

## Lady Grace's Revels

Fiction

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*Selected for publication by historical novelist RUTH DOWNIE.*

### 1.

The two young men could not believe their luck. They had been invited to Lady Grace's revels.

Frequently, in the past year, Her Ladyship had thrown open the doors of the old manor house and held revels. No one could tell when – or why – the spirit would move her, but when it did, there was rejoicing throughout the district, so seldom did anything noteworthy break the fixed round of provincial life, and there were prayers that it become a regular observance.

It was Martinmas eve, and the lofty, torch-lit hall echoed with the sounds of laughter and music, dancing and animated conversation. In the near corner of a smaller, adjoining chamber, where a long table groaned with sweetmeats and drink, and candles shed a more muted light, Lady Grace stood, conferring from time to time with a select coterie. A wide archway linked the smaller with the larger room, affording a clear view of the proceedings.

Just inside this archway, Thomas Smith and William Philpott, scribes, whispered together like schoolboys hatching a plot.

"Doubtless somebody commended us," William was saying, "but who? And wherefore?"

"Perchance nobody's at fault," suggested Thomas, "but some star. The face of fortune we have waited on a thousand years like dogs wait 'neath the table hath come about and now would shine on us."

"'Tis. Plain sense. Clouds and astral things are jolly. And wilt thou be attending to the world wherein we stand eftsoons? Here jewels glitter, fire crackles, maidens hop about with cruel abandon. And I am stark, raving mad."

"We are not the only base-born here," observed Thomas. He nodded toward the glover's daughter promenading by the side of an old wool-factor, a governess twirling in the arms of a squire's bastard.

"E'en so. Her ladyship is by no means over-nice," William admitted. "We are only the only base-born neither rich nor handsome here, that's all."

"Alas, for rich, but, handsome? Go to, wag. See to thine eyes. They want spectacles."

"Spectacles? Wherefore? The field is littered with 'em, all in a hotchpot: the graceless leads the graceful; the unfair leadeth the fair."

The dancing absorbed the young men's attention for a while.

"Nay, but I have not done with thee," continued William, emerging with a start from his reverie. "To return to the matter. I would have thee unfold me thy thoughts. Thou hast 'em, they tell. Once more: Wherefore are we here? It must be some shift of thine, for, God bless me, it's none of mine."

"I know not a whit more than thou. Summon came. Summarily we answered, what?"

"Did'st thou not leer like an insolent cutpurse, I mought believe thee. Out with it, villain! Have at thee!"

"Peace! I bow to thy superior wind. I fear I've wrote Her Ladyship a poem. Mayhap it hath had some small effect."

“Thou hast wrote Her Ladyship a poem. Thou hast wrote Her Ladyship a poem. And thereafter, what? A knighthood? A barony? Beatification?”

“Enough. Wilt thou hear it or wilt thou not?”

“I daresay I’ll hear it willy-nilly. So prate on, Sir Ovid, prate on.”

“I shall. And, Papistry, by the way, lacketh currency, in case thou had’st not heard.”

Thomas began to declaim in a loud actor’s voice.

The crimson rose grows sallow,  
the saffron primrose wan,  
The cream of Troy with Helen cloy,  
and graceless is the swan,  
The diamond doth darken,  
the lark’s a puling pie,  
The crown of white on yonder height  
grows gray, when thou art nigh.

The nightingale, they bruit,  
doth sing right prettily,  
The nightingale, if right prevail,  
ought prentise at thy knee.  
The angels watch in wonderment,  
as thou dancest by,  
Their firmament thine element,  
thy dancing-floor the sky.

The days of May are sullen,  
the day of May is o’er,  
The Graces Three face rivalry,  
for thou hast Graces Four.  
Though Brilliance glint and Joy sing,  
and Bloom wax commonplace,  
Thou wrestest all, thou bestest all,  
for thy Fourth Grace is Grace.

The sun is but a poltroon,  
the moon a winking eye,  
No day so fair but must despair,  
thy visage to outvie.  
The sun is but a candle,  
the moon a Pharisee,  
No night was e’er bedight so bright  
with light, as shines from thee.

The sun is but a mirror,  
the stars but broken glass,  
Howe’er they feign, they feign in vain,  
thine image to surpass.  
The sun is but an ember,

the stars mere mummery,  
The world's array doth lose the day  
when seen in light of thee.

When excellence excelleth,  
no excess will suffice,  
No earthly scale can e'er avail,  
to price a priceless price.  
When excellence excelleth,  
then excess goes behind.  
When face to face with Grace on Grace,  
'tis excess is outshined.

At the dying fall, amused onlookers returned to their conversations.

"Dainty," pronounced William. "Decorous. Modest. And thankfully free of any plaguy fawning."

Returning to his conspiratorial whisper, Thomas proceeded to explain the source of his inspiration. He had been standing in the High Street watching another tedious day come to another tedious end when the distinctive sound of Lady Grace's coach had reached his ear. Overjoyed at the prospect of anything new at all, he had turned to see a miracle pass: a matched team, a shining black equipage bearing the Burnham crest, and, he swore it, the face of Her Ladyship, fresh from London, smiling directly upon him with exquisite condescension.

From that day forward, he was her liege-man. He made her the subject of all his poems, the object of all his aspirations, the linchpin of all his dreams. It had taken a week's pay to bribe a servant to deliver the poem, but the sacrifice had not been in vain. Although the wait had been agonizing, he had been less than surprised when the invitation had finally arrived. How could such boundless love remain unrequited?

"Thou think'st thou can'st win great ladies now?" observed William. "Scrivening's looking up."

With an expression of disdain, Thomas protested the purity of his motives. His friend's insinuations were beneath contempt. It was Lady Grace's patronage that Thomas held high hopes of winning. Her patronage. A lady of such liberality and loving-kindness was sure to recognize the artistry that flowed from his pen. To add to which, he would make her immortal.

"Very good," interjected William. "We know wherefore thou art here. Wherefore am I here?"

"Once upon a time," responded Thomas, pityingly, "thou wert my friend. Once upon a time, thou had'st the right to gather up my crumbs and my remainders."

"I humbly cry thee mercy, my Lord," apologized William, with a low bow. "The fault is all mine. I reck'd not the intensity of thine intent. But pray remind this ignorant again how a piddling few strophes of rhyme are to make our fortune – or, more to the purpose, thy fortune and my crumbs?"

Thomas readily launched into a description of the play he was working on. It was to be a thing completely new, a thing never seen before, at once comedy, tragedy, history, romance. It was to seal his fame forever. It was to take London by storm.

"Hast thou e'er seen London?" asked William.

"Nay," answered Thomas, "Never in my life."

"It don't storm so easy."

At the sudden roar of thunder, a woman screamed, the high windows at the hall's other end rattled in their mullions, and the music halted. Excited voices ooh-ed and ah-ed the ensuing lightning flash. The murmur of rain for a moment filled the hush. Whereupon, to a ripple of laughter, the dancers resumed their places, and the music struck up once more.

"But soft!" exclaimed Thomas. "Regard the comer."

William turned and saw a lone man standing in the entrance-way. Blinking furiously, the man was holding out a wet cloak to a servant who was nowhere to be seen. Tall, almost giant, so barrel-chested as would be considered stout in a man any shorter, his great long legs were encased in the most form-fitting of hose. William had never seen anyone so exquisitely dressed: every stitchery, ruffle, piping, cockade possible, it seemed, had been put into play.

'Sblood, if it don't think itself the whyfor of all the commotion!" Thomas whispered. "Thunders harbinger it, it thinketh. Good now! I wager we shall sport us."

William knew the man.

"He's called Sir John, Sir John Westfall, though not in his own right. Third son of a marquess's second wife, the 'Sir's a courtesy."

"Sir'd by courtesy?" laughed Thomas, "Germanely sir'd. Mark! Our courteous Sirrah spy'th his Lady yonder. He maketh to do his court'sies from afar. Mark the sweep wherewith he cap'th and leg'th. But Her Ladyship is off – sir-reverence –to the jakes and oh! she see'th him not. His courtesy's nought. Oh, Will, this is too choice. Our obliging quarry diggeth his own pit."

The Mayor, separating himself from the throng, rushed up to rescue Sir John. Pitching his cloak at the flushed servant running towards him, Sir John followed the bobbing Mayor to where the dancers stood awaiting the next tune. The air of vexation with which he had begun walking had mutated to one of complacency in the time it took to reach them. Introductions went round, and soon Sir John had taken his place among the dancers, his high black forelock towering above them all.

"Mark, Will, how the press doth ebb and flood with every sally of this cloud-capped relief. Glide . . . step-step. Glide . . . step-step. Edifying. Gee . . . haw! Gee . . . haw! The finical cow sashayeth, a-dodging 'round the dung-cocks. Glide . . . step-step. Glide . . . step-step. Heigh-ho, Heigh-ho!"

"Beware he don't hear thee, fool," warned William, trying desperately to keep a straight face. "They say he pinks the likes of thee for breathing."

"Lo, how it glorieth in itself," raved Thomas, louder than before, "It eye-eth all the rout to certify that all admire the capers that it cuts. Woe to its partner and woe to her feet. It's quite reckless of 'em. Look out, Madam!"

"Lo, we're seen!" said Thomas, dropping to a whisper, and communicating theatrically from behind his hand. "I read his mind. He thinketh, 'Who are these fine young fellows who admire me? Methinks I'll guerdon them with my regard.' See him nod his graciousness our way."

"He's a noddy all right," seconded William, meanwhile bowing obsequiously, "I'll grant you. A fine flower of England's blood."

"'Tis tremendous and it trippeth light," said Thomas, loudly again, "'tis' large and it leaps, tis' a hulk and hops. What could it be? I'll lay thee forty pence."

"Soft, I say!" hissed William, "Thou art stepping in a sink whereout I'll be impotent to extricate thee, this time. Have a care for me if not thyself."

"'Tis an elephant," Thomas shouted, "a-tip-toeing for fear he might awaken mice. Come, Will. The riddle giv'th itself away."

"That will be quite enough," William asserted, taking Thomas by the arm and propelling him away from the dancers,

"Come. Come away. Forthwith."

“I do not *wish* to,” groaned Thomas, struggling and scowling angrily, “I wish to *stay*.”

“Come, my blood-drinking, fire-breathing rakehell,” insisted William, adamant, “it’s time we ate the good Lady’s meat and drink.”

Abruptly, Thomas stopped struggling.

“That’s right, I’ll need sustenance,” he said, as if to himself, and docilely acceded to William’s importunity.

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Having eaten their fill, and, just as they were starting on a third round of sack, Thomas’s attention shifted from their badinage. William could guess the cause. Turning, he saw that Lady Grace was again standing surrounded by sycophants in her customary place at the far end of the table, and the Mayor was bringing Sir John to make his obeisances. William rolled his eyes heavenward as he watched his friend sidle up to them.

“An it please Your Ladyship, my deepest condolences,” Sir John was saying, “I obsequiously lament the death of the good earl, your father.”

“Observe, Will, my Lord’s obsequy,” bid Thomas, and William was relieved at the moderate tone his friend had assumed, “obsequious to a very fault.”

“Indeed” was the most William was about to venture.

Luckily, a man inured to parasites seldom heeds them unless he has to. As Thomas was but one of those clustering about and talking about him as if he were a prize horse, Sir John plowed on, obliviously.

“We of high rank are obliged to one another, cousin.”

“This Lord ranketh,” Thomas asseverated. “I marked it from the first. The first time I clapped eyes on him, I marked it. No lord here is ranker. Good as the best. Rank so undue high heaven is assailed.”

“Indeed,” said William, not about to be amused, no matter how amusing the provocation.

“The nobility ought hang together, cousin,” Sir John admonished Lady Grace.

“A sentiment of peerless sympathy,” Thomas gushed, “expressed in a memorable figure. Like shipwrecks, nobles, by together hanging, stand fast against severally drowning.”

“’Tis but duty,” declared Sir John, in mock resignation, “but to do *thee* my duty, Milady, ‘tis not hard. Not hard at all.”

“Soft! Hark’st thou?” William hearkened. Would that he hadn’t. “’Tis not hard at all,’ he saith. I believe it. Not hard at all. Never.”

Thomas’s remarks had been to an extent masked by Lady Grace’s polite rejoinders to Sir John’s overtures. But this last evinced the slightest eye movement from Sir John. Something, some incongruity, had broken through his intent concentration on the matter at hand.

Undeterred, however, Sir John embarked on his peroration. “Dearest, cousin, I am come to aid you, in whatever it is your pleasure to do. You have but to command, cousin, and your devoted cousin obeyeth.”

“Hear how free my Lord cousins my Lady,” Thomas exulted, “Such cousinage, I do declare, hath been truant since the days of Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Esau, Joseph and his cousins twelve.”

“In your hour of need,” Sir John concluded, “think me your own knight-errant, Milady, ready to do battle at your hest.”

“Indeed,” Thomas interposed into the general murmur of approbation at Sir John’s gallantries, “my Lord, you are an arrant knight. A nonesuch. A very nonpareil. Courtesy is your cause and purport.”

When did we change to direct address? William wondered, with mounting apprehension. He was not here. This was not happening. Life was full of dangers. That capon, for one, was not sitting at all well. It could kill him by the morrow. Why abet it? Pray, more, Sir. He gulped his sack. His eyes flitted about the room, noting exits.

“Gramercy,” responded Sir John, mechanically, his attention fixed on Lady Grace.

“Courtesy is what maketh you noble. Every quality that we admire in you must needs redound to courtesy. No courtier oweth courtesy so much. Your magnanimity, your franchise, your estate, your office, your largesse, your Lordship, lay it at the door of courtesy, and we with no such portion hail you for it.”

“Gramercy,” repeated Sir John, with a curt nod, his eyes still on his object.

“Surely, my Lord, you know the regard wherein all and sundry rightly hold you?” Thomas asked, bowing ostentatiously. “Your prominence proceedeth before you. Outstanding amongst men, to women awful, you bulk large amidst the vulgar fray. From your twinkling toes to that excrescence wonderful rank on your forward top, you are renowned, yea, fabled, near and far. Wherefore, all in all, your greatness weighed, more ponderous and fraught a gravity was ne’er conceived, it overtops this little world wherein it must, alas, reside.”

“By thy leave,” Sir John objected, “thou mak’st too much of me. I ain’t as grand as all that. Nobody is.”

“I bow to more prodigious capacity,” conceded Thomas, bowing even lower. “Oh, William, did’st thou e’er hear fairer phrases?” William was no longer answering. His eyes studied the floor. “True Attic salt, the very article, elaborated with Laconic swell; sentence worthy o’ th’immortal Plautus, nay, Terence: Aristophanes himself. Sir, thy words are true, and right, and choice. I bow to thine eminence. ‘Tis gross. As gross as is the heaving mare and all the whales and cuttlefishes in it.”

“Dost thou thou me?” Sir John asked, his attention caught.

“*Thou thou?*” Thomas retorted, laughing heartily. “Indeed, I thou thee. I thou thee a thousand times, thou *thou*, thou. Dost thou thou me? That is the question.”

“What?”

“Why ought I not thou thee?” Thomas went on. “‘Tis but fitting. ‘Tis common knowledge, some base usurer, thy grandsire’s grandsire, seeing his main chance, to Richmond’s skirts seized fast and tightly clung thereon thereafter like a cocklebur.”

Not true, thought William. Sir John’s forebears were in the Domesday Book.

“Insolence,” said Sir John, coolly. “And lying insolence at that.”

Thomas strode round to the side of the long table opposite Sir John like an actor hitting his mark. Conversation began to die down as the crowd noticed what was happening.

“Thou gorbelled, vain, beef-witted bladder,” Thomas effused, pointing his finger accusingly. “Like a child whom elders watch to laugh at his foolishness, thou think’st the world dotes on thine every pose and affectation. When thou makest to turn on the toe, the rout doth flee for fear thy toppling crush them, and thou in thine unspeakable self-regard, think’st thou spin’st not, nay, the world must spin round thee.”

William, meanwhile, had slipped into the crowd and was edging towards the wall. “We are undone,” he murmured, whereupon Lady Grace, whose attention the Mayor had been monopolizing, caught and held his gaze for a long moment. Then she turned, and, quickly discerning the cause of William’s despair, she advanced to a nearer vantage point, the crowd parting for her as she moved. Saying nothing, she stood and watched with grim self-possession the scene as it played out, hands folded before her.

“When thou flound’rest like a mud-fast ox, thou think’st thyself a sprightly prancing hart, pranked up in garments so bulging taut, each lace and point cry’th out as on the rack. What could be more insufferable than such dainty-brutish, trip-tread mincing? Peradventure, thy sottish simpering?”

Dost thou not know that he who simpereth, and looketh to see who looketh on him, no one craves to see.”

The room was silent and still, except for Thomas’s ranting. Sir John stood motionless, rapt, expectant.

“Addled jolthead, so boil-brained, thou can’st not tell raillery from commendation. I hate thee, I revile thee, I abhor thee. Or is e’en *this* too heavy going for thee? Overweening imbeciles with swords and undue disdain are the sorest bane of this downtrodden and benighted world. I hate thy kind as well as I hate thee.”

“Moreover, pray, by what right dost *thou* lord it? Say what thou wilt, it stands: thou hast no title. Thy father hath the title and thy brother the reversion. The ‘Sirs’ wherewith we sir thee are but words.”

“More grievous still, thou hast the impudence to saunter in here with an eye to what? To win the Lady with thy simpering? To save thy drained estate with mincing pretty? By what happy mischance do exalted ladies feign consider stout and vain and beggared dolts whose titles have no base?”

“Have at thee, thou dissembling, plume-plucked coxcomb, thou cock-a-hoop, thou misbegotten wretch. Thou’ll soon forget thine idle lecher’s fancies, for I have made up horns for thee beforehand. Lo, these many years, the lady was mine, and thou art but a feeble, paltry second. That is, had thy empty codpiece cod.”

William had concluded that his friend had gone mad. The fool had never even seen the Lady Grace but for that moment on the High Street. Now he was her gallant.

“That is the last straw,” roared Sir John. “I will have my satisfaction of thee, Sirrah, if I have to kill the entire company.”

“And thou wilt have it,” replied Thomas, “and spare the company, but for that thou hast that rapier, and I have nought,” seizing a knife from the table, “but this carving knife.”

“Here’s my sword,” returned Sir John, drawing his rapier and throwing it hilt first across the table. “Take it. It’s sharp. I’ll take this varlet’s dancing-*rapier*,” he turned to the cowering Mayor, who rendered up his sword immediately, “and I’ll kill thee in a *pissing-while*.”

Sir John broke the tip of the blunted dancing-*rapier* over his knee, and stood at guard, the jagged end pointing menacingly at Thomas.

“Thou wilt not ask leave of Her Ladyship?”

Sir John glanced at Lady Grace and back at his opponent.

“Nay. I’ll kill thee first and then ask leave.”

They crossed swords over the table and set to. For a time, Thomas kept the master fencer stymied by two expedients: one was to keep the table always between himself and Sir John, and the other was to fan the air with his sword as rapidly as he could. These unconventional tactics nonplussed the trained swordsmen – and further enraged him. Round and round the table they ran, Thomas eluding Sir John at every turn, and miraculously fending off countless would-be-lethal thrusts.

“Stand and fight, thou villain,” shouted Sir John, breathing heavily, “Thou art no gentleman, that is clear.”

“Gentleman? What’s that? Fear not, I’ll teach thee. There is gentleness and gentleness. The gentleness that courses through thy veins is blood, glass-gazing, and contumely. A gentler gentleness there is that’s mine, for thou art gentle by courtesy of the lord, *thy* father, Marquess of this and that: I, gentle by endowment of the Lord, *Our* Father, Maker of heaven and earth.”

It was obvious that Sir John’s outrage and frustration were coming to a head. His attacks became more deliberate, more concentrated, more relentless.

Thomas was plainly growing weary. He careered wildly round the table, slashing the air when his opponent's sword wasn't even near, uttering ever fainter imprecations. Just as he began to declare, "Though thou kill me, thou art yet dull as an ox," Sir John, scattering roasts and candles and beakers, leaped upon the table, grasped the rapier in Thomas's hand by the blade, and drove the jagged end of the show-sword that he wielded through Thomas's breast by main force.

"And keener am I yet," gasped Thomas, blood spurting from his breast, "than all thy new-edg'd swords. So it is and so it shall be." Sir John drove home again to silence him. "Forever and ever." Again. "Amen." The final thrust was to the throat, and Thomas Smith spoke no more.

## 2.

Sir John dug in his ear with a tortoiseshell scoop and frowned at his valet. He had been at his toilet for several hours now and nothing was going right. Tonight of all nights, no emolument would tame his beastly hair, his clothes fit like they'd been cut for the chambermaid, and, worst of all, the fair complexion that was his pride had erupted into pustules such as he hadn't seen since his nonage. He shouted at the trembling attendant and sent him downstairs for more cosmetics. The villain's customary wizardry had apparently deserted him. And on such a night. It was an outrage.

Outside his window, a rank of cloud was creeping up on a bright gibbous moon. He lit another candle and addressed once more his mirror. It wasn't so bad. Or was it? He'd looked so long and so hard he couldn't tell anymore.

His thoughts wandered to Lady Grace Atwater, his hostess for the night, and now, it would seem, until a stronger claimant came along, for all intents and purposes Countess of Burnham in her own right, the old earl having died without male issue or collaterals. Would that his own father had been so thoughtful. Sir John's share of the patrimony was scarcely competent after all those fingers had got through with the pie. His fool of a father had been at once profligate and prolific, the worst of both worlds.

What, he wondered, could have brought her back from London to this godforsaken desert? But for the hunting, he himself would have absconded long ago. And it looked to be no short visitation, either. She was settled in, and seemed intent on taking the old earl's place in country affairs. His mind ruffled through the inevitable rumors – heresy, treachery, vice. Hardly believable of such an innocuous and retiring woman.

Be that as it may, she was a match for him if ever there was one. Fair enough for forty, well-born, and rich. This conquest would need all the charm he could muster. And charm was deserting him wholesale. He shouted for his valet and looked for his riding crop.

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Having whipped his horse into a lather, Sir John forged on through the rain. He could just make out the tree-lined approach to the manor in the distance. He was late, later than he had planned to be. Curse the horse, curse the rain, curse the road, curse the valet, curse the luck, and curse Lady Grace Atwater and all her meinee. He hoped the water wasn't seeping underneath his cloak. It wouldn't be long now. He lashed the horse's hindquarters in time with every stride.

A footman swung open the front doors as Sir John rode up. The horse began to rear just as he dismounted. Leaving the task of calming the animal to the terrified underling, he stalked into the house, whereupon he found himself lost in a pitch-black passageway with only the distant hubbub of festivities to guide him. Cursing the darkness, he made his way towards the sound. A patch of light ahead revealed the hall's threshold. Hurrying up to it, he stopped, removed his cloak and hat, and entered.

For a long moment he was blinded by the sudden brightness, and cursed the light. Where was that damned footman? He could hear that he had made an entrance, and now an imbecile servant was ruining it. Servants were always ruining things.

As his eyes became accustomed to the light, he made out the figure of Lady Grace at the far end of the adjoining room. What was he to do now? Go to her? With wet things in hand? Await assistance? Gallantry had always held him in good stead and so gallantry it was. He launched into his best bow and gave it his all. But when he came up, she was nowhere to be seen. This was all very irregular, and he wondered whether he ought turn right round and depart. But the Mayor was hovering attentively now, and there was the footman, and so, press on and let be what would be. Striving manfully, he succeeded in replacing the frown on his face with a beneficent smile, and the stalk still in his legs with a leisurely amble.

If ever there were a rabble among whom he would shine, this was it: two widowed baronesses, a few old knights and their ladies, every squire for miles around with all their broods, motley tradesmen. There was Fitz-Morris, his partner in debauchery, of late his creditor, and a sure ally in this suit, if Fitz-Morris ever wished to see his money again. There was Theophania Langley, the glover's daughter. She was a game one, and of like mind, for she had designs on old Simes the miser. The prospect of a Widow Simes, he remembered, stood surety against a failure with the enigmatic Lady Grace Atwater – a comforting thought. That courtship for a certainty would be blessedly short and to the point. They already knew what they were getting.

Following a stultifying round of introductions, out of which Sir John retained not one name, the little hogshead of a Mayor called for a dance. Here the cost of the expensive dancing master that he had employed seemingly forever justified itself. He had drilled so hard and so long that his feet moved of their own will. He knew all the latest London innovations, both of step and gesture. The yeomen would be dumbstruck.

As well they were. Sounds of acclamation reached his ears, and he looked about to see from where they originated, whereupon the Langley cut a caper that forced him to step lively if he wanted to preserve his toes.

When it again seemed safe, he searched the onlooking crowd once more. Two suspicious-looking rogues were eyeing him gleefully. Doubtless, they had him marked for a purse-cutting later on. He nodded straight at them, and gave his knowing smile, to signal that he was on to them, and they had best seek prey elsewhere, for he was not a man to be trifled with.

The dancing wore on interminably, relieved by the avid glances of a brace of young beauties who, though little they knew it, had already been pricked out for favor as soon as he found the time. He was cutting a fine figure now. He must remember to treat these swains affably. It was rumored Her Ladyship doted on them. By all means, Master Jack. By your leave, Mistress Jill.

At the sound of an altercation, he looked up to see one of the two cut-purses lead the other off. Wine-sotted cut-purses, no less: by Cock, this lady was not particular. Every Hob and Dick in the country was here. We would see about that.

Sir John tried to glean what pleasure he could from the dancing, but he had more weighty things on his mind, and let his demeanor show it. Thankfully, at the resolution of the third dance, the Mayor, ever receptive to intimations, grasped Sir John by the hand, and led him across the hall, through the portal to the adjoining chamber, and into the presence of Lady Grace Atwater, Countess of Burnham. The lickspittle's ornate introductions were as long-winded as a winter's day, but Sir John waited patiently, as the interval allowed Lady Grace the opportunity to fully take in his form and figure.

Sir John likewise availed himself of the opportunity to appraise the charms of his intended. She was tall, almost tall enough that her height would be a detriment. But not quite, God have mercy. Her erect carriage, most dignified, but less than haughty, enhanced the impression of

consequence. Her hair was arranged in a simple yet becoming configuration, its blackness offset with rows of white pearls. Her modest black gown might have betokened mourning, or even a Puritan bent, were it not for the sumptuous filigree of silver with which it was decorated. Her white forehead, unwrinkled as far as Sir John could make out, culminated in a fetching widow's peak. An un-prophetic one, Sir John reassured himself, crossing his fingers. Her high, straight nose and her dark eyebrows only heightened the effect of poignancy tempered with amused resignation that her deep-set blue-green eyes emitted. Her prominent cheek-bones were underscored by what looked like real rose, and her upper lip protruded ever so slightly over the lower, as if a bee had stung it. That upper lip was inexhaustibly expressive; one could just imagine how it could pout, how it could mock, how it could tremble with anger, or fear, or . . . longing. Sir John felt his gaze fixing upon that soft damask anomaly just as he heard the Mayor's speech wind down. Taking command of himself, he tore his eyes from the beckoning trap and prepared to make his opening gambit.

The clamor of the crowd was infelicitous for his purposes, to say the least, but "Onwards" had always been his motto, and so, taking a deep breath, he plunged into the speech he had been rehearsing all week.

He was heartened by her response to his first sally. As sure as day, was she resigned to her father's death. It made her Countess, for God's sake. Furthermore, assuming a demeanor of abject mourning would thankfully not be necessary.

An appeal to fellow-feeling came next. The idea was to create a bond based on their common difference from the rabble, along with reminding her ever so subtly who his father was. The particulars of the blood-line he could count on the Mayor to elucidate in excruciating detail. With the help of a friendly deacon and a beaker of canary, Sir John had taken special care to craft this line of reasoning. Which also went over well. Lady Grace was whole-hearted in her approval of mutual assistance.

Now was the time for the first innuendo. A spoor must be laid, faint but unmistakable, nothing vulgar, nothing that could be misconstrued as anything other than – what it was not, a chaste and humble proffering of service, of devotion, of duties to be fulfilled – duties unspecified. That deacon knew his business.

"Hard at all. Never," he heard. What was that? A parrot? He almost lost his place. By a supreme effort, he regained his mental footing and finished his recitation, word for word, concluding with a grand and yet self-effacing bow.

The loquacious Mayor piped up and stole the Countess's attention. It would be a good while. And some knave was pestering him with some nonsense. Flattering words, flattering words – he'd heard them all a thousand times. Now it looked as if he'd be hearing them a thousand more. He decided to put a stop to it – in his best, most affable manner, of course, for Her Ladyship's benefit.

"By thy leave," he protested humbly, "Thou mak'st too much of me. I ain't so great. Nobody is."

He'd said nothing out of the ordinary. And yet the fool went on and on. What the good-year was all this? What kind of flowery fustian? "Prodigious"? "Swell"? "Thine eminence"? "Whales"?! "Thine"!

"Dost thou thou me?" asked Sir John, turning his head slowly while he spoke, a gesture that usually cowed. He was alert now. He had been right. Something had been out of kilter. He suspected impertinence.

Ah, there it was. More than impertinence, more than impudence – insolence. But it made no sense. When his trencher-fellows mocked him, all was in jest. Here was a complete stranger. Did he not know the rules of civilized comportment?

No, there could be no question. Sir John was being called upon, called upon in the basest of ways – with insults, calumny, ridicule. It was insupportable. Were the wretch a gentlemen, propriety

would demand Sir John give him the lie and throw down his gage, whereupon seconds would negotiate terms and a meeting would be arranged. But to afford a common lout the courtesies due a gentleman was to sully the very name of gentleman, to cast civility before swine. Rage welled up from the pit of his stomach like an irruption of molten steel. When he was enraged he could not think. But he must think. He must make plans. Was he missing something? Could this base-born villain by some off-chance be a master swordsman? He didn't look like one. And then, the strangest vagary stole into Sir John's head. . . . Could there be something to what the boy said? . . . Nay! Nay! and Nay! again. He could not think that way! He would not think that way! The villain was already dead, and well-killed. All that remained was the pretext. And the villain was wrong. His dancing was elegant. The rabble waited upon his smile. And his title . . . ? His title was Sir John Westfall and he was going to worst this base-born mouther of presumption and silence his flapping jaws forever.

Sadly, the whole bloody rout was listening to the tirade now. Were they too mocking him? Not for long, they wouldn't. He would stick them all if needs were. He had already condoned enough effrontery to keep him for a lifetime.

Sir John stood like a statue, saying nothing, looking neither to the right nor to the left, listening for just the right words. Which were not long in coming. In short order, the cur had insulted the lady, and that was the excuse for which Sir John had been restraining himself. Well and good. The villain's time had come.

In his rage, Sir John could scarcely see. In his mind, he was already wading in blood. It took immense fortitude to maintain the presence of mind to see the arrangements through. The silly Mayor's silly dancing-rapier would suffice. A wishbone would suffice. If His quivering Honour would just hold still.

What did the villain want now? Leave of Her Ladyship? She who bore the blame for this! He'd be damned before he asked leave of superannuated whores!

When they took their stances, Sir John knew what he was up against. His opponent stood like a sheep waiting to be slaughtered. That is – unless it were a ruse. How could anyone not a sword-master in disguise bear himself so insouciantly? Enough thought. Onwards.

The first strokes decided him. He had never seen anyone handle a sword in such an idiotic fashion. It was maddening, especially because, having never practiced with any but adepts, Sir John had never learned how to counter idiocy. Like some giant humblebee, the villain would fly round the table and fan the air, fly and fan, fly and fan, in some ludicrous parody of Cob's Traverse. Sir John tried every feint, beat, parry he knew. He gave the blade with an open invitation. Since the fool would not – knew not how to counter, since the fool would not – knew not how to recognize an opening were it presented to him on a golden salver, all was for naught. It was humiliating. Sweat began to pour down Sir John's once meticulously painted face and the contemptible monologue continued to pour from the villain's mouth. Sir John longed to shut it for him, but his composure was long gone, his all-consuming rage hampering his abilities. Contrary to all his training, he could not hoard his strength, he could not pre-meditate his blows – every thrust and lunge and counter went all out. Sooner than he would have, had he been fencing with his fellows, he began to weary.

But his opponent was wearying too. Seeing his chance, Sir John's fury drove him to make an end come what may. The unlikely event of his own death seemed a fair price. As if of their own accord, his legs leaped onto the table, his left hand seized the other's weapon, and his right thrust with such force it cracked open a ribcage.

The blood-gushing carcass would not stop talking however. Silence! the right hand spoke. Silence! Silence!

“What say'st thou now, bully boy?!” panted Sir John. “Nought?! Let us see then what liest beneath *thy* codpiece, thou lying villain.”

Plucking his own rapier from the corpse's hands and using it as a tailor's shears, Sir John cut out his victim's codpiece and flipped it to one side, exposing loins plainly ravaged with chancres.

"Just as I thought," he exclaimed. "Pox'd as an old sailors' whore. A mystery solved. He was mad."

Sir John Westfall had never killed anyone before. His formidable reputation had always daunted challengers and compelled apologies. Thus, far from satisfying him, the fountain of blood at his feet only magnified his towering rage.

"Out!" he bawled, voice breaking with the strain. "Out! Every one! I'll see this chamber empty e'er I count ten or I'll see it a charnel-house."

In short order, he was alone with Lady Grace.

"I'll have you now, Milady," he said, and swived her right there on a platter for all he was worth.

### 3.

Lady Grace woke her steward early. The word went out: "Air the hangings, stoke the kitchen fires, and send Jack after musicians, for 'tis Lady Grace's pleasure for to hold revels." It would be a shame to waste these last halcyon days before winter set in in earnest.

All morning she had overseen the taking in of foodstuffs, the cleaning and refurbishing of the hall, the settling of accounts, and now she sat before a beaker of wine and a plate of bread and cheese at her desk in an upper chamber, admiring the prospect from her window: across the long expanse of lawn, broken here and there with grazing horses, to the rolling patchwork of hill and dale, forest and field that was her demesne, to the distant purple hills, over which grand billowing squadrons of clouds sailed in slow and stately majesty through a medium of azure.

Her heart swelled with peace, and contentment, and fulfillment. Everything wore a sheen of rightfulness. She was finally where she belonged, and the sun was shining, and the sky was blue. For a moment, as if she were hovering on air like the peregrine in the distance, all her cares, all her dreads, all her bad memories fell away, and for the first time in her life, she was at one with creation.

There was a knock on the door and her steward shuffled in with the invitation list. Since the old man had served as the manor's intercessor to the outside world all his life, she depended implicitly upon his advice. Given free rein, Lady Grace would have rapidly expanded the list to include everyone from beggars to kings. The steward moderated her enthusiasm with the sagacity of many years. His cogent and often colorful explanations of the inescapable exigencies of country life would swiftly bring her down to earth. They soon arrived at fairly workable compromises by establishing a middle ground between those who could not possibly be invited and those who could not possibly be overlooked. Within this middle ground was their tilt-yard. Lady Grace would insist on the Langleys, for the sake of the life and fervor the numerous clan brought to all festivity; the steward would insist on the influential wool-factor Simes. Lady Grace would suggest the flamboyant ne'er-do-well Fitz-Morris; the steward would counter with the widowed baronesses.

One invitation was not negotiable, however. The time had come. Lady Grace had acclimated herself to the society and mores of Burnham. With the help of her steward, she now knew what bounds not to overstep, where the pitfalls were, whom to propitiate, whom she could confidently ignore. There were a pair of scribes, it seemed, former students of her old tutor, whom she would have on the list come what may. Vigorous young men, after all, were never unwelcome when there was to be dancing.

She was surprised at the steward's equanimity. He was amenable to the young scribes. On one condition. There was a knight, it seemed, Sir John Westfall, a vigorous young man in his own right, by the way, and one whose gallant presence would add the perfect final touch to their hard-won hodge-pudding. Who was he? A man of birth, acquirements, and refinement. And where had

he been keeping himself? More manly pursuits than rustic revels ordinarily engaged his time. But the steward was sure that he could be induced to make an appearance.

With a sigh, Lady Grace acquiesced and the three names were duly affixed to the list. Leaving her to her reveries, the steward shuffled out of the chamber list in hand and wearing a satisfied smile, having earned his bribe.

\* \* \*

Lady Grace had to make an effort to avert her gaze from the figure of the young man standing in the portal talking animatedly with his friend. Calling her best courtly manner into play, she feigned interest in an earnest discourse on the treatment of glanders. Her eyes, however, could not help but stray. She hoped her avidity was not too conspicuous.

Why did he not come to her, shower her with that animation? It ought to be evident that she did not stand on ceremony. To her mind, these revels of hers were more bacchanal than formal occasion. A word, a bow, a proffered hand in a reception line: that was all the consort she had enjoyed with him. It was not enough.

How comely he looked. Broad straight shoulders tapered to a narrow wasp's waist. The cherubic roundness had left his cheeks and been replaced by finely chiseled features. Long, exquisitely expressive hands danced in the air as he spoke, never still. As ever, traits to excite either a woman's envy or her love. And those eyes. There was something inexplicable in them, some perfect wedding of boyish impishness with the crinkled obligingness of wise grandsires, to melt a tigress's heart.

Oh, he was declaiming. Was that her own name she heard? Yes, repeated more than once. It had to be that mad doggerel he had sent her. "When excellence excelleth, no excess will suffice." How wonderful! The sheer . . . excessiveness of it. So much bolder than the handiwork of the bloodless poetasters at court, with their pale shepherds chopping logic and thinking it seduction. Every hope she had had for him was coming true. She had wished for him to flourish, and flourish he had. The proof was there for all to see: the eagle pride of his demeanor, the elegance of his bearing, the audacity of his verse. Nodding graciously as a red-faced squire reeled off the recipe to a tried and true specific, her thoughts drifted back to her first encounter with Thomas Smith.

\* \* \*

It was a rainy and raw Lenten night, and Lady Grace was hurrying unaccompanied through the dark, wet streets of London, the hood of her cloak held tightly about her face. Even the footpads would be indoors tonight. Nonetheless, her ears were attuned to the slightest anomaly. Pausing at a street corner to let a lumbering wagon pass, she thought she heard a faint whimpering. There it was again, scarcely audible, but distinct from the souging of the wind and the creaking of harnesses and shutter-bolts. It seemed to be coming from a narrow lane not far off. Crossing her fingers, she crept up to the lane's entrance and peered round the corner.

A single candle stood in a low window, shedding just enough light into the lane that she could make out the figure of a tiny, palpitating bundle of rags lying against the wall. Approaching it and kneeling, she saw that it was a young child, not more than five or six years old. Shivering violently, feverish, lips turning blue, it could well have been in its death throes.

A homeless urchin dying in the street was no novelty to London eyes. She knew she ought to pass on and turn her mind to other things. The scene would recur, should she want to relive it. But some whim, some – obstinacy – held her; a wave had swept over her, an irresistible urge to catch the child up, and feed it, and heal it, and cosset it, and redeem it.

What was it that recommended this child above all the other homeless, dying urchins? The answer was self-evident: Beauty. Dirt and grime notwithstanding, the child was angelic. Lady Grace was reminded of a tiny, delicate young princess she had once seen in the train of a German prince, a perfect cherub.

When she took the child into her arms, however, it began to struggle in its delirium. Ignoring the wounds it inflicted on her, she began cooing, as she'd sometimes seen wet-nurses do. These melodious, feminine sounds seemed to pacify it. She wrapped her cloak more closely around it, and, by the time she reached the townhouse, the child had stopped shivering, and was fast asleep.

It was her father's townhouse. But her father, the earl, was old. He never came up to town anymore. He had married and procreated late in life. Lady Grace was the only surviving result. When, in childbirth, his young wife had died, followed presently thereafter by his second child, a son, the earl had retired to his seat in Burnham, there to tend his garden, and to adjudicate petty country disputes, and to surreptitiously flirt with the Puritanism he had no intention of ever embracing.

Lady Grace, though young, had been in London for some years now, trying to make her way amongst the toils and chimeras of court. It had been long since she remembered what for, other than that it was what was done. To marry, she supposed, had been the plan. But the courtly suitors who pursued her were idiots. They bored her unconscionably, as court itself had begun to do. Courtly talk was so empty, so unnatural: insincere flattery of the basest sort cheek by jowl with merciless back-biting, which the venom and which the antidote it was pointless to discern. Nothing mattered but favor, who was in, who out. The question had been moot to her for a long time.

Luckily, her father's neglect was her godsend. He held precisely no aspirations for her whatsoever. She could marry, she could remain a spinster, she could join a nunnery, it was all the same to him. The townhouse was hers to make use of, or not, it was all the same to him. The duenna he hired for her kept marvelously to herself, and yet counterfeited enough custodial facade so that, in effect, Lady Grace enjoyed the freedom of the city, given, of course, a healthy circumspection.

When she arrived at the townhouse, Lady Grace issued strict instructions. Clap to all the shutters. Close all the curtains. She was not receiving. She was not at home until she gave word otherwise.

She carried the child upstairs, to her own chambers on the first floor, and set about saving its life if she could. Peeling the filthy rags from its body before a roaring fire, she learned that it was a boy, although a boy so fair as to arouse a girl's envy – or her love. Ensnaring him in her own bed, she spent the ensuing long days soothing his brow and inducing him to eat, and then spoon-feeding him, and then looking on with satisfaction as his appetite came back and he devoured everything she put in front of him. She could not, however, induce him to speak. He was the most timid, fearful being she had ever seen. He jumped at the movement of her hand as she made to brush back his forelock. A noise on the stairs sent him into a panic. Clearly, he was not deaf. Had she brought home a changeling, raised by wolves, or bears, or elves? Surely such beauty never housed an imbecile's mind.

She found that he responded best to gentleness. Contrary to her preconceptions about boys, far from engaging him, horseplay frightened him. No, only the sweetest, daintiest ministrations, like those a new mother lavished on a first-born, brought a smile to his face and a light into his eyes. An only child, brought up by undemonstrative governesses prone to the strict pietism so rife Burnham-side, Lady Grace had never been exposed to the pleasures of child-rearing. The boy's need for pampering evoked in her a profound and overwhelming outpouring of emotion that surprised her with its ferocity. If only he would speak.

On Good Friday morning, Lady Grace slipped into the chamber with their breakfast. Fresh cross buns that her cook had made especially for the holydays sat on the tray beside more usual fare. The boy by this time had recovered wonderfully. Hale, rosy cheeks rose and fell with the regular respiration of untroubled sleep. She looked forward to the moment when the smell awoke him and he tore into the repast like a famished kestrel. But she could not hurry him. She had to wait patiently for his eyes to open and adjust to the strangeness of a tribulation-free world, before she could make her presence known.

In due time, his little nose sniffed, his little arms stretched, his little eyes opened, blinked twice, and straightaway sought out the source of the delicious scent.

To her delighted surprise, as soon as he caught sight of the cross buns, the boy broke into the cross buns rhyme! Here was the key to his heart – song! She swept him up in her arms and danced him around the room, joining in with a full heart and a relieved mind.

All the morning, all the afternoon, and into the night, they sang. Lady Grace had always loved nursery rhymes; one of the few joys of her straitened childhood had been learning and singing them. Each rhyme she dredged up from the distant past brought happy recollections with it. But the boy was astonishing. His little head held a treasure-trove of rhymes, saws, entire ballads.

With the disinterment of old recollections came a memory of what she had imagined life in the capital would be like before she had ever set foot in London. Fed on nothing but fairy tales and courtly romances, her dreams had been laughably fantastic. High adventure alternated with deathless love; chivalry received its due, as did dastardliness; monsters and pixies and witches and wizards haunted the streets; and splendid pageants were held daily. Romances being as they were over-larded with the hitherings and thitherings of heroes, while heroines sat, spinning, somewhere offstage, she was often forced to imagine herself into the hero's role. In other words, sometimes she was the damsel, but sometimes she was St. George – once even the dragon. What did it matter? Imagination was free: blessedly, as knights in shining armor were few and far between in latter-day London-town.

One night, however, after the holydays, as spring thunders shook the walls, and she sat embroidering fairy tales to her taste, in her darkened chamber before a roaring fire, with the boy peacefully sucking his thumb in her lap, her hulking manservant came to the door with a message. The man was a giant: one hand could compass a man's skull; he had to stoop to pass under the lintel. She had found him useful in various capacities, and he was harmless as a fly. But the giant struck abject terror into the boy. Hearing the sudden deep voice and seeing the looming shadow at the door, the boy was thrown into a frenzy of fear. Leaping from Lady Grace's lap, he ran to huddle in a corner, shivering much as he had when first she had chanced upon him.

And so it was: just as she had first chanced upon him. The sight of the huge man had thrown the boy into a kind of a trance. He was mute again, terrified again.

"Whatever did they do to thee?" wondered Lady Grace.

It took another week to bring the boy back again to his happy, receptive state. Lady Grace banished the giant manservant from the house, but took pains that the boy became accustomed to the other servants, man and woman.

When this was accomplished, she turned her thoughts to the future. What, she wondered, was she going to do with the child? She could not keep him. How would it look, she, the Earl of Burnham's daughter, rearing a ragamuffin from out of the gutters? For a moment, she seriously entertained the alternative of never leaving the townhouse again. The thought was not an unattractive one, the boy having so miraculously satisfied her deepest yearnings. But she was not quite ready to become a confirmed anchorite. She still enjoyed the society of her fellow human beings of occasion. Moreover, sequestering would certainly do the boy no good. He needed the opposite; to dive into the stream of humanity and learn to swim with the best of them. After some thought, she resolved upon a more pragmatic plan. There was a schoolmaster back in Burnham – a

man who had once tutored her, in fact, and given her what little wit she possessed. He plied the birch-rod with the utmost severity. But he was fair. And he would be forever indebted to Lady Grace for sending him such a scholar. She would send this brilliant boy to be reared in a schoolhouse. Where better? She would provide a stipend for the boy's keep, of course, but he would never be told the source. He would be led to believe that he was an orphan who had been bequeathed a small competency, and that was all. Providence must be trusted to do the rest.

Thus, she sent for the schoolmaster's wife, a warm, hospitable, matronly woman. Satisfied that the boy took to her with little urging, Lady Grace released him into the woman's keeping, with many admonishments concerning the child's care and tutelage.

It was truly marvelous how one could run through fifteen years in the wink of an eye, like a pipe of wine with the bung left unstopped, and with never a thing to show for it. To be sure, all those years in London had not been a complete waste. She had learned the ins and outs of court life, the proper answers to all questions, the proper questions to all answers, the proper ways to act and dress and behave, all the fashionable cynicisms, all the fashionable self-delusions. And she had learned a method of conversing so politic, so non-descript, so immoderately judicious that she could speak for hours on end and reveal no more thought or character or emotion than a blank wall.

When her father finally died in his eighty-ninth year, she felt a mixture of sadness and relief. Her father had been a good man, unprepossessing perhaps, but a stranger to malice and spite, and she would miss him, seldom as she had seen him in recent years. Ever since the death of her mother, however, though she had died ever-so-long ago, her father had not been at peace with the world. And so perhaps it was for the best. They were together now, as was meet and right – leaving Lady Grace – by the grace of God, by the hand of fate, or by less benign dispensations, who was to say? – essentially free. The never-ending lesson in judiciousness was at an end.

She had been her father's sole heir, as far as anyone could tell, and she had not lived in London for twenty-odd years not to know lawyers sharp enough to beat off reversioners and remaindermen before they could so much as become a nuisance. The unencumbered estate – chattels, messuage, appurtenances – was hers to dispose of as she pleased. London having long since lost its charm, Lady Grace decided that it was high time she tried the rustic life.

She looked forward to lording it over her little faraway corner of the world. She could see herself, like a miniature version of the Queen, dealing out a little magnanimity here, a little justice there. It would be like having a great, boisterous, motley family. Most of all, she looked forward to seeing her young ward.

\* \* \*

Oh, me. Under the spell of Lady Grace's reverie, all the claims of the world had gone by the wayside. The cabal of squires by her side could have been plotting war for all she knew. The wine she had drunk, however, would not be gainsaid.

When she returned, she saw with pleasure that Thomas and his friend had moved a little closer, and were taking refreshment at the foot of the long table. She saw with less pleasure His Honour the Mayor of Burnham bringing yet another guest for her to meet.

This is a strange hippogriff, she thought, half bear, half peacock.

The Mayor was one of those singular persons who could speak interminably without saying anything, but to whom one always had best attend with half an ear, for he never failed, at the most unexpected moment, to abruptly halt his maunderings and ask a pointed question, the kind of question one simply had to answer or look the arrant fool.

So this was Westfall who stood before her. Her steward's creature. She wondered idly how much the old slyboots had extorted from the man. All the traffic would allow, she reckoned. Giving herself over to her years of inculcation, the right words marched out of her mouth in lockstep order.

"Gramercies, kind Sir. In thinking on my sorely missed father, you do me honour. Much as I do deeply regret my father's passing, perforce I am constrained to resign myself to the fact, and trust in God's mercy."

"I am in your debt, Sir, for these kindly representations. With all my heart, I affirm and commend your sentiments. Indeed, mutual assistance is the very axletree round which the heavens gyre."

"You do me honour."

"You do me honour."

All the while she was answering Sir John's ludicrous overtures, Lady Grace also overheard what Thomas was saying, for life at court had taught her how to attend to two conversations at once. Extraordinary, she thought. Exiled in the far provinces, he had nevertheless learned to sound just like the wits of court. The resemblance was uncanny: the wordplay, the contemptuousness, the icy control. But ridicule was a dangerous game. Surely a young man who had learned so well to master his words had learned enough to master his tongue. To know one's limits was the soul of courtly survival. Thankfully, the man was paying Thomas no heed whatsoever, and so she turned her attention again to the Mayor, who had begun, of all things, a lengthy rehearsal of the man's bloodlines, in an apparent effort to plumb precisely the level of consanguinity he shared with Lady Grace.

Lady Grace, ever solicitous of the least of her guests, found herself wracking her brains to answer the Mayor's questions about her relations. With his customary abruptness, "Such flowery adulation," he remarked. "Methinks I spy a preferment-hungry poet."

"A brave poet," said Lady Grace.

But the Mayor's questions redoubled, and various bystanders added their contributions, and, since Thomas seemed to be holding his own, Lady Grace let the Mayor's silliness have her full attention.

Suddenly she saw William Philpott. And William Philpott was no longer by his friend's side.

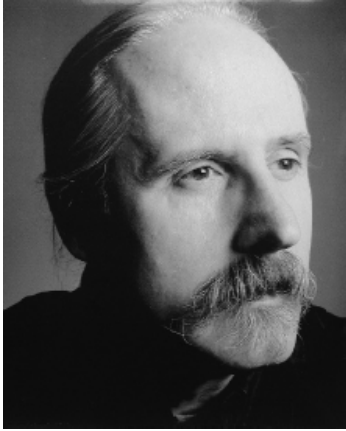
At the words, "We are undone," she was at court again. All was not well again. The sun did not shine again. The sky was not blue again. Hurrying to the head of the crowd, she saw that it had already gone too far. She knew these murderous cavaliers from court. All sweetness and silk and pretty phrases until their dander was up, whereupon they would wade so deep in blood, savages recoiled. Thomas, the bear-baiter, was become the baited. She knew the future. She had seen it too many times. She folded her hands, and began to prepare herself.

Indeed, thought Lady Grace, it is true, thou hast had me, Thomas, and well. I was thy play-fellow, thy worshiper, thy mother, thy guardian angel. But thou hast got thyself beyond my power to save thee. Eftsoons, I shall be thy gravedigger, and once more watch over thee in thy sleep.

Her heart leaped at a last forlorn hope. Would the man ask her leave? No. Of course not.

The duel was a farce. Were it anonymous clowns cutting capers round the table, she might have laughed. Would that it were. But it was not. There was only one recourse, in such a pass. She must harden her heart. She was at court again. She must harden, harden her heart.

And so, when finally the man said, "I'll have you now, Milady," "Yes, Milord," she promptly responded, with a smile she had once seen the Queen give in acceding to one of her soon-to-be-former ministers. Laying herself out on a platter, hitching up her underclothes, and spreading her legs like the outstretched wings of a swan, "Be my guest," she thought, as she gave her ravisher the pox she had caught from the same charwoman as Thomas Smith.



### Theodore Irvin Silar

Born in York, Pennsylvania on the same day as the first American Bandstand. Chaucerian, lexicographer, teacher, musician. Studied jazz piano under Wilbert Baranco of Wilbert Baranco and his Rhythm Bombardiers. Favorite bar: The Museum, Farnham, Dorset. Favorite restaurant: Osteria La Chiacchera, Siena, Italy. Publishing highlights: *Notes and Queries*, *Philological Quarterly*, *Candelabrum*, *The Journal*, *Kimera Online*, *Blue Collar Review*.

His e-book of short stories, *Five Moral Tales*, is available at: <http://cantara.squarespace.com/five-moral-tales/>



Guest Editor **Ruth Downie's** degree in English Literature left her so intimidated that she only took up writing fiction many years later as an antidote to studying double-entry bookkeeping. Since then her work has won several competitions, including the Fay Weldon section of BBC3's 'End of Story,' and sunk without trace in others. The chapters which won her the Historical Novel Society's first writing competition have since been adapted into a novel, 'Medicus and the Disappearing Dancing Girls', which was published by Michael Joseph in August 2006. She is currently working on a sequel.

This is what Ruth Downie had to say about "Lady Grace's Revels."

Judging this competition was both a delight and a trial. A delight because each of the finalists convincingly transported me to new – or rather, old – times and places, and a trial because each entry had something different to commend it. In

the end I settled on "Lady Grace's Revels" as the overall winner. One of Lady Grace's guests describes the play he is writing as, "a thing completely new, a thing never seen before, at once comedy, tragedy, history, romance," and this captures the tongue-in-cheek approach of the story.

The "period" language in which the disastrous events are narrated is extravagant and frequently very funny. The approach of relating the tale from three viewpoints, with each character adding something new, works very well and of all the entries, this was the most memorable. Congratulations to Theodore Silar for producing an entertaining winner.