

## 10. The Worst Fate Imaginable

It was infuriating to have to go in through the garden door, climb up to my window, change, climb down again and return to the front. But I didn't want to give my aunt a coronary by appearing on her doorstep in a pair of striped trousers. When I finally arrived in front, the carriage was still waiting there, and so was my aunt, anxiously looking out into the street.

'Lillian! She rushed out of the door as I approached, her hollow cheeks flushed, a determined smile on her face. Oh no. Anything that made my aunt this happy wouldn't be good. 'Finally, there you are! Where were you? Oh, don't bother, it doesn't matter. All that matters is that you're here. Come, come quickly you have to hurry! The ball starts in an hour!'

'Ball?' I asked, dread welling up inside me. 'What ball?'

'If you, silly girl, had just stayed at home like a proper young lady, you would know all about it. Your sisters, Anne and Maria, and I have been talking about nothing else for weeks.'

That would explain why I didn't remember. My ears were good at protecting themselves against unnecessary torture.

'Now come in and hurry, for God's sake!'

She rushed inside, skirts flying around her bony figure, and I followed with trepidation. 'Why a ball?' I wanted to know. 'What has a ball got to do to me? Anne and Maria get invited to balls, not me. I don't go to balls, never ever.'

'You will today,' my aunt trilled and made a pirouette in the middle of the room that was worthy of a prima ballerina. I could see it in her eyes: the golden glint that meant she was dreaming of finally being rid of us, and at a profit, too.

The trepidation in my chest was quickly evolving into panic. Me, at a ball? I hated balls! Balls meant society, society meant people, and people meant either women or men, or worse, both! I disliked men in general because they oppressed women, and I disliked women in general because most didn't at all seem to mind being oppressed. And now I would have to face both, mixed together?

Even worse – I had heard that at balls, people had to dance

With one another Both sexes!

'But surely,' I tried to reassure myself aloud, 'only Anne and Maria are going? I mean... they are the ones that everybody admires and wants to dance with.'

My aunt nodded, the happy glow of gold coins still gleaming in her eyes. 'I agree, no man in his right mind would want to invite you.'

'Oh... err... thanks.'

'Considering how uncouth and tanned and misbehaved you are.'

'How nice of you to be so explicit.'

'But,' she continued, turning her glittering eyes on me, 'Sir Phillip was so impressed by Maria and Anne's charms at the ball the other night that, now he is giving his own ball, he has issued an invitation for the entire family.'

Oh dear God! How could I escape this deadly trap?

'Sir Phillip? Phillip who?' I tried to stall her, my thoughts racing.

'Sir Phillip Wilkins. Surely you must remember. I told you of his dancing with your sisters at Mr Marlow's Ball only two days ago.'

Actually I didn't remember. But I thought it best not to mention that to my dear aunt.

Concentrate! yelled at myself. Think of some excuse! You are not going to this infernal ball. Don't you remember what Patsy told you about what balls are like? Hours of aimless chatter, and your feet hurt from dancing for days a endwards? No, no, no!

But my aunt seemed to read my thoughts as if they were broadcast on my face. 'Don't you dare think of not coming,' she hissed and wagged a bony finger at me. 'This might very well be our only chance at getting you introduced into society. We all have to go. Even Mr Brank is coming.'

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

This was such an unexpected piece of information that it shook the foundation of the world as I knew it.

'Uncle Brank? Going out into society?' I eyed my aunt suspiciously. 'How did you manage that miracle?'

She smiled back at me in a way I think the harpies of Greek legend – you know, those monsters with women's heads and the bodies of birds of prey – would have smiled. 'I pointed out to him that it would not be a wise course to o end a nobleman of such importance as Sir Phillip by refusing his invitation. I also pointed out that if Maria and Anne were to be married, he would have two less mouths to feed.'

In spite of my annoyance, I had to admire her. My aunt was not a very intellectual person – but when she wanted something she knew how to get it

'Enough of this talk!' She clapped her hands and grabbed hold of my shoulder, steering me upstairs. I tried to ram my heels into the ground, but she possessed super-auntly strength, originating from the force of her determination. 'You will get dressed now, and I do not want to hear another word of protest! You are nineteen, almost an old maid now, and it is high time you were introduced into society and found a man!'

Upstairs, she deposited me in my room and entrusted me to the capable hands of Gertrude. Not having much chance to find a husband at her age, and not at all displeased about the fact, Gertrude was more than happy to attend the ball in simple attire and instead concentrated the full force of her primping skills on yours truly.

Within 20 minutes, my hair – which had been flattened into a strange shape by a box that had fallen on my head during the battle of the files – was transformed into an elaborate updo. Then I was forcibly brushed and styled into my other dress. With horror I discovered that my aunt had somehow found the money and time to alter it: my favourite dress was now a ball gown, with frilly lace at the sleeves and neckline, and, believe it or not, it was on the shoulders! My horror was complete when my aunt rushed in and pressed a fan into my hand.

'It's the perfect way to attract a man's attentions,' she said, smiling brightly. 'And very easy. You see, if you wave the fan like this, it means...'

'Why do I have to wave this stupid thing around to attract somebody's attention?' I demanded, panicked. 'Why can't I just walk up to him and say "Hey, I like you", or "Piss o , dick!"?'

'Lillian Linton! Mind your language. And the reason for the secret language of the fan is that it is far more discrete than actual talk.'

'I am not discreet!'

Her eyes narrowed. 'I am fully aware of that, Lillian. You had better change that quickly or else you will never find a man to take care of you.'

She rushed out of the room and I scowled at her retreating back. How I would have liked to shout a er her that I didn't need a man to look a er me, that I had my own job now and would soon be bringing home my own money. But I didn't dare. I knew that if I even breathed a word of it, I would be locked in my room faster than I could say 'unfair'.

So I frantically tried to memorize what waving an open fan signified, besides the fact that it was too hot and you wanted to get some air. While I waved at myself with the fan in front of the mirror and attempted to ignore the fact that for the first time in my life I was wearing an uncomfortably revealing o -the-shoulders gown, Ella entered behind me.

'Oh Lilly! She came rushing up to me and hugged me, careful not to ru le my hair. 'We're going to a ball! Isn't it exciting?'

'Yes, very exciting,' I mumbled. I was still busy looking at the fan in the mirror. I noticed it was quite sharp at the end when not open. Idly I wondered what the message to a gentleman would be if he got a poke in the eye with it. I didn't think one needed extensive knowledge of the secret fan language to understand that. Maybe the fan would have its uses a er all. I tucked it away in my dress and turned to Ella, who was gushing excitedly.

'...can you imagine how grand the ballroom will be? And the music, Lilly? I've never heard a quadrille before, let alone danced it! I would so love to dance. If only--'

She broke o abruptly.

'Yes?' I asked distractedly, still trying to figure out the best way of using a fan as a defensive weapon. 'If only what?'

'Oh... err... nothing.'

What was this? Ella, being secretive? I would probably have paid more attention to this gross deviation from her usual character had not at that very moment my aunt stormed into the room and clapped her hands.

'Girls, girls! Why are you dawdling? Come on downstairs, the coach is waiting!'

We followed her down the stairs and joined the other four waiting in the hall: Gertrude calm and composed as ever, Lisbeth even more excited than Ella, and Anne as well as Maria with the same self-satisfied smiles on their identical breathtaking faces, in the full knowledge that the rest of us owed the invitation to the ball to their charms. They probably expected us to thank them on bended knee when it was over.

Well, I had something very di erent in mind for my dear sisters.

'Shall we go?' Lisbeth asked eagerly, hardly able to stand still with excitement, and eying the door longingly.

'Soon,' my aunt snapped. 'And don't fidget, Lisbeth. It does not become a true lady.'

'Yes, Aunt.'

'And straighten your ball gown.'

'Yes, Aunt.'

I held my hand in front of my face to conceal my grin. Ball gown? Lisbeth's dress was just one of her normal dresses, altered like mine. Our aunt must have worked overtime to prepare these for the ball – but it was still obvious they were not the best of ball gowns. My aunt's pride and imagination had to do what her stinginess didn't allow: change linen into muslin and glass into diamonds.

'I,' she said triumphantly and turned to the second staircase which was almost never used, 'shall fetch your uncle now, girls. Wait here.'

We waited while she ascended the steps. We waited while she entered and we heard voices. The voices got a bit louder. And a bit louder still, especially hers. Then she came out of the room again, slamming the door behind her.

'Apparently, girls,' she said, rushing past us to the door, 'your uncle feels that since we all are going, there is no need for him to leave the house and pay his respects to Sir Philip. He feels he would just be in the way.' She hu ed. 'Very well then. Come!' And like a general directing his troops, she directed us down the street towards where the coach was waiting – in my case, I felt like I had been pressed into service.

'Can you imagine?' Maria said to Lisbeth in a very audible whisper. 'This is one of Sir Philip's own carriages. He sent it along to convey us to the ball. What an honour for us to be favoured in such a manner.'

And Lisbeth, as the dutiful and thankful sister she was, gave the appropriate answer: 'It is all thanks to you, sister, and to Anne. You must have made quite an impression on his Lordship.'

'Oh?' Maria giggled, and Anne joined in. 'Do you think so? Well, I must admit he seemed quite taken with me.'

That stopped Anne's giggling abruptly. 'But not quite as much as with me,' she added, throwing her twin a death-glare.

I was tempted to point out that he probably hadn't been able to tell them apart, when their conversation and our advance towards the coach was interrupted. A young man came down the street and, seeing us, stopped and bowed. I recognized him: it was Edmund Conway, our neighbour's eldest son. He was a good-looking, polite young man, but unfortunately for him, he was also neither rich nor noble. So my aunt rushed past him without even stopping to acknowledge his bow. Knowing that my aunt couldn't see, I returned his salutation. Why not, a er all? He was nice enough. But in spite of my politeness, he gave me an intensive and frankly disturbing stare – then turned and walked away towards his parents' house.

'What was that that about?' I asked, turning to Ella who was standing right behind me. 'Why do you think he was staring at me like that?'

Ella blushed. 'Err... I have no idea. Let's go, shall we? The carriage and Aunt Brank are waiting.' She hurried o and I frowned a er her. What was the matter with her? Must be the excitement of her first ball.

The carriage that waited for us in front of the house was indeed an impressive sight: large, bright red and with golden ornaments everywhere. Two servants in livery were sitting on the box, one of whom had jumped down to help the ladies into the coach. When he attempted to o er me his chauvinist arm, as if I couldn't even get into a coach by myself, I gave him such a deadly stare that he quickly backed away and bowed. Good for him.

I pulled myself up into the coach. Maria and Anne were of course already sitting there, and had taken the best places beside my aunt, facing into driving direction. Ella, Lisbeth, Gertrude and I had to squeeze ourselves onto the other bench. Ah well, at least I wouldn't see my doom approach.

'Gee up!' The coachman shouted. His whip cracked, and we were o lwas o to my first ball.

'Now listen carefully, girls,' my aunt said sternly, looking at all of us in turn. 'Anne and Maria have already been to balls many times, and Gertrude a few times as well, but for the rest of you, today is your coming out. This first appearance in society is crucial. Therefore it is imperative that all of you, even those of you who normally exhibit strange and unladylike behaviour,' and she fixed her gaze on me, 'behave excellently tonight and show the gentlemen only their best side, understood?'

'Yes, Aunt,' we all chorused, except Anne and Maria who just kept smiling serenely.

'I'm serious,' she said, again for some reason fixing her eyes on me alone. 'This might be your best or even only chance to find a husband.'

I scowled. I knew it! I knew that was what my aunt planned. A shiver went through me at the thought of being sold o to some stranger. That was no life for me.

'Don't squander it,' my aunt continued. 'Do your best. Give a good impression, or you might never get another invitation like this again.'

I perked up. Really? So... I would just have to mess up so badly that she never ever would take me to a ball again. So badly that all the gentlemen would take me for the worst monster in town.

A small smile spread on my face and I gripped my fan inside the folds of my dress. That shouldn't present any problem, now, should it?

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**My dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,**

**Huzzah! It is time to celebrate, for we've arrived at a little jubilee for this book - we've now reached the tenth installment. Applause, please, my Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen.**

**All of you are invited to the virtual jubilee ball (picture of the ballroom included above). Please wear your very best 19th-century ball gowns and tailcoats, to look splendidly Victorian -)**

**Yours truly,**

**Sir Rob**

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**GLOSSARY:**

**Quadrille: The quadrille was a kind of dance which enjoyed considerable popularity during the nineteenth century. It was performed by two lines of dancers positioned opposite to each other. They didn't dance as couples, per se, but instead people exchanged dancing partners regularly as they went up & down the line of dancers. Throughout the Victorian Age, the Quadrille was a considerably popular dance both in the United Kingdom and beyond. Scholars consider the quadrille to be an early forerunner of the modern square dance.**

**Coming out: in this historical context, this phrase doesn't refer to anything related to homosexuality or lesbianism. During the Victorian Age, "coming out" referred to moment in a girl's life when she was first introduced into society at her first big public event, most probably at her very first ball or dance. This was also the moment when a young female o icially turned from an girl into an adult. The social ritual of "coming out" usually happened at or around a girl's 16th birthday. It was from that moment onward that eligible bachelors could show interest in her and ask her father for her hand.**