

The Rake's Education

by Clara Ashwick

He's taught her everything except how to stop wanting him.

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The Duke of Westhaven had been described as dangerous for twenty years, and at forty-four he had stopped finding it flattering.

The danger was financial and social, not physical — he had ruined three business partnerships and two political alliances and had not, he was at pains to point out, actually dueled anyone. The reputation for general dissolution was somewhat earned and somewhat convenient, and he maintained it the way you maintain an old house: without particular enthusiasm, mostly out of inertia.

He met Miss Emmeline Farrow at Lady Denton's musicale, which he attended only because Lady Denton had leverage over him and he was paying it off socially, and which Miss Farrow attended because she was Lady Denton's niece and had no choice.

She was twenty-six. He noticed her because she was reading behind the potted palm during the soprano's first aria, which was precisely what he had been planning to do until social obligation intervened.

"The palm is taken," he said.

She looked up. She had the expression of someone who had expected to be left alone. "I beg your pardon?"

"I had the same plan," he said. "But I was trapped."

She looked at him. He was a duke; most people registered this immediately and adjusted their behaviour. She registered it and did not particularly adjust.

"There's room," she said, and moved aside.

He was not accustomed to being moved aside for. He sat down anyway, because the alternative was the soprano.

"What are you reading?" he said.

"A treatise on enclosure law," she said. "It's more engaging than the alternative."

"The aria or the conversation?"

"Both," she said.

He looked at the book. It was, in fact, a serious text on enclosure law.

"You're interested in land rights?"

"My father's estate was affected by an enclosure act fifteen years ago," she said. "I've been understanding it backwards ever since."

"Affected how?"

She looked at him, apparently reassessing. "Common grazing land. Eighty families lost access. Father received the minimum legal compensation. It was technically legal and entirely unjust."

"You've read the act."

"Three times. Also the petition against it, which was unsuccessful, also the subsequent parliamentary debate, which was brief and inadequate." She paused. "You're not going to say that it's not a proper subject for a young woman."

"I am a liberal reformer," he said, which was the honest answer and also not a sentence he often led with at musicales.

She looked at him properly for the first time, which was different from the previous looking.

"Westhaven," she said.

"Yes."

"You voted for the Enclosure Reform motion in '09."

"I did."

"And against it in '11."

"I was paid to," he said, which he had never told anyone and which came out now because there was something about her directness. "The full story is more complicated than either vote suggests."

"Tell me," she said.

He told her. It took forty-five minutes, during which the soprano completed two arias and the room rearranged itself for supper. Neither of them moved. He could not recall the last time he'd told anyone the truth about the '11 vote.

They met four more times before he understood what was happening, and twice more before he acknowledged it.

She was reading law — informally, through borrowed texts and the good offices of an elderly barrister who had agreed to mentor her because she had persistently and intelligently asked. She intended, she said, to become the kind of woman who could at minimum advise on such matters, in a world where women could not yet formally practice. He found a library for her. Not grandly — he mentioned a library with relevant holdings and access could be arranged. She looked at him and said "thank you" in the tone of someone who understood what had been offered.

They talked at three more social events during which everyone around them found other things to look at. He was fifty years into understanding the social arithmetic of a room; he could feel the calculation going on around them. The age gap was noted. The reputation was noted. She appeared not to care about either, which was either naivety or something more interesting.

He suspected the second.

"People are talking," he told her, at Lady Fentham's garden party.

"I know," she said. "Are you concerned?"

"Are you?"

She considered. "If I were concerned about what people said about women who had opinions, I'd have fewer of them by now." She looked at him. "Are you."

"I have an established reputation," he said. "Nothing I do will surprise anyone. You, however—"

"Are twenty-six," she said, "and will be twenty-seven regardless of what I do with the time. I'd rather spend it thinking about enclosure law with someone who voted on it than smiling at people who haven't read the act."

He looked at her. "I'm forty-four."

"I know how old you are," she said. "I've read about you."

"What did you read."

"That you're dangerous," she said. "I found it somewhat overstated."

He laughed, which he did rarely and which apparently startled her — the genuine kind, not the social kind. "Only somewhat."

"You're very careful," she said. "Careful people aren't dangerous, they're—managed."

He looked at her across the garden party. Lady Fentham's roses. The polite distance people were maintaining.

"Miss Farrow," he said.

"Emmeline," she said. "We've had this conversation six times. Use my name."

"Emmeline," he said. "I'm going to say something inadvisable."

"Good," she said. "Those are the most interesting ones."

He said it, and it was inadvisable, and it was also honest in the way he'd stopped being honest fifteen years ago when the social arithmetic had

made it impractical. She listened. She asked one clarifying question. She said yes in the tone of someone who had thought about it and arrived at yes by a deliberate route.

They were married quietly in November, which was not what he'd expected himself to be doing at forty-four and which his solicitor managed with an admirably straight face.

The wedding night was — he did not have a word for it that was not inadequate. She came to it with the same directness she brought to enclosure law, which was to say completely, asking questions where she had them and providing information where she had it and looking at him with the particular look she gave difficult texts that had just become clear.

"Emmeline," he said, later, because her name in his own voice was still new.

"Mm," she said.

"I'm going to be impossible to live with."

"I know," she said. "You've been warned about. I've prepared."

"Prepared how."

"I've studied your parliamentary record. I have a list of positions where I disagree with you. I intend to argue them all."

He looked at her in the dark. The November cold outside. The fire. His wife, who had moved aside behind a potted palm and had not stopped making room for him since.

"The '09 vote," he said. "I can defend that one."

"I look forward to it," she said.

He kissed her, which was not on either of their legislative agendas and was far better than anything on them.

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In the morning she had her enclosure law texts at his desk before he was dressed. He sat beside her and began the defence of the '09 vote, which lasted three hours and which they interrupted twice for reasons unrelated to parliamentary procedure.

She won, in the end, on the merits.

He found that he did not mind at all.