

Dueling Hearts

There was an unusual gathering in London's posh Kensington neighborhood. Summoned by the Earl of Worthington, Lady Charmayne entered the second-floor drawing room of her family's five-story brick townhouse. She looked every bit the demure young lady in a daytime chemise of fresh white muslin with a lace-covered neckline, long sleeves, and double-flounced hem. With each kid-slippered step, golden ringlets bounced merrily from the matching bandeau tied at the top of her head. Charmayne surveyed the room, and her heart sank. One by one, she took the measure of the personages enjoying tea near the glowing warmth of a blazing fireplace. She could always read her aunt's face, and the gracious Dowager Countess Summerville's demeanor signaled caution. Charmayne's brother, Reginald, stood shifting nervously from side to side next to a tall blond, all too familiar aristocrat.

Peeking from under her long lashes, Charmayne felt the full weight of her current predicament. Certain this was the man she faced on the field of honor just before dawn, she lost some of her natural exuberance. Dueling was illegal in England, and Putney Heath was the place gentlemen preferred to settle disputes because it was least likely to be interrupted by authorities. She arrived with a fine-pair of her father's Manton flintlock pistols in a handsome case favored by the upper class for their single-shot accuracy. Neither side capitulated, and each opponent appeared dressed in dark attire to avoid being easy targets. Both stood back to back, walked twenty paces, turned, and shot at the signal.

Called to the present, the Earl smiled affectionately at his only daughter and patted a place on the settee next to him.

"Charmayne, I think you know Lord Charles, the Duke of Thornhill?"

After a pregnant pause long enough to increase her unease, he stated bluntly, "My dear, are you responsible for His Grace's injury?"

Guilty as sin, Charmayne's emerald eyes darted from face to face and landed on the Duke's arm slung in a sling. Squaring her shoulders, she bravely faced her father's penetrating gaze and blurted out.

"I can explain. You know I'm a much better shot than Reggie, and I was not about to let him get himself killed over some little ladybird!"

"Enough," her father bellowed with displeasure. "Such impropriety is unforgivable. You should have come to me! Fortunately, His Grace has graciously agreed not to make your indiscretion public."

The Earl paused, shooting daggers at his scapegrace son.

"I will deal with you later."

Turning back to Charmayne, "As for you, I insist you apologize to the Duke."

Gathering her courage, Charmayne obediently addressed the Duke with sweet deference, "Forgive me, my Lord, I did not mean to wound you. I was defending my twin's honor. Had you not tried to spare him by discharging your firearm in midair, my shot would have dislodged your weapon."

As far as Charmayne was concerned, the Duke had ruined a demonstration of excellent marksmanship. Unsubdued, she politely excused herself and abruptly exited, leaving a stunned audience behind. His Grace Thornhill followed her exodus and accepted her apology with an amused smile on his lips. Then he turned his attention to the Earl and asked if he might have a private audience. In response, Lady Marion dutifully excused herself, followed in short order by Viscount Reginald.

Finding her brother alone shortly after the Duke's departure, Lady Marion eagerly inquired, "Well, Allistair, what did he say?"

The Earl could hardly contain himself. "I know, dear sister, you think I should take a harder line with Charmayne. I now believe I've found the perfect man for the job."

His answer piqued Lady Marion's curiosity. "Does that mean the Duke is seriously interested in her?"

Eager to satisfy his sister, he explained, "It appears Cupid struck with a lead ball instead of an arrow. Thornhill asked permission to pay his addresses to our little minx."

The two siblings laughed in unison. They put their blond heads together over brandies and laid plans to encourage what was sure to be the most advantageous match of the season.

Days later, at the fashionable hour of four in the afternoon, Charmayne and Penelope, her future sister-in-law, was closeted in her late mother's favorite parlor taking tea with some biscuits and bite-size, butter-iced cakes. Penelope led the conversation. "I hear the Duke of Thornhill paid a visit to your father, and all hell broke loose? "

Slightly blue-deviled, Charmayne nodded her head to confirm. "Yes, he showed up, and we were all outed. I didn't think I should apologize for saving Reggie's bacon, but that's not the worst of it. I think the Duke enjoyed watching Father scold me. Afterward, Reggie, the traitor, made a cake of himself toadying up to him. One would never guess that they were recently adversaries."

Penelope urged Charmayne to be grateful, "I've suffered too. When my mother learned how close we came to being compromised, she had a fit of the vapors and resorted to laudanum to calm her nerves. She says the Duke was right to alert your father to Reggie's hotheadedness and our close call with ruination."

"Forgive me, I should not have embroiled you in this affair," Charmayne admitted. "However, I fear, this is not the end of it."

Troubled, Penelope asked, "Whatever do you mean?"

Charmayne confessed and relived the Duke's reaction, "The strangest look came over him when he realized I was not his intended target."

Penelope was not surprised. Charmayne was unaware of the effect she had on the opposite sex but kept the thought to herself. "No doubt, seeing you was a shock, and considering the dire circumstances, it was particularly gallant of him to have us quickly removed from the scene."

No damsel in distress, Charmayne reminded Penelope. "I had my escape plan and didn't need his blasted interference."

Penelope ignored her unladylike use of cant. "At least you know now the Duke never intended to harm Reggie."

Charmayne relented, "I suppose so, but wish he didn't know I existed!"

Penelope asked, "And, why is that?"

Charmayne had inexplicable misgivings about the Duke. "He doesn't appear to be the sort to be interested in me when there are other more suitable ladies, but I fear my Aunt Marion and Father don't see it that way."

Ever the optimist, Penelope pointed out the bright side. "If Thornhill is dangling after you, it will only improve our chances for a more exciting second season."

Temporarily mollified, eighteen-year-old Charmayne proved she could relish another London season with as much enthusiasm as any of her peers. Under Aunt Marion's tutelage, she was just beginning to appreciate the joys of being female versus riding bareback with her brother dressed as young bucks on their family's country estate. Under the auspices of a skilled French dressmaker, Charmayne received an enviable wardrobe copied from the latest fashion plates in the ton's favorite women's periodical, *The Ladies Magazine*. Finally, with season vouchers procured from her aunt's dear friend and one of its patronesses, Lady Maria Sefton, Charmayne was all set for the first Wednesday evening ball at Almack's assembly rooms where the single aristocracy mingles.

Meanwhile, at Whites, the popular gentlemen's club on St. James Street welcomed two of its regulars. The Duke of Thornhill and Baron William Arden Alvanley sat in front of the famous bow-window where they enjoyed an evening of brandy and conversation.

Alvanley asked, his good friend, "Thornhill, how did it go with the chit's father?"

"Hard to tell," he said, "Given his daughter's recent scrape, he seemed surprised by my interest."

Thinking, Alvanley stroked his chin, "I'll lay odds that he'll jump at the chance to make his daughter a Dutchess."

Sudden storm clouds flashed a warning in the Duke's gray eyes, "Not this time, I don't want her name bandied about in the betting books."

Surprised by his response, Alvanley was defensive. "The Worthington girl must be something special if you are willing to bite my head off."

Owing to his friend an explanation, the Duke recalled the first time he set eyes on his sweet nemesis.

"As I lay bleeding, I was overwhelmed by the vision of young Viscount Reginald's replacement. Upon close inspection, I saw the uncanny resemblance, and I swear I will never be the same again.

The softness of her whiskerless face made my heart race. She was demonstrably upset by the injury she caused and refused to move until the surgeon you hired gave her leave. I don't remember much after that except the overwhelming desire to protect her."

Alvanley's knowing smile spoke volumes. "I see why you are in a quandary, but all is not lost. Have you considered taking her brother under your wing? Securing his admiration may improve your prospects with the daughter and father."

The Duke's features brightened, "I like the plan and have just the person in mind to help me. The Countess de Lieven, the wife of the Russian Ambassador to England, is one of Almack's most influential patronesses. It was she and the Russian Tzar who introduced the waltz to the Beau Monde. What better way to get the lovely Charmayne in my arms? Besides, Doretha would like nothing better than to have two of England's most eligible bachelors in regular attendance at the Marriage Mart."

Topping off his brandy, Alvanley barked, "Slow down old boy, I'm a confirmed bachelor, but you can count on my support."

On the eve of their first visit to Almacks, Penelope expressed her doubts about Reggie's affection. "Have you noticed, Reggie hasn't been very attentive of late."

As taboo as it was to talk about male dalliances in the petticoat line, Charmayne did her best to assure Penelope. "Don't worry. I know my brother is as much in love with you as ever. He's just been a little preoccupied. He bore the brunt of father's disapproval over our part in the dueling incident and is working hard to redeem himself."

Still feeling neglected, Penelope craved more assurance, "I hope you are right. We are pledged but not officially betrothed. However, that is no reason to take me for granted."

Charmayne suggested that she take action. "Reggie's a slowtop when it comes to romance. Perhaps you should give him a little push."

Penelope planned to take her advice. "Think, I will teach him a lesson!"

The first evening Lady Marion entered Almacks with her charges, Charmayne and Penelope, were hailed for the second year as the season's goddesses. Each was stunning in under-the-bust Empire silhouettes of soft-draping, silks, a look made famous by Napoleon's Empress Josephine. Penelope was petite perfection in pale pink with rose ribbon spilling down the front and weaving through her raven tresses. Charmayne shimmered in Spring-green embellished with emerald beading and a matching jeweled hair comb. Both ensembles had matching silk pumps and drawstring-reticules to carry their indispensables. The band played from the balcony. Charmayne and Penelope flirted and danced with eligible young Lords. Lady Marion and her cohort, Lady Sefton, watched from the back of the ballroom. Seated on a wooden settee, the ladies had a birdseye view of Britain's dazzling upper echelon by the light of candle-bearing wall sconces and chandeliers.

Excited by the sight of two newcomers, Penelope whispered in Charmayne's ear, "Look, Reggie is here with you know who."

Charmayne's resentment boiled over, "Lately, the two of them have been thick as thieves. Attending bare-knuckle bouts at Gentlemen Jackson's and such. Just because I'm a woman, I don't see why I can't join the fun."

Wrinkling her Patrician nose in distaste, Penelope pointed out Charmayne's inconsistency. "I thought you wanted to avoid the Duke, not make him aware that you also share a love of blood sports."

While Charmayne pondered this, the Countess de Lieven descended upon them with the Duke and his party in tow. "You lucky girl, I have given His Grace special permission to lead you in a waltz."

The Duke's broad shoulders and slim hips, elegantly framed in the venue's mandated formal tailoring, made him a dashing figure in a black cutaway tailcoat, form-fitting breeches, stockings, and rhinestone-

buckled shoes. A watered silk waistcoat, high-neck white linen shirt fronted with the cascading folds of a silk cravat added the finishing touches. Suddenly trapped in his arms, Charmayne swept round and round. The physical intimacy of the dance made it impossible to give him the silent treatment. The Duke toyed with her and showed his appreciation of her feminine charms. His eyes lingered over the deep gown she wore with deep décolletage, little puff-sleeves, and long white gloves. She blushed, and he spoke. "I much prefer this enchanting vision of you." And her resistance crumbled.

Ignoring his reference to their first encounter, Charmayne hoped another apology would suffice.

"I am truly grateful that you have completely recovered and beg you not to tease me further."

He was not going to let her off the hook. "It's our little secret, but I would like to know how you managed to switch places and why you put yourself in harm's way."

Charmayne answered with alacrity. "What did you expect. As the only direct heir to the Worthington title, I made sure my twin would be foxed and sound asleep in his bed. Reggie's second and our childhood friend, Count Frederick Stonefield, helped me ply him with wine to pull off our deception."

The Duke's jealousy surfaced, "I wonder, what did you promise the Count to enlist his help, a kiss perhaps?"

Charmayne refused to take the bait. "Certainly not, Freddie is a gentleman and would never dream of taking such liberty."

Not at all convinced, he concluded. "I think Freddie is so smitten that he would do anything you ask, no matter how improper. I, on the other hand, would not."

Annoyed, Charmayne was blunt. "Oh, you may be right, but Freddie knows I'm not in the market for a husband."

The Duke undercut her attempted setdown, "We'll see. In my experience, women change their minds all the time, and the Count is a definite suitor."

It seemed like an eternity before their waltz ended, and she free of the Duke. Before releasing her, he staked his claim by filling out her dance card more than the customary two sets for non-engaged couples.

Infuriated, Charmayne pulled Penelope aside to complain. "That man had the effrontery to tell me I didn't know my mind and is broadcasting that he has designs on me."

But Penelope wasn't listening, and Charmayne guessed why. "You know, flirting with the Marquis is dangerous. He has a very unsavory reputation."

Foolishly pleased with herself, Penelope confided, "Silly, I planted a little seed of doubt to make Reggie jealous, and it's working. Your brother has promised to announce our engagement. Perhaps you should give the Duke a chance. Reggie truly believes that you won't be happy in the role of a maiden aunt."

Charmayne was deeply disturbed by her twin's defection. They did everything together, and now their genders had set them on very different paths. Dancing continued into the wee hours, and she began to feel lightheaded. Perhaps it was her confusion about the inevitability of marriage or the verbal sparring with the Duke as they moved through the four corners of the quadrille. The normally, unflappable Charmayne fainted. Alarmed, the Duke scooped her up and placed her in the tender care of her aunt Marion who waved burnt feathers under her nose. Slowly Charmayne came to, complaining of a slight headache to mask her embarrassment. No one spoke a word on the carriage ride home. Once safely tucked in her bed, Charmayne endured a restless night of disturbing dreams. Locked in the Duke's passionate embrace with his lips assaulted hers, she surrendered willingly much to her surprise.

Late the next morning, Penelope popped in to see Charmayne.

"Tell me, what did he say to upset you?"

Propped up in bed against a pile of pillows, between sips of hot chocolate, she patted the top of her head. "I've had it up to here! I brought up Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of Women's Rights*, and we spent the entire set challenging each other."

"No, you didn't," Penelope said. "Such an outrageous topic surely gave him a disgust of you."

Disappointed, Charmayne continued. "That's what I thought, but it had the opposite effect. He agreed that both sexes are rational beings but stopped at elevating women's roles. As he put it, he serves in the House of Lords, not the House of Lords and Ladies."

Penelope interrupted. "I see why you had such a heated exchange. Don't be cross Charmagne, but I think if he may be more enlightened than you think and just enjoyed goading you. Why did you let him?"

Charmayne's irritation overflowed. "Everyone I know thinks marriage is inevitable, and becoming a Dutchess is the best of all outcomes for a woman. The Duke suggested as much, and I lost my temper. That's when everything went blank."

Penelope expressed concern for the Duke's dignity, "I'm so glad you did not get another chance to assault his ego. Shooting him was bad enough. Reggie says he was one of Wellington's best lieutenants and deserved better."

Charmayne did not like that all the people she loved were singing the Duke's praises. So what if he did call the next day inquiring after her health, bearing a fresh bouquet from his famous rose garden. Nonetheless, Penelope did her best to make Charmayne see that the Duke's interest in her had unique advantages.

"Reggie says Lord Thornhill has season tickets to Vauxhall's Pleasure Gardens, and when you are up to it, he would like to take us there."

Charmayne reasoned it would be selfish to deny her family such a treat, and in mixed company, she and the Duke would probably be less combative.

The Worthington family traveled in the Duke's crested carriage to Westminster, followed by a boat ride on the Thames. Away from the shore, they climbed the stairs to the garden's enchanting landscape. The night glittered with hundreds of glass-fairy lights hung in trees towering over pavilions with Roman colonnades, lodges, and rotundas. The Duke's guests were seated in one of the many alcove supper-boxes against a backdrop of large scale paintings of England's fashionable upper-class. In the grove where they dined, the menu consisted of thin slices of ham, cheeses, assorted tarts, and champagne.

Inside an ancient octagon temple, an orchestra played the music of German composer Handel. Walks along graveled paths bordered by hedges and fragrant flower beds offered many amusements.

Anticipating a favorable response, the Duke asked Charmayne, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

Feeling a little apprehensive, she decided to break a confidence. "I would be if I were not worried about Penelope's secret rendezvous with Gregory, the Marquis of Badderville. I can't possibly let her go alone."

Aware that the Marquis and other unsavory characters waited to pounce on easy-marks, the Duke replied. "I'm afraid the Marquis is in no condition to meet anyone tonight. It appears Penelope was a ruse, and you were his intended target."

Furious, Charmayne balled her hands into fists. "I hope you punched his lights out."

It was at this exact moment that her feelings toward the Duke began to warm. He declined to say just how long the Marquis would be out of commission but assured her that she had nothing to fear.

"Your brother feels I let him off easy."

"My over-protective brother would have challenged him to a duel. If left up to me, I would have drawn his cork, and that would have done far more to wound his male pride!"

Not surprised by her bloodthirsty response, the Duke informed her that the Marquis planned a clandestine elopement.

"I'm afraid he had accomplices to carry you off to Gretna Green, and you would be completely at his mercy."

Charmayne showed her disdain and withdrew her little pistol. "I think this might have changed his mind. Still, I can't imagine why he would go to such lengths to marry me?"

"Why is that love?" said the Duke and regretted his words instantly as

Charmayne's defensive walls went up. He changed the subject and hoped the evening's fireworks would ease any awkwardness between them. Careful not to let his ardor cross the line again, he began a campaign in earnest to win her over. What woman could resist the lure of going to balls, the theatre, picnics, and Gunter's Tea Shop for ices; riding on horseback in Hyde Park and driving a high-perched phaeton drawn by a pair of prime thoroughbreds?

In the interim, Lady Charmayne began to rethink the possibility of marriage. Something her Aunt Marion said about relationships made her think she could have her cake and eat it too. Not one to delay, she decided to test the waters at their very next meeting. Near the end of the season, the Duke called, and the entire household started to behave most peculiarly. Allowed to meet him alone in the upstairs drawing-room, a determined Charmayne immediately took charge and startled her suitor.

"Your Grace, "I have concluded that a union between us might be mutually beneficial if you can agree to my terms."

Walking over to where she stood, Thornhill placed both hands on her shoulders, lifted her chin, and responded with the look of love lighting his eyes.

"Just as I predicted, to what do I owe this change of heart? Surely not my title or fortune?"

He did like to provoke her, and she responded in kind. "You know perfectly well I don't care a fig about that. You need a wife to produce an heir, and I need an agreeable husband. One who will give me autonomy. "

Drawing Charmayne closer, their bodies melting into each other, "Darling, a marriage of convenience is out of the question. I want to be your lover, not your jailer."

She matched his bold declaration with one of her own.

"Oh, that. I have given it some thought. In my dreams, I saw us together, and well, you were kissing me."

He took this as an invitation and kissed her soundly. Stoking their surging passions to a fever pitch until for propriety's sake, the Duke pulled away.

A bemused, Charmayne begged him not to stop.

"I could make love to you forever," she confessed, "and Aunt Marion promised an even more blissful experience after we are married."

Thrilled by her enthusiasm but cautious, the Duke replied. "What exactly, my love, am I signing up for?"

Charmayne pleaded her case using his Christian name.

"Charles, you must promise, to never take a mistress, and I want it writing."

"Is that the only condition," he countered as if that would ever be a problem.

Charmayne prayed the Duke would not object to one more concession.

"I promise to be more prudent than Lady Caroline Lamb's habit of donning men's attire in public. I know what's due to your station and plan not to feed the ton's gossips."

The Duke roared with laughter as he compromised, "Sweetheart, "I promise to be open-minded and even foot the bill for both wardrobes. Come, let's share our joy with your family.

They wed soon after announcing their engagement in the newspaper, finalizing the marriage articles, and obtaining a Special License from the Arch Bishop of Canterbury. The ceremony at Saint George's Church in Hanover Square had just the family. Afterward, they celebrated with a wedding breakfast and honeymooned at Brighton's seaside resort.

Once his unconventional daughter settled, the Earl was fond of telling friends that she had found a good man to love and keep her in check.