



THE NEW GIRL AT USKWEIRS MANOR

A PASTORAL ROMANCE
BY MIRIAM ROBERN

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THE DUCHESS REGENT

Sussex, May 1813

The next morning saw the four of them walking out to the stables in their riding gear (or in Theresa's case, her traveling clothes). Amelia had been surprised to receive the dowager's permission to take the boys for a ride, but was quick to take advantage. Gift horses, etc.

Eustace picked out his favourite steed, a gelding named Trebuchet, whose name was the only thing necessary to secure the boy's everlasting devotion. Gregory selected Dapple, which made Amelia happy; the ancient mare would be no challenge for the young equestrian.

She stepped up to King Francis, another long-time resident of the ducal stables with whom Amelia was familiar. The beast was getting on in years, but he was a well-built specimen who could put on speed if he—or Amelia, chasing one of her charges—needed it. She wondered as she patted his neck if the stallion recognized her at all, or if her scent had changed beyond equine recognition.

Amelia glanced back at Theresa, who had stopped a few steps back, eyeing the horse stalls with trepidation. "Perhaps," her lover said shakily, "I should let the three of you enjoy your ride without me. I fear I should only hold you back."

"Nonsense," Amelia insisted. "You said you'd give the boys

your condensed history of London when we take luncheon up on the summit. And I'd like to show you the estate. It's beautiful."

"I am not a accomplished horsewoman," Theresa begged off, although her expression said, "Horses terrify me."

"Then take Old Dapple," Gregory offered, and led the grey mare out to where Theresa stood. "Horace says she's gentle as a lamb. She won't give you any trouble."

"Who's Horace?"

"The new coachman," Amelia supplied.

"Properly speaking, I am Master of the Stable," the man himself corrected her, coming down the shadowed length of his domain.

Amelia tried not to wince. Horace wasn't new; he'd been here for months. More months than Amelia had been here as governess. There was no plausible reason for her to call him new.

But the horseman did not seem to notice her slip. He was too busy giving Theresa the exact same leer that he had given Amelia on their first meeting. "The late duke wished to cultivate the pedigrees of his stable," he said as if he were a sommelier discussing wines, "and by all accounts the new duke is also keen on horse breeding."

Amelia pasted on a smile. She'd told Julian that the estate should acquire sufficient broodmares to have at least one of them pregnant at all times. Eventually, she hoped, the estate would produce its own virus amantis equae, but for now she was reliant on shipments from Uskweirs. She understood how Horace had

got from her obscure directions to “keen on horse breeding,” but it was still inaccurate, nor was she “the new duke.” The new duke was presently patting Trebuchet’s nose.

But she was not in a position to correct the swaggering Master of the Stable, so she stayed silent and let him select a horse for her lover.

“Let’s leave Dapple to the young master,” Horace suggested, and gestured Theresa deeper into the stable with a smirk. She followed with a roll of her eyes seen only by Amelia. “Margaret is nearly as gentle, but twice as robust. I’m not sure the boy could straddle her if you took Old Dap.”

The two of them were out of Amelia’s sight when Theresa said sharply, “I require no assistance in mounting, sir.” Then a series of grunts and huffs sounded down the stable, followed by Theresa, sitting astride Margaret. The horse ambled along with a sense of resigned disdain; the Master of the Stable did not bother to follow them out.

Their little riding party followed a well-worn horse trail out from the house and up the gentle incline of the north hills. Mindful that the ride was a reward for Eustace’s cooperation the night before, Amelia refrained from layering lessons on top of the excursion. Instead, she rode alongside Theresa, splitting her attention between watching the boys ramble ahead and back and keeping an eye on her lover’s tenuous control of her mount.

She pointed out a few of her favourite corners of the estate from her youth; Theresa informed her of the latest careful maneuvers of her bluestocking friends and conspirators. Childhood reminiscences and tales of political stagnation resulted in the both of them repeatedly remarking about how little things

ever changed, until it became a joke through repetition.

Finally they crested the last ridge in Amelia's mental itinerary and the estate spread out before them. The house itself sat like a regal monarch wrapped up in golden fields, emerald groves, and the sapphire sea across the southern horizon. They stopped to take in the view, and Amelia prompted Eustace to identify the visible points of interest and tenant farmhouses of his future domain.

The boy did so haltingly, until his brother's corrections tripped his temper and the both of them were growling at each other. Amelia sent the two of them riding in separate directions, there and back, so they could cool off.

She shrugged to her lover. "Sometimes they're attentive, sometimes they are distracted. I take what I can get each day."

But Theresa was paying no attention to the children. "So this is all yours?" she asked, a little awed as she took in the sprawling estate.

Amelia frowned softly. "This is all the duchy's. Not mine."

Theresa gave her a gentle smirk. "You exercise sovereign control over all of this, which we common folk call ownership."

The boys came thundering back, cheeks pink from the wind, and Amelia called to the elder boy instead of answering. He turned Trebuchet to face the two ladies, eyebrows raised truculently. "Eustace, dear, can you explain to Miss Chesterley the difference between ownership and stewardship? Specifically as regards the duke's relationship to his duchy."

The boy screwed up his face in a caricature of focus.

“Ownership is when you get to decide what to do with a thing for your own purposes. Stewardship is when you decide what to do with a thing—with property, I should have said—when you decide what to do with property for the greater good.”

Amelia bobbed her head in approval.

Seeing his brother getting attention, Gregory sidled in to add, “Cause we belong to the duchy, too.”

Eustace rolled his eyes. “That’s not how it goes,” he groaned, and then launched into recitation. “The land belongs to the duchy. And we belong to the duchy, too. And we work with the land to make sure the duchy is here in the future.” He smiled a beat, and then remembered the rest: “Both for our family, and for all the families that work on or with the duchy. There’s hundreds of people who depend on the duchy,” he told Theresa, “and it’s the duke’s job to make sure they’re taken care of.”

Amelia tried not to preen too obviously at her students’ top-marks answer, as she smiled at Theresa.

“I take it they’re reciting lessons you taught them?” her lover asked. The woman was trying to smirk away the children’s performance, but Amelia was sure she detected a little surprised respect lurking in Theresa’s face.

“They are,” she confirmed with a short, proud nod. And then the boys decided they were going to have a race to that tree and back, and this time actually asked permission before tearing off towards the horizon. Amelia granted it and watched them go, more than a little fondly. “I don’t own any of this. I steward it, for Eustace, and for his heirs, and for all the families who live and work here.”

“Ah, so you’re the Duchess Regent,” Theresa observed wryly.

“If such a title existed in England, perhaps,” Amelia allowed, hiding her own smile.

Theresa clumsily guided her mare to sidestep towards Amelia; the old beast complied only grudgingly. When she was finally close enough to do so, she leaned over and murmured lowly, “So I would not be entirely incorrect if I called you my Duchess... in private.”

The way her lover said the last part sent a shiver down Amelia’s spine, which she had to hide as the boys came riding back in a dead heat. They immediately began arguing over who had won, and were only mollified by Amelia reminding them that she had brought a basket full of sandwiches.

They lunched in a copse of trees just under the breezy summit, on a picnic blanket spread out in the shade. The two boys devoured their luncheon in what seemed like moments, and Amelia felt guilty asking Theresa to stall her lunch in order to give them her condensed history of London.

But her lover didn’t seem to mind as she rested her half-eaten sandwich on her knee and brushed crumbs from her fingers. “Alright. Tell me, boys, which do you think has the longer, more prestigious history: the English crown, or the City of London?”

The boys responded predictably—nothing could be more prestigious than the English crown—which gave Theresa all the rhetorical leverage she needed to amaze them at how old the city actually was, how it had been built by the Roman Republic, and when Rome fell away it had been kept alive by common men and

women, without any help from any king, English or otherwise.

When the kings did appear in Theresa's retelling, they came as conquerers and raiders; the boys were happy to imagine great battles and sieges. After each time London changed hands, though, Theresa reiterated that the men and women of London did not change much. They patched the place up, took care of each other, and kept the city going across centuries.

Amelia, at least, could easily see Theresa's clear bias for her hard-working commoners over the exploitative kings and their knights. As the story progressed, she watched the two boys' reception, wondering how much might sink in. They had, like many young boys, a tendency to favor the idea of knights in shining armor over anything else. Could they even comprehend that the blacksmith who made the armor might be just as interesting, if not more?

No matter whose story was more interesting, the boys' eyes started glazing over around the time the guilds started losing ground to the banks and factories. Amelia reached over to touch Theresa's shoulder and suggested, "Perhaps we can finish the story tomorrow?"

While Theresa finished her lunch, the boys rolled around in the grass. Amelia watched carefully so that playful wrestling didn't turn into murderous intent. "I have to admit," she told her lover idly, "I was expecting a larger emphasis on the roles of women Londoners in your condensed history."

"The historical record isn't kind to us," Chesterley answered with a shrug. "We have hardly any names of the women who no doubt were there. You noted, I'm sure, me saying 'the men and women of London' at every opportunity. That's the best we get."

Amelia made an agreeable sound. “A pity.”

Theresa plucked the last sandwich from the platter. “It’s all the same story, though. The same themes. The same political goals, at the end of the day.” When Amelia asked her to elaborate, she said: “Rights for women requires rights for common folk, because women are common folk. Sometimes even when they’re nobility. And rights for women requires rights for workers, because all women are workers, even the nobility. So when I tell the story of London, I tell the story of Londoners cleaning up the mess that the conquering kings and nobles leave behind. The idea is to wrench the focus away from those in power and onto the common people—all the common people—and understand the story from their perspective.”

Amelia realized she was smiling sappily up at Theresa, and interrupted the smile to say, “And that’s what I wanted the boys to hear.” Oh, the boys. She darted her attention over to them. They’d rolled a little down the hill, but now seemed intent on watching a snail slide down a log. “Don’t poke the poor thing!” she called down the hill, laughing as Gregory’s hand dropped the stick he’d just picked up.

“Do you think it will matter?” Theresa asked. Amelia looked over to her lover and saw that she, too, was watching the boys. She elaborated: “Will what you teach these two now stand up to the... torrent of chauvinism they’ll get when they go to school?” She shook her shoulders slightly. “I only ask because I never experienced school first-hand.”

“I try not to think about my school days,” Amelia sighed, looking down on the boys. “They weren’t very positive.”

“My apologies, I shouldn’t have—”

“No, it’s fine. It’s a good question.” She considered the boys for a long moment. “I don’t know if it will work. It’s certainly not a guaranteed success. But... in the time that I have them, I’d like to prepare them as best I can.” She looked back to Theresa, trying to force a smile through her own bad memories. “Because it certainly is a... how did you put it? A ‘torrent of chauvinism?’ That’s perfectly accurate, functionally, but the... emotional reality is... hellacious.”

“Why put them through it, then?”

“Reasonable question,” she sighed. She could, after all, refuse to pay the tuition; simply accomplished. “And I don’t have a good answer. Because it’s always been done that way? Because if Eustace takes the title without the network of connections he’ll get at school, he’ll be less capable of stewarding the estate, less likely to find a good match in marriage. It would be bad for the duchy.”

“Bad for the duchy,” Theresa mused, “but better for him?”

Amelia shook her head. “He’d be plagued his whole life wishing he went to better schools, got in with a better crowd. I’ve known society men, titled men, who didn’t go to Eton; they’re kept on the fringes. They spend their lives on the outside looking in.” She took a ragged breath. “I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

The ride back down was shorter in absolute terms but felt longer and lazier. Fatigue had siphoned off the worst of the boys’ impulsiveness and they all let their horses take the lead, watching the landscape pass through what felt like an endless afternoon.

At one point Margaret decided to take Theresa on an unplanned trip down to the creek. Her rider had somehow misplaced her own reins and no amount of kicking or pulling on the horn would stop her. In the end, Amelia had to follow after, scoop the reins dangling into the water, and hand them back to her lover.

“I told you I am not an accomplished rider,” the woman sighed.

“That’s all right,” Amelia laughed, and checked that the boys were still up on the horse trail, out of earshot. “Tonight you can ride me.”

“Such scandalous talk from the Duchess Regent!” Theresa grinned in the dappled shade. “And that does sound delicious... although at this point my thighs may be too sore for me to do anything but lie on my back and moan.”

“That can also be arranged,” Amelia winked, and wheeled King Francis around to return to the horse trail.

By the time they returned to the house, the boys were both dragging but Amelia insisted that they seek out their grandmother and thank her for the day’s outing.

Grandmother was in the conservatory, but not alone. The boys, Amelia, and Theresa trailing behind were already within the green space when the matriarch’s voice cut through the screen of foliage: “The only impressive thing about you, Iris, is your eternal temerity in asking repeatedly for things that I have neither the willingness nor the basic ability to provide you.”

Both boys halted in their tracks; Gregory looked back at Amelia, confusion written across his face. His governess

considered clearing her throat and interrupting what sounded like one of her mother's thorough dressing-downs, but knew that, once Mother got going, very little could halt her. Instead, she lifted one finger to her lips and nodded back to the doors into the house proper.

"I am trapped!" wailed Iris, also out of sight. "I cannot believe that you do not see or understand my situation, and I will not believe that you are so unfeeling as to disregard it. I have no wish to be a burden on you, milady, but I have no other options unless you provide them."

Gregory had responded to Amelia's gesture towards the door, and Theresa gamely collected the boy and bundled him towards the exit. His elder brother, however, had started creeping deeper into the conservatory, craning his neck to get a better look at whatever was happening.

"I understand your situation perfectly, you vapid little girl," Mother spat back. "I understood it before you were even in it! Do you not remember I told you that this was exactly where you would end up if you married my son? That you were not at all the bride that he required, and he would be the worst possible husband for you? And yet you insisted. You were in love," she sneered, the expression on her face perfectly plain to Amelia even if she could not see it directly, "and all sense and forethought be damned in the face of it."

Amelia quick-stepped after Eustace, praying that her riding boots would tread quietly on the flagstones. The boy was nearly at the bend of the path that would bring him into view, and did not seem to be slowing his steps at all. With a quiet huff, Amelia lunged forward to wrap one arm around his middle and clamp her opposite hand over his mouth. She hauled the boy

backwards, clutching him up against her body and staggering, as quietly as she could manage, towards the door.

“Forgive me if I did not believe your powers of prophecy,” Iris hissed. “I didn’t understand, then, that you personally make sure they come to pass.”

“I’m sure I have no idea—”

But the Lady Marbury refused to back down. “When he courted me, Eustace insisted we need not have children, that we could live on the Continent, that we could leave all this nonsense behind. But then you whispered in his ear about his solemn duties and you cut his allowance and—”

Amelia shoved Eustace the Younger through the door and then made sure it closed quietly behind them.

Theresa and Gregory were waiting outside, the little boy’s eyes wide as saucers. “Is Mama in trouble?” he asked Amelia, in the kind of tone that suggested he’d already asked Theresa and got no answer.

“Your mother and your grandmother are having an adult conversation,” Amelia whispered, even if the door behind them was closed. “And while we did not intend to overhear it, it is rude to eavesdrop any further.”

Eustace crossed the hall to drop onto a mahogany bench opposite the conservatory door. “They hate each other.”

Looking from the boys to Theresa and back, Amelia groped for something that she could say. Something that the newly-arrived governess would know to say. Something that would help the boys understand how adults sometimes talked to each

other. Something that was, if it was even reasonable to hope for, actually true.

Finally she sighed and said, “Remember, they’re both in mourning. It’s difficult to lose your loved ones, especially the loved ones you depend on. Which I think you both understand, possibly better than I.”

The boys made no answer to that. A few moments later, Gregory crossed from Theresa’s side to sit next to Eustace and quietly took the older boy’s hand. His brother did not protest; a moment later he squeezed it.

Amelia prompted the boys to go wash up before their suppers and watched them walk out of earshot before heaving a sigh. “I’m sorry you had to hear all that.”

“Families are complicated,” Theresa answered with a shrug. “You should have seen the rows my family had.”

“I thought you were raised by bluestockings?”

“There’s nothing bluestockings love more than arguing,” Theresa replied with a wan smile. She then collected Amelia’s hand and pulled her down the hall, towards their rooms and away from the conservatory. “We should wash up before our suppers, too. Would it be gauche of me to say I’m looking forward to the table conversation?”

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