, and then in making the requisite follow-up determination of what that gift should be. It is, I do not hesitate to assure you, a quite marvelous gift.

"Second, the gift of my time in locating the gift, since the gift is not something one just walks into an emporium anywhere, pulls out a wallet and buys. One must hunt it most diligently, if one is to capture it and safely bring it home.

"Third, there is the gift of my skills at negotiation, as the seller will undoubtedly try to charge far more than I am willing to pay for a gift of such surpassing elegance.

"And last, there is the gift of my valuable time in expending the time to pick up the gift, and thereafter wrap it appropriately for a proper presentation."

He paused and then waved a hand dismissively. "The cost in pounds and pence? A mere bagatelle, my lord. Not worth considering in the totality of the circumstances."

I felt that another “uh, what?” would not go over well, and might lead to some disparaging thoughts. About me, rather than by me.

“Well, ah, yes, I do see. That... that makes sense. Uh, you may tell Gregson that you may draw on the household operating funds for that amount, and that he needs to draw up a cheque for my signature to replenish the account.”

Another airy wave. “Oh, I already did that earlier this morning, my lord. You will find the cheque on your desk.”

“You had that much confidence I would agree?”

“Not confidence in confidence alone, my lord, but certainly I have confidence in me.”

“In your skills at manipulation.”

“In my skills of persuasion, particularly where the goal is such a desirable one. I also believe you will find that Lord Smythe will enjoy your gift as well.”

“So. More of a gift to both of us, then?” He nodded. “Well, why didn’t you say so from the very beginning. Or did you just wish to exercise your skills?”

He opened his mouth to reply, but it was my turn for a hand wave. This time to indicate “Don’t bother replying. Just go on about your business.”

Bentley smiled and left.

I wondered when we three would meet for the giving of the gift. Soon, I hoped. I have always had difficulty restraining my eagerness for receiving gifts.

Reggie

23 November 1882, 3:00 p.m.

No. 24 Bramwell Road

London

I have to tell Harry. I owe it to him. He deserves it.

But still... Men simply do not display those feelings. For the most part they do not *have* those... those *unmanly* feelings. And they most certainly do not *talk* about their feelings, especially feelings associated with... with... *that*.

The word you're looking for is "sex," you know. Or perhaps you are avoiding using or thinking the word beginning with an "L"? And how do you explain the feelings you definitely display when you remember other-Harry seeding Harry's arse, and imagine it is you? Or when you seed Harry's mouth?

That's different, I argued with my self. That is... well, that is just sex. And I defy any man to remain calm and dignified with his prick pounding Harry's arse or gliding in and out of his mouth, much less remain so at the moment of completion.

Not that there is going to be anyone else to experience those particular pleasures. Not any more. Harry is *mine*!

Then why the bloody hell don't you just... tell him?

What? Just walk up to him and... and... say those words, like one of Monsieur Montgolfier's balloons suddenly deflating and dropping on one's head out of a clear blue sky? Or more likely, a gloomy grey sky, which is more the rule in England.

Idiot. Your better self is not suggesting anything quite so stupid as making a declaration in the card room at White's, or in bloody Trafalgar Square at a moment when it is filled with all those vulgar, nattering, chattering American tourists.

Ah. I see.

You are recommending having a plan.

If my better self had hands, he would have thrown them in the air in exasperation at that juncture. As it was, his tone did quite well in conveying the breadth and depth of his exasperativeness. *A plan. You propose to plot, to*

prepare a bloody plan, as to the where and the when and the how, and most important of all, the words of the most important thing you are ever likely to say to Harry? Are you out of your mind?

I silently *harrumphed!* at my inner self. As Harry has so frequently said throughout our lifetimes, I am not exactly at my best when spontaneity is required. Though since Harry first came across Bentley's photographs, and our first visit to the Emporium, I rather think the quality of my spontaneousness has improved dramatically. Not, of course, that I will ever achieve the heights of spontaneity to which Harry regularly ascends. A hot air balloon going straight up to achieve a record would not match Harry's heights.

So. Yes. A plan was what was required. A careful plan, designed to create the appearance of spontaneity, while at the same time permitting me to pursue matters in the proper sequence, at the proper time, and in the proper place.

I can't believe you are doing this.

And I couldn't believe *he* was still yammering on and on about whether a plan was needed or not. After a bloody lifetime as my better half... though at times I am rather inclined to say *Ha!* to the "better" part... and an equal amount of time as my internal consultant, he really should have known better.

Of course I am going to create a plan.

I mentally waved him away to... wherever it is he stays until I call upon him again.

Which should I plan first?

The location? The time? Where we might be standing, or perhaps, yes, sitting, or, perhaps an even better—*yes!*—lying down? The latter would necessarily have to be a bed. These kinds of words are not the kind one says in a reading room at the Emporium, or across a crowded room, no matter how enchanted the evening might be.

My bed? Or his? Which bed would create the least pressure on him to reciprocate? I am quite sure he does reciprocate. Otherwise, I would not be venturing out on this limb, armed with a verbal saw to raggedly, jaggedly, nervously cut through the branch behind me, between me and the trunk, all the while praying I will be caught in a net of appropriate words, even if not quite reciprocating ones. I do not want him to feel forced into an *immediate* reciprocity. I am more than willing to wait. After all, he will need at least a little time to recover from the magnitude of my gesture in actually saying the words to him.

I could give him... oh, an *hour*... to recover from the sheer unexpectedness of my declaration, before reasonably expecting him to respond with a similar statement.

Yes, I believe this will work. His bed would be best, however. Less pressure. In my bed he might feel forced into an affirmative response of the instant variety, for fear of being forcibly ejected from the warmth of my bed and bosom.

No. Scratch that. Although the alliterativeness of "bed" and "bosom" is quite nice, it does not have quite the manliness that the moment requires. Besides, any ejection I might ever consider doing would only be post-ejaculation. Anything less would be most inappropriate. And most unfair. Indeed, one might consider bed-ejection before ejaculation to be quite vulgar.

Now, then. The words. How should I start?

I dip my pen, write, "Harry." No, that is too informal, too, ah, merely friendly. I scratch it out.

Another dip, another writing. "Dear Harry." No, that sounds as if I'm writing him a letter.

Another dip. "My dear Harry." Better.

A dip, and a second dip, to achieve, "My *very* dear Harry." Yes, that will give him an inkling that something important is about to be said, as we don't call each other "dear" in the normal course of events.

I paused to ponder what would come next.

Should I just go straight away into it? That might be rushing the fence a bit. Perhaps I could lead into it? With a bit of humor. Harry likes humor. And for some reason I don't quite understand, he likes Mr. Carroll's books. He's forever on about Humpty Dumptying when he uses words in the way he thinks they ought to be used, rather than as befitting one educated to correctly use the Queen's English.

And then there is that silly walrus thing he half-sings and quotes. What is it?

Ah.

How very odd that I should *remember* the words, merely because... or perhaps, *just because*... they amuse Harry. I dip my pen the number of times needed and write the opening lines down.

*"The time has come," the Walrus said,
 "To talk of many things:
 Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
 Of cabbages—and kings—
 And why the sea is boiling hot—
 And whether pigs have wings."*

Yes. Perfect. I can use that. We won't be talking of *many* things, and certainly nothing as absurd as those on that list, but still, he will appreciate my thoughtfulness in thinking of his fondness for these silly words, and using them as an introduction to the *important* thing I have to say.

I blotted and set that paper aside. I rather think I am going to require a fresh sheet.

I write... a *version* of the important words I want to say, knowing as they drip from my pen that they are not really right. Upon review I find my instinct correct, fold my dissatisfying verbal selection into fours, uncaring of smears, and set the paper beside me to await a proper ceremonial burial in the funeral pyre in the fireplace. I select another sheet. Write again. Review. Discard again.

Bloody hell. Writing important words, of the magnitude of these words, is difficult beyond belief. What is it that Dickens said? "It is a far, far more difficult thing that I do, than I have ever done before?" Though at least this "thing" will not be the death of me. And yet...

And yet... I rather think it might, if I am wrong, and Harry does not reciprocate. I shall not leap from London Bridge in despair, but I rather think a part of my soul might die were that to happen.

I shake my head, and still in a Dickensian mood, I say aloud, "Bah, humbug!" to these desolate thoughts.

Very well. I have the proper salutation. I have a humorous beginning. Now I must find... the damned words.

So I write, review, fold, set aside. Again.

And yet again.

And *yet again*.

Bloody hell!

The women who write those damned romantical novels for other women to read must have an innate ability for forming words and phrases about bloody

feelings. Which is, of course, not at all surprising, given that women are creatures of *feelings* themselves, unlike men, who are creatures of logic and will. However, I am of the firm belief—as indeed all men are, and must ever be for the protection of their sanity—that anything women can do, men can do better.

If they put their minds to it.

Well, not quite *everything*. There is... *that*, of course. And... And... Oh well, the basic principle is still sound. Quite sound.

But what if I say...

No. Not even close. I don't bother to write *that* thought down.

I got up and paced. I am not a perennial pacer, as the proper words are always at hand, so to speak, so I have no need for the motions of walking repetitively to and fro with no purpose but the repetition itself, in order to jiggle or joggle my mind into giving up what I require.

No jiggles. No joggles. No words. I sighed, a quite loud one. Had it been somewhat more abrupt, and slightly more forceful, anyone hearing might have thought the noise came from another orifice entirely.

And then I recalled Harry's admonition when I was on the verge of committing a social solecism some years ago, brought about by that stolidity of mine, and from which only Harry's timely intervention saved me. Repairing to a quiet tavern generally not patronized by members of our set, we indulged in several tankards of remarkably fine dark ale, before he imparted his words of wisdom.

"When you are uncertain what to do, Smythe, you have only to remember four letters, and the words that go with them, and your social course will be safely set."

He winked at me and said, "W. W. H. D."

He waited while I figured it out, albeit with a slight degree of impatience when I did not immediately perceive it. "Oh. 'What would Harry do?'"

I paused. "Seriously?"

He nodded.

I reached across the table between us, and punched his shoulder.

Not hard at all, barely a tap, but he affected great pain and vast surprise, throwing himself against the wooden back of the booth, as if compelled to do so by the blow, and said, "You hit me, you bloody bugger."

"Well, of course I did. One who gives one's friend stupid advice should always be hit so that eventually he will learn to give only *sound* advice."

Alas, poor Harry. A blurt won the race to his lips yet again, with the thought at least a length behind. "Ha! Tell me, then, when have I ever not..."

His voice faded away, with a dawning, mischievous chagrin overtaking his expression.

What else could I do but what any best friend would do in the same or similar circumstances?

I gave him several fine examples of J. W. H. D.—Just What Harry Did. Spontaneosity at its finest. We laughed until we felt sure we could laugh no more, and then, calling up memories of other fine examples, we laughed some more.

And when my own remembering smiles faded, I recalled what Harry so often enjoyed and spontaneously did. We called it "mangling masterpieces." Harry would call up... spontaneously, for the most part... some piece of Shakespeare or a poem, or a bit from some fine piece of literature I had never read, and sometimes had never heard of... and rewrite it on the spot. Usually to some pointed or humorous effect.

I paused to reflect. I mangled the masterpiece of *Hamlet* at the Emporium, in a most spontaneous manner.

That's what Harry would do, were he writing to me. He would mangle a masterpiece. And so will I. For him. But what?

What?

The shelves of my library were far more practical than his shelves. Mine were not precisely overflowing with the fruits of the finest English literary achievements. Or even the more mundane novels intended purely for mindless entertainment, such as the romantical novels he quite insisted on reading.

My shelves were indeed deadly dull to most of our set. Tomes on business, agriculture, mathematics, finance, hist...

History?

But of course. Harry is fond of American history, even admires Americans. Or rather, admires the ancestors of the current generation. I am sure he feels, as the rest of us do, that we are being paid back for the burning of Washington City by the recent, and ongoing invasion of London society by the frequently vulgar American *nouveau riche*, and their culture, such as it is.

So. Something from the American past which he would appreciate as a declara...

But of course!

I shall write him a Declaration of... *Dependence*.

As it were.

It took me a while, but eventually I found an old book, which contained the text which had so infuriated our ancestors, and had such astonishing and unprecedented results for the Empire.

Well, damn. Quite a bit longer than I recalled. Wordy lot, those Americans.

Harry would just have to appreciate the careful thought behind the opening bits, then.

I pondered, considered, perused, repeated until I was certain I had it. Then I carefully began to write it out for later memorization.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one man to dissolve the friendship bonds which have connected him to another, and to assume the mantle of a new and higher station of relationship to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them both, a decent respect to the opinions of his friend, requires that he should declare the causes which impel them to this new and better union.

I hold these truths to be self-evident, that these men were created equal, that they were endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, and Liberty and, for one, the pursuit of Harry.

And then the final task. The words I had to say. The point of all this prelude.

I wrote again, and this time, if I was not quite the Lord beholding all I have written and declaring it very good, I was close enough.

By George, I do believe I have it!

A *complete* plan now.

An excellent plan.

I shall carry it out.

Soon.

Just as soon as I find some Hal to shout out a grand, ringing speech that will give me sufficient courage to do so.

Would it begin, "Once more unto Harry's breeches..."?

Harry

23 November 1882, 3:00 p.m.

No. 18 Bramwell Road

London

I opened the book to a page I have often read. So much so I sometimes thought that if I set the book upright on its spine, clasping the covers together, and let my fingers open, the book would separate at just this spot. I have no idea why these words move me so, other than the logic that it is merely because I am an Englishman, and this is one of the greatest speeches of all time by an Englishman, to Englishmen. Indeed, by any man to any group of men about to enter battle. Even if it did not, as a matter of historical fact, occur in just this way.

Yet it calls to me, as I somehow feel I am about to embark on a battle. Of sorts.

I ran a finger down the lines as I read them aloud, making no attempt to imbue them with the richness and full-blown passion they deserved. Or rather, truth be told, making a small attempt to somehow make the words mine. To stiffen my sinews, to summon up my blood.

*Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility:
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage;*

I paused and smiled a little to myself. The blood I summoned up was definitely not used for stiffening *sinews*. And my fair nature is rarely disguised with drink, much less rage.

I read on, to:

*Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit
To his full height. On, on, you noblest English.
Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!*

My full height is not all that great, and though I am of the noblest English... or so my father frequently says we are... given my father's nature, the nature of my brother, the nature of my grandfathers, I am not of the blood of men battle-tested in any war, let alone this particular "war."

Had I been there that day, with Harfleur's battered walls in my sights, I suspect I would have been one of those good yeoman, whose limbs were made in England. I would have been one of the many being exhorted to show the mettle of our pasture, to show the worth of our, my, breeding, to show the noble luster in our, my, eyes.

*I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:
Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'*

I am, if anything, just a little greyhound, not so much straining upon the start, but recognizing that the start must be made. That I must follow my spirit, and if it is not a charge which requires a battle cry shouted to the heavens from a thousand throats and more, yet it is something I must do.

I have to tell him. It is tearing me apart not to. I don't know when or where or how, nor even what words I will use. I doubt that I can say the logical three. Or rather, the illogical three, as those words are not something one man may say to another. Assuredly never in public, not even from a father to a beloved son, if, indeed, there are any such relationships. Unlikely even in private. It is simply... not the done thing.

Yet still... Yet still... words there will be. I am confident of that. They will come to me.

I smiled. And then laughed a little aloud. When my words arrived, springing, as it were, from my brow, fully formed, they would be unplanned... *spontaneous*.

Unlike any words Reggie might say.

I allowed myself the fantasy that Reggie had this same dilemma. Indeed, I hoped and semi-prayed he might somehow feel as I feel, although I could only "semi-pray," as I was far from certain whether anyone was there listening. Nevertheless, I regularly attended services on the off-chance I might be wrong.

But if this fantasy were so, dear, much-dilemma'd Reggie would, even now, be developing a bloody plan. Deciding on all the "rights." The right location.

The right moment. The right clothes. Probably the right food and the right wine to create the right atmosphere. And above all else, the precisely right words.

Yes, I can see him at his desk, steel-nibbed pen in hand—very *au courant* is my Reggie—his brow furrowed in almost anguished thought. The anguish arising, naturally, from the thought of putting *feelings* on paper, no matter how brief a time they would be visible, and even if only to him. He will stiffen his writing sinews... and hopefully, stiffen something else as well, given the occasion for his wordly contemplation... and then proceed. Quick, firm strokes; a precise dip into the well, then more strokes, and repeat as necessary, producing in his characteristically neat and so very legible penmanship, his first draft.

I *require* a “first draft” in this fantasy. I don’t want him to find the words in just one go. Struggle a bit, damn it! I’m worth a fight to find the “just right!” And he does. He pauses, he ponders, he decides the words his fingers have just formed are simply not good enough for me. He discards them.

The process of discarding is as precise as the process of writing, which is something to which I can attest from personal observation. He does not crumple and pitch as mere mortals do. Instead, he carefully folds the paper in half, then half again, using a thumbnail to make the crease sharp and encourage the paper to lie flat. If necessary his palm will flatly achieve what thumb-persuasion is unable to. He then sets it aside in one of the numerous empty spaces on his desk, most likely a space specifically designated in his mind as the recipient of his discards, and therefore never used for any other purpose.

He considers the purpose of his prose again. Unlike others, he does not lift his head and let his eyes and thoughts wander about, will they, nill they, seeking inspiration from mostly unseen surroundings. He concentrates. Raises his hand, reconsiders, returns it. A moment later, he is writing again.

In my fantasy, Reggie requires many drafts, really, a *most* amazing number, creating a quite thick stack of paper containing words unworthy of me, before he creates the final version. He holds it up, staring at it with mild surprise, silent on his own Darien peak, at words he never thought he would ever say.

Though he has, of course, not said them yet. He is just preparing to.

He reads his words through again, resisting any urge he might have to tinker even more. He smiles in my fantasy, a smug smile of one who has done it yet again—achieved his goal of utter rightness. Then, satisfied he has firmly fixed the words in his memory, he folds and folds the final paper, placing it atop the stack.

He lights the fire, and carefully feeds the folded papers to the flames, one-by-one. He is unwilling to take the risk that by tossing them all and looking away, one sheet might escape its doom, and—to mix metaphors, or whatever it is that may be mixed—in so doing come back to bite him on the arse.

I sighed at the ending of my fantasy. Reggie might feel the things I am feeling, but there is still the remnant of that propriety pole up his arse. Not as wide or as long or as deep as it once was, though his arse has admittedly shown a talent for other things wide or long or deep going up inside beside the pole. Thus it is unlikely he would, without prompting, say the words.

So I shall prompt him.

I shall paint a picture for him in words. A precise, concise picture in, ah, seventy-five sounds right, words or less. And I will provide him a prompt of such fineness that it will inspire him to write a story.

A brilliant story.

Just for me.

I will, I definitely will... but who knows where or when?

Reggie

25 November 1882, 8:30 p.m.

No. 121 Falmouth Lane

London

The meal had been superb. *Precisely* as planned. The right food. The right wine. The right service by Bentley, which had been something of a shock to Harry. After all, you didn't expect to find your own manservant serving dinner to you and your... paramour? lover? ...in a tidy, but not at all ostentatious house set aside for your paramour's supposed mistress.

As agreed, Bentley had promptly withdrawn after clearing away. Oh, and he had given the nod that indicated everything else had gone as planned. The wine in the parlor. The bedroom freshened and ready.

A casual mention as we walked to the parlor that I had given the few servants who usually attended me at this location the evening off, and that Bentley had departed as well. I poured myself a glass of port. Although it is no longer the after-dinner wine of preference amongst the ton, *I* prefer it. I handed round another glass of a rather fine claret to Harry.

I had designed the perfect convivial atmosphere conducive to communication.

And damn it all, it bloody went *gang aft agley* almost from the start.

We stood before the sideboard, glasses in hand, not speaking. I waved him courteously... *damn it!* the kind of courtesy one extends to a comparative stranger newly in one's home... to take a seat. He hesitated, walked to the rather sad, somewhat saggy-cushioned, floral-patterned couch opposite the fireplace, hesitated again, and then sat.

I would have hesitated, too, before sitting on *that*, if I were a guest. But damn it all, there was no need to expend a great deal of money to furnish a house for a nonexistent mistress. So I should not have to feel so bloody embarrassed about surroundings he had never been intended to see. And even though he had seen them on several occasions since we began our photographic adventures, the embarrassment was still present.

He didn't sit at the far end, as he might so easily have done. Which would have signaled... distance? disinterest? Nor did he sit just next to the center,

thereby... encouraging me to sit next to him? Instead, he chose to sit between the two points. Signaling... what?

Subtlety, thy name is *not* Harry. So what are you doing?

By the time all these thoughts finished swirling I reached the couch, and faced my own decision.

Where to sit?

I could not make this awkward moment any more so by stalling and making my uncertainties obvious. I sat down in a mirror position to his. We were separated by not quite the thickness of a hand.

Now what?

I finally admitted to myself that my plan had a flaw in it. A hole roughly the size of one of the craters you can see on the moon with the application of a good telescope readily available at Bell's Emporium—a rather more respectable purveyor of varied goods than the other one. Or if one did not want to spend the ready, one could call upon a friend at the Royal Observatory who can provide the *very best*. My plan required us to be in bed when I said the words I had so carefully written and memorized.

Except I had no idea how I was going to get him... *us*... there.

To my bedroom. No. Not *my* bedroom. This was a... *neutral*... bedroom. One never used by an imaginary mistress, nor even by me for a stay overnight. So it could possibly be *our* bedroom. Except we were not there. Yet. And I was lost.

The silence stretched.

Harry? *Spontaneous*? A paragon of spontaneosity? Ha! And ha! again. If he was so damned spontaneous why wasn't he saying anything?

We weren't looking at each other. At least not our faces. We were staring at hands.

I was to his right, my glass in my right hand. His drink was in his left.

My hand had naturally dropped to my left thigh when I sat, although it had been tempted to move that extra bit of distance, to almost slide off, but not quite, so that if I stretched my little finger just a bit, just the tiniest bit, the tip could stroke his right little finger. I restrained my finger, as I restrained my prick. With difficulty.

Was Harry having that same difficulty?

We had agreed we would be *together* together. We had even given away our prized collections. Though I still felt the slightest twinge of guilt that I had not surrendered all of mine, yet not enough guilt... perhaps not *yet*... to disclose my error. We were ready for the intimacy we had not yet had with each. I was ready to say the words I had never imagined in all my life I might ever say to anyone, much less another man.

A man to whom I could not think of a thing to say, nor anything I might do. I couldn't just... leap upon him. That simply isn't done.

My carefully crafted train had taken a curve at far too high a speed, and each carriage had left the tracks, leaving me alone and dazed and just blindly staring at the wreckage of my plan.

And all for want of a sound.

Harry

25 November 1882, 8:30 p.m.

No. 121 Falmouth Lane

London

Silence.

For once I had no idea what to say or do. All the “just right” things that had gone before, and they were, indeed, *just right*, had clearly been part of Reggie’s plan.

Which had gone most prodigiously *agley*, it seemed.

I had no way to resurrect it, or to put it in terms of one of those damned railroad lines he had invested in and was perpetually talking about the returns from having done so, to get this wreck cleared away and the train back on its tracks.

I had no plan of my own. I was relying on spontaneity to tell me what to say or do, and for the first time in... forever... I had no idea.

The silence was going to hurt us, possibly damn us, and we were letting it.

Sitting here, not quite touching, in silence that would in all likelihood be broken by one of us suggesting, so as not to lose any more dignity and self-respect than had already been lost, that perhaps it was best if we just called it a night and went to our respective homes.

Separately.

Damn. And damn. And damn again.

Which was when Bentley walked in. Without any warning.

Excellent. It gave me... gave *us*... something to focus on other than the disaster in the making. The focus being: why the hell was he still here when Reggie had assured me he was gone?

His appearance was so sudden I had no time to move away, though it was only our proximity that was morally damning. It was not as if we were in truth *touching*, although we had somehow subtly shifted from our original sitting-down positions, to one in which there was only the thickness of a piece of onion skin paper between us. And we most certainly were not doing anything which would assure our social damnation were it seen.

Not that Bentley would ever say anything. But I still preferred not to flaunt whatever it was we *ought* to have been flaunting in this moment.

Bentley was carrying a box, quite elegantly wrapped.

The gift?

He was interrupting a private evening between just us two, an evening he knew quite well was to be private, and he well understood the definition of the word without having to look it up in the Reverend Stormonth's *Dictionary of the English Language*, sixth bloody edition. Just to give me a gift I had paid for?

Perhaps I should require him to return to my house, open the dictionary to the right entry, and refresh his recollection.

He held the box out to me.

I glared at him.

He pushed it forward again.

"Harry?" Reggie asked, his tone containing the rest of the words: "What the bloody hell is going on and why is Bentley back and what have you done to bring him back?"

His tone also contained his relief that that damnable silence had been filled with *something*.

I transferred my glare to Reggie, who looked affronted, and then retransferred it to Bentley who could, as a servant, in theory not afford to appear affronted no matter what he might actually feel. A theory only, and one never practiced. The reality was that Bentley could affront—whether being it or causing it—with impunity and we both knew it.

We three knew it.

"It is merely a gift, my lord. For the both of you."

I attempted to reignite my glare, but it fizzled out. He knew very well I would not embarrass myself or him with an explanation of who paid for what.

I would have expected the idea of a friend's manservant giving a joint gift to his employer and his employer's best friend, to have set off at least a mild propriety pole reaction in Reggie. However, Reggie's delight in gifts, though generally well hidden behind his stolid manner, except to someone who knew him as well as me, overrode any incipient poleish tendencies

"Really, Bentley?" Reggie asked, all hidden "aglow." "How very kind of you."

How very kind of Reggie not to cross question him about the oddity of what he was doing. Though, knowing Reggie, I at least would be vigorously cross-questioned later. Reggie is quite good at that. Good as an Old Bailey barrister going after a nervous witness to save his client from incarceration.

"Not at all, my lord. Shall I?"

"Oh, yes, Bentley. Please do."

Reggie the ever susceptible held out his hands, and Bentley placed the box in them. He nearly dropped it, as the ease with which Bentley held it gave no hint that it was apparently quite heavy.

He grasped it more firmly. "What a heavy gift you've given." He held it up. "A large number of small unmarked coins, for some pictorial purchases, perhaps?" He shook it slightly and shook his head. "Alas, no clinking."

"No, my lord."

There was, of course, no precedent for this situation, upon which we could rely in discerning the social niceties, and what we were required to do. Should we simply state our thanks and let Bentley leave? Should we open it now?

Dear Reggie cut through my Gordian knotting. "Let's open it now."

"It's not bloody Christmas morning yet," I grumbled.

I was rewarded with duplicate glowers.

"Oh, very well, go ahead."

Reggie has done it before, and he was doing it again. Ordinary people, regular people, even amongst the nobility, simply find a place where one can hook one's finger, or one's nail, in the wrapping paper, catch it up, and then rip it off, either crumpling the shreds and shards first, or simply letting them fall.

But no, Reggie had to be as precise in his unwrapping as he was in his paper discarding.

He carefully untied the bow, and with equal care removed the ribbons. He examined the box and finally found just the right place to insert a carefully trimmed fingernail and begin to take the wrapping apart. Even he was not good enough to come in first in the All England Wrapping Removal Stakes by doing so without a single tear, but he came close.

I harrumphed a time or two but he simply ignored me. When at last, *at bloody last*, the paper was removed, and folded, and set aside, he looked at the box in his lap. Oak, gleaming, smooth and entirely sans carvings or decorations. He twisted it towards me to show the brass lock. With no key. He looked up at Bentley.

"On the bottom, my lord."

Of course Bentley would never give an incomplete gift. Reggie rested the box on his knees, tilted it, and removed the key attached with a little dab of glue. Naturally he then had to use his fingernail to scrape away the residue before he got on with the business of opening the bloody gift.

He inserted the key and then paused. Purely for dramatic effect.

"Smythe, there will be no trumpets sounding. Just open it." He almost looked hurt that I had not used his first name, but still, we were in the presence of Bentley, who, at least officially, did not know of the degree of intimacy between the two of us.

"Sometimes you just drain the fun out of things." He paused again, considering. "*Harry*."

Well, that put paid to me and my foolish thoughts of some secrecy.

He turned the key, lifted the lid... and gawped.

There are some who do not know the difference between a mere gape and a clear gawp. I was not one of those. The contents, in Reggie's more stolid and slightly stuffy mind, clearly warranted a gawp. I was confident I would do neither.

I gawped as well when he turned the box, lined in black velvet, to me.

Inside was a book. Or rather, *three* books. Rare books. So very rare that if Her Dread Majesty's censors were to discover we had a copy, the book might well be burned in public, and ourselves be subjected to the social equivalent of an *auto da fé*.

Even we, in our pre-Edwardian ignorance of those particular facts of life, had heard of this book.

The Memoirs of Three Men of Leisure and Pleasure, or, The Tantalizing Tale of A Rake, A Rogue and A Roué.

In three volumes. Reggie lifted them out, carefully, almost reverently. He put the first on his lap, tilting it against his belly. He handed the second to me.

He started to turn the box to Bentley, to allow him to remove the third, but Bentley shook his head.

Given his ownership of the pictures which had set off this remarkable journey for Reggie and me, he had undoubtedly inspected the book most thoroughly before hiding it away.

Each had a full leather binding in a rich burgundy color, with gold tooling on the spine, covers and squares. The title labels were also elaborately tooled, and there were handsewn endbands in red and gold, and gilded edges. The volumes were thick, and as Reggie and I opened them, we discovered why.

In addition to all the words necessary to describe the numerous adventures of the authors, the sheer number of far from discreet illustrations was astonishing. Some, perhaps most, of those I saw, and I could only assume a similarity in what Reggie was seeing, were, in their own way, far more explicit and arousing than the finest examples of gentlemanly portraiture available from the Grand Emporium.

We selfishly became engrossed in our examination, and did not become unengrossed until Bentley's amused voice cut across and through our concentration. "I see you are enjoying the gift, my lords."

Startled, we lifted our heads, both of us thankful that the volumes covered our crotches, and stammered our belated thanks for a stunning gift.

"You're most welcome, my lords. And now, if I may, I beg..." I briefly said *Ha!* in my head at the idea of Bentley's begging being anything other than the merest formality. "...your leave to depart."

This was Reggie's house but my manservant, so of course we stumbled over each other's voices in giving our consent and renewing our thanks.

At the door, Bentley stopped and then turned back. "Oh, my lord?"

I assumed he meant me, so I lifted my head.

"A most odd thing, my lord. I discovered a hundred pounds just laying on your dresser. Of course, no one on *our* staff would steal from you, but still, I thought it best to be prudent—" *after your carelessly leaving it about*, his tone said—"and put it in the bottom and back of your lowest right desk drawer in the library. Where it should be safe, until you can lock the notes away properly."

Smug bastard. He didn't even give me an opportunity for a visual *touché!* or acknowledgment of the joke, or anything else, just finished his Parthian shot and walked out.

I looked back to Reggie, and the room was treated to the third gawp of the evening.

Mine. A magnificent gawp, of course, given the reason for it.

Reggie was holding the open volume cradled in his left arm, most carefully indeed. With his right he was fumbling with his trousers, working with his fingers, and then suddenly he succeeded in his endeavors. He looked triumphantly at me.

His prick was out, sticking up from his trousers, a gnarled, powerful pillar.

A weeping pillar-prick.

“Well?” he said.

Reggie

25 November 1882, 8:45 p.m.

No. 24 Bramwell Road

London

Harry just looked at me.

And looked at my prick.

And looked at me whilst groping his own prick.

Well! Perhaps it was not sound that was needed, after all, to get this plan back on the tracks. Departing the station. Driving... *pounding*... through the tunnel.

I forced myself to stop all the verbal train imagery. To slow the stroking. Or the train would crash with dismaying effect right then and there.

"There's a bed upstairs, is there not?"

Well, of course there was a bed upstairs. In the bloody bedroom. The one he'd spied... well, no, he hadn't actually spied from the tree into the bedroom. He would probably have broken his neck had he climbed that high.

I let none of my impatience show. Words were, after all, probably a good thing just then. "Yes."

"And you... had a *plan*, did you not, dear Reggie, for getting us up there?"

I nodded.

"An exercise in a bit of deviosity, perhaps, so that we would be on the second floor without me suspecting *why* we were there? Perhaps... a guided tour of this den of depravity you devised for your nonexistent mistress? With scatterbrained Harry having no idea of your licentious intents for his person?"

"Well, I wouldn't—"

"And once you had the bedroom door open, ostensibly intending only to make a passing show of it, you would 'recall' something particularly fine about it that would require our entering so that you could show it to me? And once in there, would you have stumbled, and fallen into me, and found your face so close to mine from your accident that you could bring yourself to do nothing less than kiss me? And kiss me well? Thoroughly?"

"Ah, perhaps—"

"Reggie, Reggie, Reggie." Harry looked at me with the fond exasperation of a parent for an idiot child, a look I was not precisely fond of just then. On the other hand, progress was being made in the general *verbal* direction of the bedroom.

Harry patted my thigh as he said those words. He reached over, and he didn't... *pat* my prick, but he did rub my knob.

"Sometimes, Reggie, I despair of you. I really do. You remember the most intricate of details for the most complex of business ventures; you have those details at your mental fingertips, available for decision making and acting upon. You can expound upon those details until those parts of your audience who have no real bloody interest in them, other than that they are making you happy in some way, wish to scream and run from your presence. And yet you are entirely unable to recall one of the most important lectures you have ever given."

During all this, Harry had released his own prick from its confines, and was stroking it as well. Marvelous thing, Harry's prick. Particularly with his hand going up... and down. Up... and down. And the skin hiding... and revealing, hiding... and slowly revealing, that most delightfully dark red knob. A weeping knob about which his fingers swirled so that all of it would glisten. I felt I could watch that forever, although there was, perhaps, something else that I was supposed to do just then. Though for the life of me I could not remember precisely what.

"Reggie!"

The sharpness of his tone unfortunately yanked my attention away from the object of my affections, and intentions.

"What?" It was almost a snap of annoyance.

"Set the book aside."

"What?" This was no snap, but puzzlement. Book? Book? I had no... oh, but I did. But why...

"You do not wish to stain Bentley's fine gift, do you?"

Ah. No. Definitely not. Yet in my concentration on the delights of Harry's dick, the wonderful book, with its wonderful illustrations, had drifted perilously close to danger from my own dick drippings. My hand reluctantly leaving my prick, I carefully closed it, and set it on the table.

Much better. I had free rein to sit back, and grab my prick, and resume my visual examination of Harry's.

That self-same Harry who thumped my left shoulder.

"What in the bloody hell was that for?"

"You haven't answered my question."

"You haven't asked a question."

"You should have understood it was intended as a question."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Naturally. Very well then. I shall explain it to you even more carefully. No, better yet, I shall quote your own words to you, and see if that helps. You said to me... and listen carefully now, you said: 'My dear fellow, did it *ever* occur to you to ascertain my interest, or lack thereof, in this particular artistic endeavor, just by asking me?' Although I would, of course, were I saying that to you just now, select a word other than 'artistic.'"

What? When had I ever...

Oh.

I had.

Very well, I would accept simplicity as an alternate plan.

"Harry, would you like to go upstairs and fuck?"

"Yes."

I stood up.

"Sit down."

I sat. Confused, but I sat.

"We need to talk."

And we both grinned at our recollections of that phrase. Which didn't stop either of us from stroking.

Talking to each other while stroking was something I was sure I could learn to enjoy.

Oh. I already had learned.

I waited for him to say something, though not very long, since the alternative plan succeeded so brilliantly and all this—nonexistent, but

presumably only so for a moment—chatter was delaying implementation of my equally brilliant post-arrival-in-bed, or, post-arrival-to-being-near-a-bed, strategy.

I prompted him with, “Well?” And waggled both my eyebrows in a semaphore signal sort of a way.

“Very well, thank you.” He smiled and looked at his prick and mine, and of course I followed his lead. I rather suspected that whenever Harry chose to lead, I would follow, and suspected, too, the opposite would hold true as well. His leading this time led to prick observation. Damn but we were both shiny and slick.

“We are *together* together now, are we not?” he finally said.

“I should hope so. After the kind of kisses you gave me in front of that rather extraordinary mirror, a mirror which might, perhaps, reflect more than just kisses one day, or night, and after indulging in sex in a carriage without marriage, we had certainly better be. If we’re not, my honor has been sullied, and I shall have to call you out.”

“I would have choice of weapons, you know.”

“Naturally.”

“Do you think... pricks at no paces?”

“Most excellent. We shall have to practice that dueling technique, though not, I think, tonight. Well, perhaps *later* tonight, if we ever get on with what might be called the first things first part of tonight. Simplicity, Harry, simplicity.”

“Very well. I think we should live together.”

What? I haven’t even had my prick in his arse, or, most certainly, *vice versa*, and already our living arrangements are being changed? I started to ask him what was wrong with the way things were but didn’t bother. In the asking of his question, I knew the answer to what was wrong with any other living arrangement than the *together* together living he proposed.

“There will be difficulties, of course,” I said to him.

“Of course.”

“Bartlett and Bentley dueling for pride of place in the combined household?”

"Certainly a possibility. Though I think the weapons of choice might be somewhat different than ours."

"Our families."

"Bugger them. Though not, of course, in any literal sense, as that would be most unnatural."

"The ton."

"Bugger them, as well."

"A good part of the English-speaking world, and most of the rest."

"Bugger them all, if need be."

"Well, now that those minor problems have been solved, I really think we should go upstairs." I tried a little bit of forlornness. "My prick is hurting, you know."

I stood.

"Sit down."

I sat. Was Harry training me to be one of those children's toys, though of a more pointed and erotic variety?

"Just one thing more."

"You are sure it's only one thing more?"

"Quite."

"Then get on with it before I am incapacitated by the blueness of my ballocks."

"I should like a dog. In our new household."

"A dog."

"Indeed. A dog."

"But you've never had a dog."

"Then it's time I did. I think I need one, actually."

"Need a dog."

"Yes. Are you having difficulty following? You seem to be repeating my thoughts."

"No, no, I understand. Following right along, just... confused about your sudden doggy needs."

"I agree it's comparatively new. Indeed, I hadn't realized until quite recently the kinds of advantages there are to having a dog around. Especially a big dog."

"A big dog, you say."

"Oh, yes. I wouldn't have any other kind."

"And speaking of kind..."

"Nothing less than a mastiff will do, Reggie. A quite large and powerful mastiff." He paused, and then twinkled at me. "That way, I shall always have two of them around to protect me."

Those were *not* tears in my eyes. A British nobleman does not engage in tears merely because someone, even a quite special someone, has paid him an unusual compliment.

My inhalation just then was also not a sniffle or snuffle or any similar sort of a sound.

"I... I think that would be a rather fine idea."

"Excellent!" He patted me briskly on my left thigh once again and stood. "So, if you finally have nothing more to talk about, perhaps we might proceed upstairs?"

I graciously ignored his calumny and stood when he did. But when he turned towards the door, prick still out, his fingertips idly fiddling with his foreskin, I had to say something. After all, you just don't wander around a house, even your own, with your prick on display. It just isn't done. And so I said.

"Who says?" said he.

"Why, everyone."

He kept right on walking as he was talking. "So Fenwick, one fine day, just walks up to you, takes you aside, and with his customary drunken huff, murmurs in your shell-like ear, 'Word of warning, Smythe, old chum. Not the done thing to be wandering about in your house with your prick out. Word to the wise, don't you know.'"

"Don't be ridiculous." Actually he wasn't, and I was, but I wasn't quite ready to admit that just yet. Which is perhaps why I slapped my palm flat on the door and kept him from opening it.

"Well, if it isn't your chums giving you the nod, then who? Whom?"

"Damn it all, Harry, the whole ton would say so. If anyone had the large brass ballocks to ask."

"And what did we just say about the ton?" he said in that teaching-an-idiot-child-yet-again tone.

"Bugger them."

"Precisely." He looked down at my prick, which was just as stiff as his. "Your prick isn't worried about pointing the way through the house and up to the bedroom. So why should you be concerned about his guidance?"

I shouldn't be concerned, but I was, and then I realized this was just another of Harry's adventures: naked-prick walking through one's house. I could do that. I lifted my hand away, let him open the door, and then, when the bastard gestured to precede him, I did.

What an odd feeling: walking through your mostly darkened house, accompanied by a man whose arse you were going to fuck through the mattress in the oh, so very, very near future, before giving him a minimal amount of recuperation time so he could do the same to you. Harry had the candle and so I naturally suggested he lead the way. While that put his prick out of sight, I could admire the way bits and pieces of light—reflecting off various shiny things on the walls—stroked, and rubbed, and fondled his arse. Even the light recognized its... superbity.

There was no one outside, especially not in the tree, spying on us. I had checked to be sure. Nor was Bentley around to do so. *This* time Bentley was gone. I was sure of it.

Reasonably sure.

Somewhat so.

Ah, well, if he wanted to spy on us and see both our pricks in their primed and oh-so-*finally!*-ready state, he could do so. It was only fair, after all, since we had seen his.

Good Lord, had we seen his.

Despite what I'd told Harry, and all the sound and fury I'd generated over the ridiculousness of the Bendy Ben confrontation, I was in reality quite sure Bentley was the gentleman being immortalized—at least as long as the negatives lasted—on those two sets of images. If he didn't want us to

acknowledge that fact, didn't want to acknowledge it himself, who were we to argue?

And then we were at and through the bedroom door. Harry headed to my desk to light the small candelabra there, and then to the mantel for the larger one. Once the room was filled with flickering yellows and golds and whites, he set his candle down on the nightstand and turned to look at me, still in the doorway, his arms akimbo and his prick jutting.

I could see the sardonic eyebrow lift. "My dear Reggie, we both know you have a marvelous prick. I can see it from here. And I fully realize that men in general have an enlarged opinion on the size of their pricks, which is undoubtedly why we so often stand too far away from whatever receptacle is to receive our piss, and proceed to piss on all sorts of places between our prick tips and there. You will, I am afraid, have to accept the reality that even giant-Reginald or African King could not fuck me from there.

"And if they can't, you certainly can't. Not that they ever would. Have a chance, I mean. To try. So..."

He let his voice trail away, still watching me. Still stroking himself. "And wanking that far away is not at all acceptable, even as some sort of perverted foreplay. You promised me a through-the-mattress fucking, and I am holding you to your word."

Good Lord, how my Harry... *my* Harry... could talk. I decided then and there that there were three methods I would use throughout the remainder of our lives to staunch his babbling, or blathering, or chattering or whatever it might be.

Primus: My cock in his mouth.

Secundus: My tongue in his mouth, and my lips most firmly attached to his.

Tertius: A simple verbal signal, easily understood, which he could be trained to obey. "Harry, sit!" Yes, that would do quite nicely. And if we were in some location outside of our home where nothing was available to actually sit upon, whoever happened to be around us at the moment of command would simply have to be amazed that he shut up.

As he was standing, his mouth was too high for the cock approach, so I settled on the second. I strode across the room, stopped in front of him, put my hands on his shoulders, pulled him to me and kissed him. The kiss was brilliant, of course. How could it not be? But I had to somewhat awkwardly jut my hips

back, release his right shoulder, put my right hand behind his head to keep it in place, and then use my left hand to get my prick into a better position.

When your pricks are out, and you are still fully clothed, pulling your lover to you clearly required more finesse than I then had knowledge of. The awkward angle at which my prick bounced off his, struck his trousers head-on as it were, and then slithered upward at an angle, while his somehow got forced down, left me with trouser burn on at least my knob.

It being entirely Harry's fault that that occurred, him being so enticing and all, I was certainly going to require him to kiss it... and lick it and slurp it and suck it... to wellness before fucking him with it.

When we pulled apart, both of us gasping, his lips so delightfully puffy, mine precisely as they were beforehand, I began to unbutton his vest.

He put his hands over mine. I stopped. "Really, Reggie?"

I gave him a reasonably decent askance.

"Are you going to unwrap me as carefully and delicately as you unwrapped Bentley's gift? Precisely folding and setting aside each piece of my wrapping paper before proceeding to the next?"

"Spontaneosity!" I said, much as some officer would have cried charge before the Light Brigade did so. Though of course my charge was not doomed. My success was a foregone conclusion.

He wagged his eyebrows at me in a sort of a kind of a "what the fuck?" way as I got my hands loose, grabbed the edges of his waistcoat on each side, just above the buttons, and yanked. I am not all that strong, but apparently strong enough that the buttons popped and his waistcoat fell open.

I grabbed his shoulders, spun him around, reached around, curled my fingers in his lapels and peeled his damned coat off. I tossed it aside. I curled my fingers in the waistcoat cloth at his shoulders and proceed to peel and toss it, too.

Another spin, fast enough to make him stagger just a little, a double shoulder-shove to make his braces dangle, but when I reached up to take care of the upper, buttoned portion of his shirt, he leaned back, so my fingers missed. "Please, Reggie, allow me."

I allowed.

My allowance did not achieve the precise result he had intended. I had a mission. Smythes who set themselves a mission simply do not fail, and mine

was a simple one: speed and spontaneosity. While he was unbuttoning and pulling the shirt off over his head, I pretended to acquiesce in less speed by unbuttoning the top button of his trousers. I then yanked the sides of his trousers apart with the same button result, and pushed them down to his knees.

By this time he was upper-naked, and nearly lower-naked, since he wasn't wearing drawers.

Although I was sorely tempted to touch those delightful, taut, swollen, flushed-pink nipples, I refrained, and merely put the palms of my hands flat over them and pushed.

He collapsed onto the bed, his feet still on the floor, with a marvelous "woof!" kind of sound.

I grabbed his trousers, raised his legs and yanked once more, only to have my speedy spontaneosity come to a semi-screeching halt. The trousers caught on his shoes.

I looked up the length of his glorious body, past his wonderful leaking prick, though I passed with only a great deal of reluctance, to find him raised up, resting with his arms back, forearms and palms flat against the bed. One fucking eyebrow up.

Of bloody fucking course!

I ignored the "Shoes, my dear, shoes!" eyebrow, grabbed his left leg, planted the heel of his shoe firmly on my right thigh, untied it, raised his foot, wiggled and jiggled and waggled the heel until the damned thing came off and tossed it over my shoulder. There may have been a sound of something fairly fragile being shattered, but as there were no family heirlooms about, nor any purchases I particularly cared for, I didn't care. I suspected that even if there had been—heirlooms, purchased items—I wouldn't have cared just then.

Right leg, left thigh, and I repeated the process with the second shoe. This time, there was no question about the shattering behind me. We would simply have to remember to walk in that vicinity most, most carefully when we were finally able to walk, and I had plans to make sure he could not do so for quite some time.

Getting rid of his trousers somewhere in the general—pitched—vicinity of the chairs by the fireplace, sent his stockings somewhat askew. I taunted him, though, by slowly and quite carefully unsnapping the garter belt below his knees, and when the stockings were freed, slowly, in a bastardly sort of a way, rolled them down his calves and off his feet. His rather glorious feet.

I found myself admiring them. Wondering: if felching could be described as a fetish, and I would not know whether it was a fetish of mine—doing *versus* observing—until I tried it in a little while from now, could there be a foot fetish as well? I took each foot in turn, braced my knee on the edge of the bed, and with my thumbs and fingers kneaded and caressed his arches, his toes, his soles until he was moaning.

I set his feet on the floor. His legs somewhat flopped open, and he was lying back on the bed.

“Get up there, Harry,” I said.

“Oh, is the big dog growling?” he said as he did what I said, turning over and crawling up on all fours. I gave his right cheek a slight swat, but it was enough to turn the ivory a pale pink where palm met arse.

“On your back.”

That stopped his crawl. He sort of flopped over on his side. “On my back?” His voice carried an “are you really sure you want that?” with it.

True, the fucking with giant-Reginald had been with him on all fours, as had our fucks been with other-Harry. I don’t know about the books of pictures Harry had looked at when making his purchase decisions, but number ten of the ones I bought provided the inspiration.

Whether his legs were over my shoulders or caught in the crook of my elbows or wrapped around my waist didn’t matter, so long as I could see his face. I needed to see his face when I said what I had so carefully prepared to say. To know success or failure *immediately*.

No. To know *success* immediately, since I entertained no doubts at all. Not any more.

“Yes, Harry, I’m sure. I want to see your face, see your eyes, your mouth, your lips, watch everything about you and the wonder that you are while I’m pounding you so hard, we will not merely go through the mattress, but the bed will collapse.”

“Oh.” He got somewhat wide-eyed at that. “Well, of course, if that’s what... Well... of course.”

And with that little bit of maundering he did as he was told.

I began undressing myself.

"You're not going to get all spontaneous with your own undressing, are you?"

I didn't answer. I just proceeded to get undressed with the same precise efficiency I used every day when Bartlett was not assisting me. Although far faster than was my usual wont. But still, my clothes had to be neatly folded, placed just so. How else could I properly annoy him?

"You're a right bloody bastard, you know," he said.

I agreed.

And then the bastard utterly surprised me by sitting up, leaping out of the bed, stalking over to my neat pile of clothes, and promptly turning them into utter disarray. He even went so far as to rip off buttons, and rend fabric.

I was naked from the waist up, seated on the chair, left leg over right knee to remove my shoes. In something of a state of shock from his un-Harry-like aggressiveness, I simply stared as he walked over to me. His stance was such I could easily have lifted my head and leaned a little and tried to find out whether I could swallow all of him at once.

That wasn't in the cards.

"Get your damned shoes off, Reggie."

I did.

"Stand up, Reggie."

I did.

"Rip your trousers open, Reggie."

I hesitated. This was not my finest pair of trousers, but still, it was a good pair. Well made. Quite serviceable, I thought, for some years to come. I could achieve the same desired goal—mutual nakedness—without the necessity for damaging my trousers, and being required to spend the coins to have them repaired, along with everything else Harry had just de-buttoned.

"Scrooge!" he muttered as he batted my protective hands away and did the button-popping honors himself.

He then glared at me. "Finish up yourself, and immediately, or I shall believe you would actually prefer me to fuck you to and through the mattress, perhaps down through the ceiling of the room below and onto the floor. And take your turn later."

Well, bloody hell, that sounded bloody brilliant. But still, my prick had its mind, heart and related ballocks set on being the initial arse-through-the-mattress fucker. I did as I was told and got myself naked. With all the immediacy he desired and commanded and a little bit more.

His "I thought so" was nearly unbearably smug as he returned to the bed, clambered up, got on his back, spread his knees up and wide and planted his feet.

"Fuck me, Reggie."

I nodded my agreement but went to the nightstand first, opened the drawer, and pulled out a fairly large bottle of oil and several cloths. I wasn't quite certain that the cloths were really necessary just then, though they might be of some use much later, but my family had always believed that boys and men should always be prepared.

I'm not certain that anything could have quite prepared me for the sight of Harry, flushed a beautiful pink all over, his prick brilliantly shining without the slightest need of manmade oils, looking up at me as I settled back on my haunches, my knees nudging the creases where his arse met the backs of his thighs.

I oiled myself lavishly, not daring to stroke too much due to a very real fear of seeding too soon.

And then I was stroking his hole with my slick fingers, rubbing around and around and pressing a bit but not a lot. I was focusing on that when I felt a palm slap my upper arm.

I looked up from my arse-concentration to Harry's face. "I'm not a virgin. I'm not delicate. Get bloody on with it."

Thus encouraged, I slid my forefinger inside him to the accompaniment of a slight moan. I stroked back and forth, and found that little button or bump or bulge, and the moans became whines. I added a finger, twisting and turning and spreading them. Added more oil, added a finger.

He heaved himself as nearly upright as he could get and managed to clamp a hand around my right wrist. In that teacher-to-idiot-boy tone he said, "What were your instructions?"

I didn't pull my wrist away. Just smiled at him. "To get bloody on with it."

"Are you?"

"Not quite."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

"Right bloody now you teasing bastard?"

Caught. I wore a face of such innocence then I could have posed as the child had there been a Madonna nearby. "But of course, my lord."

He let me go and I slid my fingers out of his arse, swirling them around my prick again. He remained half pushed up, watching, though that wasn't going to last long.

I inched forward, lifted his right leg over my shoulder, used my right hand to guide my prick to his hole.

"Do you know, Reggie, I quite like your belly?"

That quite broke my concentration on the imminence of prick in arse. "What?"

He reached up to rub it in a somewhat circular motion, caress it with his fingertips. "It's so... round, and firm, and fully packed. I wonder how it will feel on my back and arse when you fuck me from behind."

He looked briefly forlorn and yearning. Bastard faker. "You will fuck me from behind, won't you?"

"Yes, I will fuck you from behind, and in front, and up against a wall, and bent over a bannister, and in a carriage without marriage and my hand over your mouth so your screams won't tell Frank or James what the fuck... as it were... we are doing."

"Oh, good."

"Yes. Good, indeed. Now do you think we might make some progress on the bloody fucking front here?"

"Of course." And he finally relaxed back, stretching his head out on the thick pillow.

I looked down between us, to where my well-oiled prick was seated at his hole. I had put a little pressure on, and he had opened just a little for me, so that the tip of my knob was in, and my slit was out of sight.

"Uh, Harry."

"Yes, Reggie?" We both heard the "what the bloody hell is it now?" beneath his actual words.

"You do understand that I'm going to hammer you really hard, because you can't go through the mattress if I don't?"

"Yes, Reggie."

"But, well, to start the hammering I have to get inside first, and I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't."

"But I might. You see, you bastard, I'm so damned aroused that I'm not at all sure I can ease my way into you and give you a chance to adjust before the... er... hammering happens."

"Then forget the easement... and bloody well do it before both sets of ballocks burst, you not-yet-buggering-me bastard."

With that kind of encouragement, what else could I do but ease all of my knob in, on the tick of the clock, and on the tock just ram myself in ballocks deep.

His shout of "Christ, Reggie!" was quite probably heard all the way to the docks, down the river and out to the Channel, and far out beyond the edges of the City, as well.

It was only when I was starting to pull back for my next thrust that it occurred to me that Harry and I had implicitly professed to each other a firm belief in the golden rule. And what I had done to him just now, he was likely to do to me.

Well, if it was true that as I sowed, so would I reap, I decided I would sow Harry's arse so bloody damn well that when it came my turn to reap, I would not merely enjoy it. I would be ecstatic over it.

First ballocks-deep thrust and all.

I began to stroke in and out, just keeping my knob inside on the out-stroke, beginning to pick up speed, imagining my hips to be whatever it was that made engine pistons pound up and down with a steady pace.

Just Harry and me. And though it was true what he had said, so many men, so little time, it was equally true there were so few experienced. And I had not the slightest regret in the world for that, for the adventures we would never

have, since *our* adventures, our *together* together adventures would be far more glorious than anything other men could ever provide us.

I sped up.

And sped up again.

Realized... I had to tell him.

I was fucking so very fast, so very deep. We were both approaching completion. But he deserved to hear the words from me. He really did. They'd been a long time coming, and as my own coming was far more imminent—indeed, I was approaching unstoppable inevitability—they needed to be said.

But if I said anything, I was, well, giving up my plan. My well-thought-out, appearance-of-spontaneousness, plan, the plan designed to shock and awe Harry into a puddle of sentimentality.

Fuck the plan! I was fucking Harry, and if something wasn't said, and said quite soon, it would all be over and the opportunity to be spon....

Well, bloody hell, I'm *fucking Harry!* and I'm... planning? No more.

So I thrust several times quite rapidly, rotating my hips and eliciting the most deliciously delirious moan of delight I had yet achieved, and then I told him. Said it out loud at last.

"Oh, Harry, you are a prince of a fellow."

He blushed ever so nicely, and gasped when I brushed, or more accurately, used my knob and shaft to press *hard* on that nice-sized bump inside him, and gasped again, and flushed again, and finally managed to say in a sort of a kind of a panting and heaving and nearly breathless voice, "Aw, Reggie, you're top drawer. Really! *Top drawer.*"

He loved me, too!

I sped up, feeling his now well-practiced, oh-so-talented chute tighten and release about me with excellently exquisite timing. So I said it again, so he would know with the utmost clarity that my feelings matched, if not exceeded his own. Said it quite loudly, without any embarrassment that Bentley might overhear, indeed, the whole damned Empire might hear me proclaim it.

"Harry, you are a *royal* prince of a fellow! Indeed, you are."

And then I came up his ginger arse as he seeded the fine fur lawn on my chest.

POSTLUDE

*25 November 1882, 9:23 p.m.
No. 121 Falmouth Lane
London*

Bentley, with his superb hearing—though given the sheer volume of the various shouts and exclamations emanating from his lordship's bedroom, or rather, *their* lordships' bedroom, superbity was not necessary—heard quite clearly what was happening.

He listened again and nearly laughed.

"Top drawer!" A "royal prince!" indeed.

They'd finally gotten around to saying it.

He glanced over at the two complete sets of clothing he and Bartlett had devised, in case of need. And the sounds had indicated there probably was such a need.

Instead of a laugh, he allowed himself the smile of one well satisfied with the work he has just completed. Most *successfully* completed.

Fin

Author Bio

Eric does not do well with third person writing, as his own writing mostly attests. Nevertheless, he's giving it a go again. Eric is a Midwesterner, and older than dirt. Or as Lady Glenhaven might say, "He's old enough that his first deep water voyage was with Noah." He has had an intimate connection with the arts during these many years, and in the real world he writes for a living, but not fiction. (Though there are those who might differ about what he and his colleagues do.) He started reading at five and has been a science fiction/fantasy addict ever since. That's why, with rare exceptions, most of his writing, has been and probably will be in those genres.

The "Another England" series has burgeoned. It looks like there will be at least four novels. The 2014 The Rake, The Rogue and the Roué, is a Regency, as will be no way out and The Serpent Mark, and the book you just finished is Victorian. Banging the Bishop Back is a Regency short story involving the characters of RRR. The maybe-novel, maybe-novella, not-yet-done, tentatively titled Strathairn's Warrior is a contemporary "Another England" set in the spring to fall of 2015.

There is also a book of poetry, with a number of definitely gay poems, to be published in the near future. A Rollerblade Day is anxiously awaiting a cover (if he can just break the tie on the two alternatives a marvelous designer has done for him).

And then there are The Chronicles of Kohlmar. The first of the four Chronicles—gathering of the Light—is a short story (to be "sold" for free) that also includes samples of the rest of the Chronicles: Taren's Tale, bloodLight, and The Dragon Winked.

Now all he has to do is find the time to actually write them all! (The real world can be a real pain!)

Contact & Media Info

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