

The Uneven Chance

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The Uneven Chance – Charlie Cochrane

“A single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a civil partner.”

“That’s not quite what the sublime Miss Austen wrote,” Roger Nicholson reflected, although the girl did seem fairly enlightened. Perhaps if she’d lived two hundred years later she might have come up with a “Pride and Prejudice” *de nos jours* where Mr. Darcy would encounter a handsome young man full of spirit if lacking in breeding. Roger couldn’t work out if there would be more chance of a novel as good as Austen’s becoming a classic even though it dealt with the love that still encountered difficulties with speaking its name, or him meeting his own equivalent of Fitzwilliam Darcy.

He’d met a few Johnny Wickham types in his time, along with Rawdon Crawleys, yet never a Nicholas Nickleby or even a Heathcliff. Plenty of potentially *uncivil* partners along the way. Now he was in the position of being always the usher, seeing people to their seats and smiling politely but never the one signing the register or taking the vows. And while he realised he had no biological clock at risk of running down, unlike one of his sisters who seemed desperate to find Mr. Right before her ovaries shrivelled like raisins, at thirty-one he was hardly a spring chicken. It wouldn’t be long before the lines and wrinkles started to develop from the rudimentary to the bleeding obvious and all he’d be fit for was some sad little advert in the Kindred Spirits “Men seeking men” section of the Daily Telegraph. A dreary little piece along the lines of *Well preserved male, 50, GSOH, solvent, seeks man 20-30 for fun and friendship*. It didn’t bear thinking about.

Roger put down his pen—he couldn’t write at a keyboard any more than he could cook using a microwave—as he was well ahead with the latest product from the prolific, if pseudonymous, Mr. Sorbus, writer of elegant and intellectual detective fiction. As a hobby it was financially rewarding and the plaudits of the public were enjoyable, although the money it produced meant nothing in the vastness of the Nicholson coffers. And today wasn’t a day for writing; it was more a time for musing and looking out at the lawn to fantasise about ideal partners, ones who didn’t need to be advertised for.

He thought about Miss Austen and her characters. Perhaps he’d been wrong to liken himself to the young Bennett sisters looking for a Mr. Darcy each; *he* was the one with the fortune and no one to share it with. Maybe he should be setting his sights on a male equivalent of Elizabeth, although please God without all the sisters. He had enough of those of his own. And definitely without the harridan of a mother. Well, he’d no invitations to dances to look forward to, nor was someone likely to come along and be sick through his study window. Besides, he was fed up of Sebastian Flyte types, too.

The most exciting thing he had in his diary was on Friday, when a train would take him from the dubious delights of Epsom station through the even more depressing suburbs of London, to the capital itself, where he had tickets for a preview night of a play which might just be a total disaster. But his actor friend—playing a cluster of small parts with one significant speech in the second act—needed moral support.

Roger decided he'd go early, have lunch at the Bombay Brasserie, indulge himself all afternoon with the delights of the V and A, then wander down to the theatre and take a little pre-ordeal snack. Perhaps he'd be so full he could slumber through the worst parts of the thing; modern drama was something else he found disappointing with the twenty-first century. Compared to Jane Austen's day, the increased freedom to indulge his personal inclinations was sorely countermanded by the lack of style, wit and good taste. Besides, the news from Australia about the cricket made any sane person feel suicidal.

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The lights were down in the theatre, but not enough to stop Roger looking around. And unfortunately not anywhere near enough to stop the audience seeing the tripe on the stage. The man at his side looked like he was as bored with the "entertainment" as Roger was. No, bored wasn't the correct term to use, there was too much in this play that attempted to shock to really produce ennui. What the guy displayed was a mixture of embarrassment, outrage and a deep desire to be elsewhere. Yet he hadn't taken advantage of the interval to make his escape. No doubt he was, like Roger, here to give support to a friend, to go backstage afterwards and pour praise on their performance, *a shining light among a dung heap you were, darling*.

It was probably the leading lady that he was in thrall to, although *lady* wasn't a suitable epithet given her language and behaviour on stage. Roger gave up on watching the drivel and kept casting surreptitious glances at his neighbour, trying to see if his temperature rose when more décolletage than normal was flashed. It was amusing to find that he seemed even more embarrassed when the girl was jiggling her anatomy than when she was letting fly with a barrage of words that would have made a sailor blush, even one who knew the worst version of "Fire Down Below."

Handsome enough, this bloke at Roger's elbow, with a fine gravitas and bearing. If he'd written a Kindred Spirit advert, he would have fallen into the 30ish category but perhaps not the "for fun" bit. Nice to look at, though, much nicer than what was onstage. Roger actually felt vaguely let down when the animated rant came to an end and he had to part company with his neighbour, but that disappointment turned to delight as they met up not five minutes later, in the communal dressing room which the three bit-part men occupied. A room which was packed with various friends and paramours, all of whom were full of effusive, fallacious praise for the play and its cast.

Coincidence went further when it turned out they were both friends of the same actor and had to be, rather grudgingly, introduced. Roger's neighbour's name turned out to be Miles Storrie, which seemed rather bland for such a striking man. Two other fawning worshippers were also throwing themselves at their mutual friend's feet so Roger and his new acquaintance took the opportunity of escaping early; Miles seemed to relax immediately once they were through the stage door and out into the night air. There were still plenty of bars open and half an hour could be found on Roger's part before he had to be at Victoria station for his train, if only he could get through the reserve and persuade Miles that he'd like to share that time with him over a pint.

Without even discussing anything, they turned together into Victoria Street, towards one of the bars, weaving through the crowds, avoiding the drunks and the bollards. “So, how do you know Simon?” It sounded an innocent question, but the answer might, even if it was itself superficially blameless, reveal a wealth of hidden, crucial information.

“You tell me how you know him, first.” It was the longest sentence Roger had heard Miles use.

“Oh. It’s pretty boring, really.” Roger was unnerved at having the tables turned. Conversation was interrupted by arriving at a bar and pushing their way through the crowd. Once the really important business of getting drinks had been dealt with, they could resume. “We were at school together, in the same dramatic society. We kept up the friendship, not sure why. I wouldn’t want you to think it was any more than that.” Simon wasn’t Roger’s type, although he didn’t divulge that piece of information.

“I know his sister...”

Roger’s heart sunk. He could guess who Miles was, without hearing the rest. The long wished for suitor for plain, little Genevieve, the poor bloke whom Simon’s mother had been scouring London for.

“...she’s the personal assistant for my boss. She was trying to drum up some support for big brother and...” Miles shrugged. He’d obviously been roped in, too naïve of the ways of the theatre to realise that this particular play shouldn’t be touched with a barge pole. “It’s really not my sort of thing at all, but I felt honour bound to stay till the end and show my face afterwards.”

“Was she there then, doing her familial duty?” Roger kept the excitement in his voice at bay.

Miles snorted. “I now understand why she said she was waiting for the opening night. If there’s any justice in the world there won’t be an opening...”

“And she was counting on that?” Roger grinned and his new acquaintance did likewise, a shy smile adding a soft vulnerability to his face. *I could fall for him like a ton of bricks.*

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Miles. As the train took him home, Roger considered the literary augurs and they weren’t hopeful. Miles sounded like he was usually friend of the hero, not the leading man. Orlando or Orsino would have been far more auspicious names. And Miles didn’t have an Austenesque gaggle of sisters. An only child, or so he said, and he seemed truthful enough, although Roger’s experience had taught him that men told you all sorts of tripe while all the time wearing faces like angels. So the pair of them couldn’t play Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam. Even if Miles wanted to.

Roger was no closer to knowing whether this Mr. Storrie shared the same inclinations as he and his actor pal, not even after half an hour at the bar. He was meeting Simon

the next day for lunch, an appointment long arranged and now to be slightly dreaded given that the play had exceeded even Roger's astute expectations of its appalling standard. At least the engagement would allow him the chance of making some enquiries, discreet or outright blatant, of his chances with his new acquaintance.

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"I'll toss you for him." It was the last thing Roger had expected. He'd got the impression very early on in the conversation that Simon also had his eye on the delectable Miles. That he'd manoeuvred everything via his sister to get the man to come to the press night, had been rather aggrieved to have to introduce him to Roger and even more miffed that there'd been so many other folk around that the pair had slipped out. Together. Simon had seemed mollified when he found out that all they'd done was sink a pint or two and that Roger hadn't yet rung Miles, despite having a contact number. Roger wondered whether Simon had tried to ring and been greeted with the cold tones of an answer phone.

It had become bleeding obvious that they were both interested, that they were both determined, and that the only gentlemanly way out of the dilemma—the old school way—was for one of them to stand down and let the other take precedence. Given there was no bloody way that was going to happen, the only way out of the impasse was to let fate decide.

"Whoever wins the toss rings Miles and takes his chances." Simon tapped the table with his fork, acting much more subtly now than he'd managed onstage. "If nothing comes of it the loser gets a go, but not before the winner has a fair crack of the whip."

"You're on." Roger felt in his pocket and found a little two pence piece, which he flicked up, caught adeptly on the back of his hand then covered. "You call. We'll make this first time just to see who gets the choice for the real thing."

"That's what we did at school." Simon grinned. "Heads."

Roger lifted his hand. "Quite right." He flicked the coin up again, catching it as before, his face a picture of insecurity at the likely outcome.

"Tails. Oh bugger." Simon watched as the coin was uncovered, displayed, put back in Roger's pocket. "Heads it is. You ring him, then. You've got two weeks to get somewhere or else it's my turn."

Roger nodded. "Indeed."

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Roger gently ran his fingers up Miles's backbone as he slept. Such a lovely spine—the soft, white ladder down to the land of ecstasy. It seemed a long time since they'd sat together at the awful play; another world, another lifetime. Simon was currently working his way through various z-list celebrity reality TV programmes, the playwright had gone back to plumbing or whatever his previous trade had been, but Roger and Miles were still together. Eighteen months and barely a cross word

between them, none that hadn't been eventually resolved with a kiss. Perhaps Mr. Darcys did still exist, after all.

Roger remembered the words of Dr. Smart-Allick, as written by Beachcomber. *It was not always the timid fellow, with four conventional aces in his hand, who won the highest honours. It is often the fifth ace that makes all the difference between success and failure.* He reached over to the bedside table and gently fingered his little two-headed two pence coin. He'd been delighted when he'd found it half a dozen years ago, and had soon realised that the thing would only prove useful if it was employed in a subtle manner.

An elaborate charade of two tosses, always getting the other man to call first. If he chose tails then Roger was always home and hosed for the second spin. If the other man chose heads and won, then he'd invariably change his call to tails for the all important subsequent toss, most people having a strange understanding of the true nature of the laws of chance. Either way Roger almost inevitably won, the even chance of the spin being skewed in his favour. He took the coin, tracing a lazy circle or two on Miles's back.

"Something on your mind? The usual?"

Not fully asleep, then. "Just you and your incredibly lovely body."

"Oh, so it *is* the usual, then." Miles turned over, took the tuppence to admire it. "We should have this old thing put in a display box. You're not going to use it again, are you? Not for the same purpose."

"I doubt it. Unless I tire of you and can't be bothered to resort to murder." Roger took back his little treasure, carefully placed it on the bedside table where it would be out of harm's way, should *the usual* ensue. He'd been wrong about the "for fun" bit in any advert Miles would have penned. This guy had many talents and several of them were apparent in the bedroom. "As you're awake betimes..." Roger edged his body closer, cool flesh warming against Miles's. They rarely kissed early in the mornings, mouths tasting too stale—skin tasted better, the gentle sweat of sleep not detracting from the flavour. Hands, coming to life from a night of being ensconced under pillows or duvets, roved freely, found plenty of places just awakening. Places which could spring into glorious life at any moment, with just a little encouragement.

"Roger..." One little word, yet it could convey so much by intonation or cadence. This morning it definitely meant *now, please, don't tease me, can't wait.*

Roger didn't tease, wouldn't make his lover wait, wondered all the while what Elizabeth Bennett's sisters would have done in order to possess either such a marvellously effective tuppence or such a splendidly civil partner.