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Victoria and the Rogue

Lord Malfrey reached out and suddenly took the hand that she'd purposefully left lying upon the ship's railing, temptingly close to his. "Victoria—may I call you Victoria?"

He could have called her Bertha and Victoria would not have minded in the least. Not when he was pressing her hand so tightly, as if it were the most precious thing in the world, against his chest. She could feel his heart drumming, strong and vibrant, beneath the cream-colored satin of his waistcoat. Goodness, she thought with some astonishment. I believe he is about to propose!

Which he promptly did.

"Victoria," Lord Malfrey said, the moonlight bringing into high relief the planes of his regularly featured face. He was such a handsome man, with his square jaw and broad shoulders. He would, Victoria decided with some satisfaction, make a very dashing husband indeed. "I know we have not

been acquainted long—just under three months—
but these past few weeks ... well, they've been the
happiest I've ever known. It breaks my heart that
tomorrow I shall have to leave you to travel on to
England alone, for I have business to attend to in
Lisbon ...”

Dreadful Lisbon! How Victoria hated the sound of
that foul city, stealing away this excessively charming
young man! Lucky Lisbon, that it should get to bask
in the glow of the delightful Lord Malfrey.

“Oh, well,” she said, trying to sound airily
unconcerned. “Perhaps we shall meet again in
London by and by—”

“Not by and by,” Lord Malfrey said, flattening her
palm against his heart with both hands. “Never say
by and by when it concerns us! For I never met
a girl quite like you, Victoria, so beautiful ... so
intelligent ... so competent with the help. I cannot
imagine what a perfect creature like you could ever

see in a pitiful wastrel like myself, but I promise that if, whilst I am in Lisbon, you will wait for me, and then upon my return deign to give me your hand in marriage, I will love you until the day I die, and do nothing but try to make myself worthy of you!”

La, Victoria thought, very pleased at this turn of events. How jolly this is! A girl goes to chastise a cook for underdoing the roast, and comes back to the table a bride-to-be! Her uncle John would be quite put out when he heard about it, however. He'd wagered Victoria wouldn't get a proposal until she'd been at least a year in England, and here she was getting one before even setting foot on shore. He wouldn't be at all happy about owing her uncles Henry and Jasper a fiver.

The three of them would be taught a sharp lesson indeed! Imagine them sending her off to England so unceremoniously, simply because she had suggested—merely suggested, mind you—that one of them marry her dear friend Miss ... Oh, what

was her name again, anyway? Well, it was simply ridiculous, not one of them agreeing to marry poor Miss Whatever-Her-Name-Was, when Victoria had had such a lovely wedding planned. Now it was her own wedding she'd be planning instead! Perhaps when her uncles caught a glimpse of her own wedded bliss, they'd give Miss Whatever-Her-Name-Was a second look....

“Oh, dear,” Victoria said in tones of great—and completely feigned—distress, batting those sooty lashes as her ayah had recommended. “This is all so terribly sudden, Lord Malfrey.”

“Please,” Lord Malfrey said, clutching her hand even more tightly, if such a thing were possible. “Call me Hugo.”

“Very well ... Hugo,” Victoria said in her most womanly voice. “I ...”

It was always a good idea, Victoria's ayah had told

her, to leave young men in some suspense as to your true feelings for them. Accordingly, Victoria was about to tell Lord Malfrey that his ardor had taken her completely unawares, and that as she was but sixteen and hardly yet ready for matrimony, she'd have to turn down his kind proposal ... for now. With any luck, this answer would throw the poor young man into such a fit of passion that he might do something rash, such as heave himself overboard, which would be very exciting indeed. And if he survived the dunking, Victoria would be assured of a good many more proposals from him when he returned from Portugal, which would give her something to look forward to whilst she was staying with her horrid aunt and uncle Gardiner.

All of her hopes for a dramatic—and hopefully very damp—climax to this tender scene were dashed, however, when, just as Victoria was about to turn down Lord Malfrey's proposal, a deep and all-too-familiar voice reached her from across the ship's deck, its accents, as always, dripping with

sarcasm.

“There you two are,” Jacob Carstairs drawled as he stepped out of the shadows by the rigging and into the silver puddle of light thrown by the moon. “The captain was wondering— Oh, I say, I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

Victoria snatched her hand out from beneath the earl’s grip. “Certainly not,” she said quickly.

Stuff and bother! What a tiresome young man this Jacob Carstairs was! Since he’d joined the Harmony and the Cape of Good Hope six weeks earlier, he seemed always to be appearing at the most inopportune times, such as whenever Victoria and the earl happened to find a rare moment alone together.

And it wasn’t as if Captain Carstairs—for in spite of his youth, the interfering young gentleman was a naval officer—were so very pleasing a companion.

Why, he wore his collar points shockingly low, instead of level with the corners of his mouth, as Lord Malfrey and all the most stylish young men were wearing them. And he had been exceedingly disrespectful to Victoria the time he had overheard her advising Captain White that his crew would be a good deal less discontented if they were only made aware of the merits of higher thought. Victoria herself had volunteered to read to them every noontide from Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and had been a good deal put out when Captain White politely declined her kind offer.

Mr. Carstairs, however, had not been a bit polite about it. He had taken to calling her Miss Bee—as in busy bee—and had ventured that if she was always this intent on offering her assistance to people who hadn't asked for it, it was no wonder her bachelor uncles were sending her to live with relatives back in England.

And yet here Jacob Carstairs was, butting his nose into the private affairs of his fellow ship passengers! Why, it was infuriating!

Lord Malfrey seemed to think so, too, if his next words were any indication.

“Actually, Carstairs,” the earl said in his smooth, cultured tone, “you are interrupting something.”

“So sorry,” Jacob Carstairs said, not sounding the tiniest bit sorry. “But Mrs. White wants Lady Victoria.”

“Kindly tell Mrs. White I shall be there directly,” Victoria said, straightening her lace fichu, and hoping that perhaps in the moonlight Mr. Carstairs hadn’t noticed how very close she and the earl had been standing....

That hope was dashed, however, when Jacob Carstairs said in a tone that sounded not unlike one

of her uncles, “No, my lady. You had better go see Mrs. White now.”

Victoria felt another hot flush fill her cheeks. How dared he order her about as if she were his midddy? Jacob Carstairs, with his impertinent ways and too-bright gray eyes that seemed to see everything, needed a lesson in manners. He ought to learn that young men who wore their collar points too low and who teased young ladies to whom they were not even related would never earn the affection of anyone ... particularly any of those said young ladies.

And Victoria thought she knew just who could best give this lesson to the unfortunate captain.

Accordingly, she turned to Lord Malfrey, and, giving him her hand once more, said gravely, “My lord, in answer to your question, I would be honored to be your wife.”

The look of astonishment that flickered across Captain Carstairs's face at that moment quite made up for Victoria's no longer being able to look forward to Lord Malfrey's leaping overboard in frustrated passion.

In all, she congratulated herself on a job well done.

Very well done indeed!