

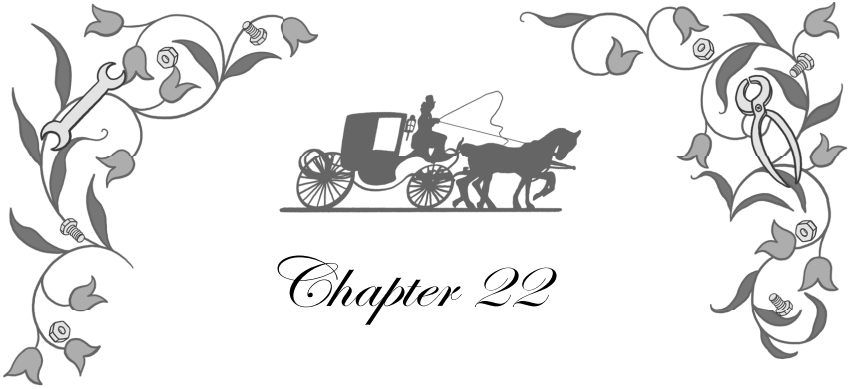


Fast & Fastidious

*A racy Regency
thrill-ride*



R. M.
CALDWELL



Chapter 22

Whatever suspicion Lucy had about the motives of Captain Dashwood, she could not deny that he made an excellent partner at cards. This, of course, did raise further concerns in her mind and she wondered if his aptitude for the game was behind his current exile. They were so effective a pairing as to bring the first game to a premature close. Dashwood proposed a second, pairing Lucy and her father against himself and Margaret. This game was a much closer affair and the tight victory came down to a well-played queen from Margaret on the second-to-last hand. Andrew Elliot declared the round to be the most enjoyable game he had played in quite some time, aided by the soft and steady tone of his wife's pianoforte music.

With the hour moving on, Mrs Elliot wondered if it might be time to return to their coach and to Atherton.

'I apologise if it was poor manners not to send a coach of my own,' Dashwood offered.

‘Not at all,’ Mr Elliot dismissed. ‘We are more than happy for our horses to get some exercise, especially in such fine spring weather.’

‘I am fortunate you were able. My coach is currently somewhat ill-disposed for use of any kind.’

‘I do hope you had no issue with our roads?’

‘Not at all. I have seldom seen finer. I am in the process of rebuilding my coach.’

‘Our Lucy had a fondness for that in her younger years,’ Mrs Elliot quipped.

‘Really? You built coaches?’

‘Models,’ Lucy replied.

‘Were you inclined, I should be quite happy to show you my progress.’

‘You are too kind, Captain, but the hour is drawing late,’ Lucy demurred.

‘Well, I should like to see it,’ Margaret said confidently.

Lucy glanced at her in surprise.

‘Go along then.’ Mr Elliot sighed. The evening had been going so well and now the odd nature of both his daughters had been revealed in swift succession.

‘Are you coming, Lucy?’ Margaret asked casually.

‘I believe I shall.’

‘Perhaps a duet while we wait?’ Mrs Elliot suggested to her husband.

‘That would be most welcome, my dear,’ he replied.

As the sisters followed Dashwood, Lucy smiled at the fading sound of pleasant notes from a well-matched pair.



Lucy was not entirely sure what to expect as they entered the stable rooms and Dashwood lit the lamps. His coach had been lost to

Torres and it seemed a curious thing to build a coach himself when a completely new one should likely be superior. Captain Dashwood was at least wealthy enough to have wagered horses and coach on a race. Then again, perhaps it was an indicator more of recklessness than capital.

‘Why, pray tell, did you ask to see a deconstructed coach?’ Lucy asked her sister quietly. ‘You have never indicated the slightest interest in such a thing.’

‘No. But you have.’

Before Lucy could reply, their host returned, ushering them in.

Laid out on the flagstone floor was something that might barely be recognisable as a coach. It was broken up into pieces and parts, just the way Lucy might do with her models on her bedroom floor.

Instinctively she began putting together the components in her mind – wheels and spokes, axles and cross braces, all coming together bit by bit. It was woefully incomplete, whole sections missing, including the front, a wheel and . . .

She paused as she recognised what she was presented with. Her initial failure to recall was easily forgivable. The last time she had seen the coach intact, it was flipping head over tail, about to come to pieces. It appeared that Captain Dashwood had followed through on the stakes of the race and had all salvageable parts delivered to him.

‘A Pemberley Cross,’ Lucy noted, ‘partly complete.’

‘I do hope you have not been swindled, Captain Dashwood,’ Margaret commented.

‘Fortunately not. It was involved in a crash. I hope to rebuild it better than before. I believe the Pemberley Cross is a versatile model.’

Margaret gasped. ‘You plan to do the work yourself?’

‘My footman, Jim, has experience in building. I have talked with your local blacksmith, as well as a firm in London that will

ship me the parts. I have been considering a double cross-brace under the carriage.'

'You cannot have a double cross-brace on a Pemberley!' Lucy countered indignantly. She took a moment to compose herself before explaining. 'The cross brace is already reinforced. Putting in a second will remove all flexibility from your base and transfer imbalance to the axle points.'

There was quiet as the authoritative statement on engineering settled on the flagstones.

'That is a shame.' Dashwood shrugged. 'I have heard good things about Harding suspension and was hoping to try it.'

'There should be no need to install a double brace for that, so long as the anchor points have reinforced lateral bars.'

Again, there was a pause.

'Miss Elliot, would I be presumptuous in asking for your assistance on this work? You appear to have a most adept mind for it.'

'I must decline, Captain. To come here alone would be overstepping the bounds of propriety.'

'I am sure Mrs Marbrook would be happy to chaperone,' Margaret suggested. 'She was a nurse to us for many years and has a fond connection to our family. If she and you are amenable to such, I see no reason why Lucy could not offer her insight.'

Dashwood remained silent, turning to Lucy in expectation of her reply.

She weighed the choices in her head. Chaperone aside, the connection was still decidedly unladylike and would certainly be cause for gossip in the district, and possibly even Talk. Though in truth, what would such gossip say about Lucy Elliot that was not already known?

And she could not deny the appeal. The chance to work on a real coach was assuredly unique. Should she decline it now, she

might never have another such opportunity. And there was also the mystery of the gentleman, which, over the course of the evening, had in no way diminished. If anything, her desire to solve it had grown to rival any other conundrum she had previously tangled with. How else could she explain the nervous flutter she felt in her stomach?

‘I should be delighted to assist you, Captain Dashwood,’ she replied evenly.

‘I am glad to hear it. We shall correspond to arrange an appropriate time, with the permission of your parents, of course.’

‘Of course.’

And with that, it was settled, the trio returning to the warmth of the sitting room and the sounds of a contented duet.

The coach ride home was a quiet one. Margaret fell asleep, as she often did on such return journeys, leaving Lucy to ponder and appreciate the efforts of her sister, who was willing to overstep propriety to forward the interests of her sibling. Had Margaret not expressed her interest in seeing the coach then Lucy would never have accessed this opportunity.

A double cross-brace. She shook her head in disbelief as she recalled the exchange. That a man so familiar with coaches should suggest such a thing was absurd. Completely absurd—

Lucy groaned, though not so loud that her parents noticed. Of course he would not make such a mistake. And of course she could not help but correct it.

Halfway home and far too committed to back out now, Lucy Elliot realised she had taken the bait, hook, line and sinker.

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