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Then Comes Seduction: Number 2 in series



Par Mary Balogh
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn a night of drunken revelry, Jasper Finley, Baron Montford, gambles his reputation as London's most notorious lover on one woman. His challenge? To seduce the exquisite, virtuous Katherine Huxtable within a fortnight. But when his best-laid plans go awry, Jasper devises a wager of his own. For Katherine, already wildly attracted to him, Jasper's offer is irresistible: to make London's most dangerous rake fall in love with her. Then Jasper suddenly ups the ante. Katherine knows she should refuse. But with scandal brewing and her reputation in jeopardy, she reluctantly agrees to become his wife. Now, as passion ignites, the seduction really begins. And this time the prize is nothing less than both their

hearts....ExtraitChapter OneJasper Finley, Baron Montford, was twenty-five years old. Today was his birthday, in fact. At least, he amended mentally as he loosened the knot in his neckcloth with one hand while the other dangled his half-empty glass over the arm of the chair in which he slouched, to be strictly accurate in the matter, yesterday had been his birthday. It was now twenty minutes past four in the morning, allowing for the fact that the clock in the library of his town house was four minutes slow, as it had been for as far back as he could remember. He eyed it with a frown of concentration. Now that he came to think about it, he must have it set right one of these days. Why should a clock be forced to go through its entire existence four minutes behind the rest of the world? It was not logical. The trouble was, though, that if the clock were suddenly right, he would be forever confused and arriving four minutes early or did he mean late? for meals and various other appointments. That would agitate his servants and cause consternation in the kitchen. It was probably better to leave the clock as it was. Having settled that important issue to his own satisfaction, he turned his attention to himself. He ought to have gone to bed an hour ago or two. Or even better, three. He ought to have come straight home after leaving Lady Hounslow's ball except that that would have put him in the house alone before midnight on his birthday, a damnably pathetic thing. He ought to have come after leaving White's Club an hour or so later, then. And that was precisely what he had done, he remembered, since here he was in his own familiar library in his own familiar house. But he had been unable to go straight to bed because a group of gentlemen had somehow attached themselves to him as he left White's and come home with him to celebrate the birthday that had already passed into history. He wondered through the mist of alcohol clouding his brain actually, it was more like a dense fog if he had invited them. It was deuced forward of them to have come if he had not. He must ask them. "I say," he asked, speaking slowly so that he would enunciate his words clearly, "were any of you invited here?" They were all in their cups too. They were all slouched inelegantly in chairs except for Charlie Field, who was standing with his back to the fireplace, propping up the mantel with one shoulder and swirling the contents of his glass with admirable skill since not one drop of precious liquor sloshed over the rim. "Were any of us?" Charlie frowned down at him, looking affronted. "The devil, Monty, you practically dragged us here." "By the bootstraps," Sir Isaac Kerby agreed. "We were all bent upon toddling home after we left White's to get our beauty sleep, but you would have none of it, Monty. You insisted that the night was young, and that a fellow suffered a twenty-fifth birthday only once in his life." "Though turning twenty-five is nothing to get unduly maudlin about, old chap," Viscount Motherham said. "Wait until you turn thirty. Then you will have every female relative you ever possessed down to cousins to the second and third generations and the fourth and fifth removes admonishing you to do your duty and marry and set up your nursery." Jasper pulled a face and clutched his temples with the thumb and middle finger of his free hand. "Heaven forbid," he said. "Heaven will refuse to intervene on your behalf, Monty," the viscount assured him. He was thirty-one years old and one year married. His wife had dutifully presented him with a son one month ago. "The female relatives will rout heaven every time. They are the very devil." "Eenuff," Sir Isaac said, making a heroic effort to get the word past lips that looked as if they were paralyzed. "Enough of all the gloom and doom. Have another drink, Motherham, and cheer up." "No need to stand upon ceremony," Jasper said, waving his arm in the direction of the sideboard with its impressive array of bottles and decanters, most of which looked seriously depleted. Good God, surely they had been full when they all arrived here two or three hours ago. "Can't get up to pour for you, Motherham. Some_thing has happened to m'legs. Doubt they will support m'feet." "What a fellow needs on his twenty-fifth birthday," Charlie said, "is something to cheer him up. Some new venture. Some exhill . . . arrrr . . . What the deuce is that word? Some new challenge." "A challenge? A dare, you mean?" Jasper brightened considerably. "A wager?" he added hopefully. "The devil!" Charlie said, lifting a hand to grip the edge of the mantel against which his shoulder already leaned. "You need to get an architect to take a look at this floor, Monty. It ought not to be swaying like this. It's downright dangerous." "Sit down, Charlie," Sir Isaac advised. "You are three sheets to the wind, old boy maybe even four or five. Just watching you sway on your pins makes my stomach queasy." "Am I foxed?" Charlie looked surprised. "Well, that is a relief. I thought it was the floor." He weaved his way gingerly toward the nearest chair and sank gratefully into it. "What is it to be for Monty this time, then? A race?" "I did Brighton and back just two weeks ago, Charlie," Jasper reminded him, "and came in fifty-eight minutes under the agreed-upon time. It ought to be something quite different this time. Something new." "A drinking bout?" Motherham suggested. "I drank Welby under the table last Saturday week," Jasper said, "and there is no one in town who can hold his liquor like Welby or was. Lord, I think my head must have swollen to twice its normal size. My neck does not seem quite up to the task of holding it up. Does it look twice its normal size?" "It's the liquor, Monty," Charlie said.

"It will feel even larger in the morning the head, I mean. Mine too. Not to mention my stomach." "This is the morning," Jasper said gloomily. "We ought to be in bed." "Not together, though, Monty," Sir Isaac said. "We might cause a scandal." There was a bellow of raucous and risqué mirth for this sorry attempt at humor and then a collective grimace. "Agatha Strangelove," said Henry Blackstone, rousing himself from a semicomatose state in the depths of a leather chair in order to contribute to the conversation for the first time in at least half an hour. "What about her, Hal?" Sir Isaac asked gently. Agatha Strangelove was a dancer at the opera house. She had luscious blond curls and ringlets, a pouting rosebud mouth, a figure that was overgenerous in all the right places, and legs that stretched all the way up to her shoulders so one wag had observed when she first appeared on the stage a month or two ago, and every man who heard him had known exactly what he meant. She was also very miserly in the granting of her favors to the gentlemen who crowded the green room after each performance begging for them. "Monty should have to bed her," Hal said. "In no more than a week." There was a small, incredulous silence. "He did that the second week she was in town," Sir Isaac said, his voice still gentle, as though he were talking to an invalid. "Have you forgotten, Hal? It went into the betting book at White's on a Monday night with a one-week time limit, and Monty had her on Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday nights, not to mention the days in between, until he had exhausted them both." "Devil take it," Hal said in some surprise, "and so he did. I must be foxed. You ought to have sent us home an hour ago, Monty." "Did I invite you in the first place, Hal?" Jasper asked. "Or any of you? I can't for the life of me remember. London must be duller than usual this year. There don't seem to be any really interesting or original challenges left, do there?" He had used them all up, dash it all. And he was only twenty-five. Someone earlier in the spring had been overheard to say that if Lord Montford was sowing his wild oats, he must be intent upon sowing every inch of every field he owned and those of his more prosperous neighbors too, for two counties in every direction. He could not possibly be down to his last inch yet, could he? Life would not be worth living. "How about a virtuous woman?" Charlie suggested, risking the perils of an undulating floor in order to cross the room to the sideboard to replenish his glass. "What about her?" Jasper asked. He set down his empty glass on the table beside him. Enough was enough except that he had probably reached that limit even before leaving White's. "She sounds devilishly dull, whoever she is." "Seduce her," Charlie said. "Oh, I say." Hal had been sinking back into his semicoma, but he roused himself again at this interesting turn in an otherwise long-familiar line of conversation. "Which virtuous woman?" "The most virtuous one we can think of," Charlie said with relish, having reached the safety of his chair again. "A young and lovely virgin. Someone new on the market and with a totally unblemished reputation. Lily white and all that." "Oh, I say." But Hal, having drawn all eyes his way, could not seem to think of what he wanted to say. He was wide awake, though. Motherham chuckled. "Now that would be something entirely new for you, Monty," he said. "A new star in your illustrious career of devilries and debaucheries." He raised his glass as if to toast his friend. "He wouldn't do it, though," Sir Isaac said decisively, sitting upright in his chair and setting down his glass. "There are limits to what even Monty would do on a dare, and this is one of them. He would not seduce an innocent for all sorts of reasons I could name which I will not do on account of the odd fact that my tongue and my lips and my teeth are all at odds with one another. Besides, he probably couldn't do it even if he did decide to try." It was the wrong thing to say. Seducing an innocent was the sort of thing no decent gentleman would even dream of attempting or even one of society's most notorious hellions for that matter. There were limits to what one would take on for a wager, though admittedly they were few. Of course, those limits fluctuated, depending upon whether one were sober or inebriated. Jasper was very far from being sober just about as far as it was possible to be without losing consciousness altogether, in fact. And someone had just suggested that there was something he could not accomplish even if he tried. "Name her," he said. "Oh, I say!" "Ho, Monty." "Splendid of you, old chap." His friends had been given all the encouragement they needed. They proceeded to trot out the name of almost every young lady who was currently in town for the Season making her debut. It was a lengthy list. Yet everyone on it was gradually eliminated for one reason or another, though none by Jasper himself. Miss Bota was Isaac's second cousin once removed, while Lady Anna Marie Roache was about to be betrothed to Hal Blackstone's brother's friend's brother-in-law or something like that. Miss Hendy had spots and therefore did not qualify as lovely . . . And so on. And then Katherine Huxtable was named. "Con Huxtable's cousin?" Sir Isaac said. "Better not. He would veto her name in a moment if he were still in town and here with us tonight. Wouldn't like it by half, he wouldn't." "He would not care a straw about it," Motherham said. "There is no love lost between Con and his cousins for obvious reasons. If Con had only had the good fortune to be born legitimate, he would now be the Earl of Merton instead of the young cub who actually has the title."

Miss Katherine Huxtable is Merton's sister," he added lest any of his friends not know it. "She is too old anyway," Hal said firmly. "She must be twenty if she is a day." "But ladies do not come any more innocent, Hal," Motherham pointed out. "Her brother has only just succeeded to the Merton title, and it was all thoroughly unexpected. By all accounts the family was living in a tiny cottage in a remote village no one has even heard of, as poor as church mice. And now suddenly the lady finds herself sister of an earl and making her come-out before the ton during a London Season. I would say she must be as innocent as a newborn lamb. More innocent." "She undoubtedly has country morals too, then," Charlie said with a theatrical shudder. "Puritanical values and unassailable virtue and all that. Even Monty with all his good looks and legendary charm and seductive arts would not stand a chance with her. It would be cruel of us to pick her for him." "It was again the wrong thing to say. No challenge was ever more exciting than one that was impossible to win. There was no such thing, of course, but proving it to himself as well as to those who wagered against him was the breath of life to Jasper." "She is the golden-haired one, is she?" he said. "The tall and willowy one with the inviting smile and the fathomless blue eyes." He pursed his lips as he pictured her. She was a beauty. There was an appreciative roar from his friends. "Oh-ho, Monty," Sir Isaac said. "Been scouting her out, have you? You have a secret yearning for a leg-shackle, do you, her being an innocent and Merton's sister and all that?" "I thought," Jasper said, raising one eyebrow, "the object was to seduce the woman, not marry her." "I vote that we name Miss Katherine Huxtable as the lady to be seduced, then," Hal said. "It cannot be done, of course. Only matrimony will tempt females like her. And even that might not tempt her if you were the one offering, Monty, no offense meant, old chap. But you do have a reputation that scares off innocents. For once I will feel quite confident of making something back on my bet. It will be a veritable investment." "By seduction," Sir Isaac said, "we mean full intercourse, do we?" They all looked at him as if he had sprouted a second head. "Stealing a kiss or pinching her bottom would hardly be a challenge worthy of Monty," Hal said, "even if the said kiss and pinch had to be willingly granted. Of course we mean full intercourse. But not ravishment, mind. That goes without saying." *Revue de presse* Exquisite sexual chemistry permeates this charmingly complex story that seamlessly interweaves family issues with the far-reaching effects of scandal. Library Journal