



Don't miss the story of Blake Montague,
the dark, dangerous duelist with a warrior's heart.

He'll be starring in

The Devilish Montague

the next book in the Rebellious Sons series,

by Patricia Rice

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Standing in a field outside a duke's mansion, in a drenching pre-dawn downpour, surrounded by a crowd of equally drunken young men, Blake Montague decided that getting shot by a drunken imbecile over a rude parrot possessed potent symbolism, if only he could fathom what it might be.

Perhaps he should not have partaken of that last glass of brandy while attempting to ignore a vivacious Venus—damn the woman and her haunting eyes.

Blake examined the assortment of weapons being offered to him. For whatever reason, the perfumes of the ladies had disturbed him since his prior encounter with Miss Carrington. He hadn't the looks or the bluntness to be a ladies' man, so he needed another outlet for his many frustrations. Shooting anything would help.

Hair unfashionably tied at the nape, whiskers in need of scraping, and torso stripped to shirtsleeves, embroidered vest, and loosened neckcloth, Blake was aware that he looked the part of disreputable highwayman. Perhaps if he accidentally killed Bernie, he'd take up thievery for a living.

"He's a most notable coward," he pronounced, the words tripping effortlessly off his well-oiled tongue while he held up a pistol and checked the length of the barrel. "An infinite and endless liar, an hourly promise breaker, the owner of not one good quality."

Oblivious of his terrified opponent huddled with friends further down the hedgerow, Blake pointed an ornate Manton at the moon. "I desire that we be better strangers."

"Damnation, he's quoting Shakespeare," Nicholas Atherton said to the man acting for Blake's opponent in settling the rules of this meeting. Staying dry beneath the spreading branches of an oak, he did not seem overly anxious about Blake's impending confrontation with

death. “We could all drown out here before he’s done.”

Blake would miss his callous friends if he took up thievery. He wouldn’t, however, miss Miss Carrington’s infectious laugh. Or that riveting cleavage she’d flaunted this evening. Ladies be damned.

Bernie’s second sounded more concerned than Nick did. “We’re supposed to resolve this dispute, not let them further insult each other.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Bernard Ogilvie, the Duke of Fortham’s nephew, protested, as he had done ever since the drunken party had whooped its way from the mansion to this distant pasture.

Ogilvie ignored the proffered box of weapons while he affixed the duke’s molting parrot on a perch he’d planted in the ground.

The wet creature flapped its wings and squawked a bored protest. “Acck! Stick it up her bum! Roger her, boyo!”

The very words that had set Blake off this evening.

“You stated the rules, Bernie—you said I might shoot the bird over your dead body,” Blake reminded him, aiming the still empty pistol in his host’s direction.

“The beast don’t mean nothing by it!” Bernie burped prodigiously and didn’t look as if he knew which end of the pistol to take when the box was offered again.

“‘Methinks thou are a general offence, and every man should beat thee,’” Blake quoted, filling his weapon with powder.

Shoulders propped against the oak, Nick sighed in exasperation. “You’re not on the battlefield anymore, old friend. Let the poor boy toddle to bed and sleep it off. You may not mind fleeing the law for a stint on the Continent, but it’s a damned poor way to treat your host.”

“It is my duty to defend the delicate sensibilities of the ladies. How can I marry a rich one, and return to the battlefield, if I allow them to be insulted?” Blake said calmly.

Bernie’s second lifted a questioning eyebrow.

“Blake needs a dowry to buy colors. He thinks he can run the war better than the current crop of hen-hearted rattle-pates,” Nick explained

“You’re serious?” the other man asked in disbelief.

Nick shrugged. “He possesses the intellect to run the country but hasn’t a ha’penny to his name. What do you think?”

“War heroes get titles,” Bernie’s second nodded in understanding.

“Acck, tup her good, me lad!”

Ignoring Nick’s idea of repartee, Blake aimed the loaded pistol at the half-featherless creature, which was barely discernible against the backdrop of yew. “Scurvy, old, filthy, scurry lord.” He fired a test shot in the general direction of the bird and hedge. A flurry and scuttle of night creatures shook the evergreen branches, and the parrot squawked incomprehensible curses.

“Not the bird, Montague!” Bernie cried, in more fear of the parrot’s life than his own.

“His Grace will disown me! Someone move Percy behind the hedge.”

One of Bernie’s companions obligingly pulled up the perch and moved the scurvy lord out of sight, if not out of hearing. Obscenities and squawks screeched against the silent dawn, raising songbirds into protest.

“The ladies are already packed and prepared to leave,” Nick called from his position beneath the oak, making no effort to verify the safety or accuracy of the next pistol Blake hefted.

“Shooting Bernie won’t do you any good now.”

“Twill satisfy my soul.” Blake again sighted along the length of a barrel, in the direction

of the hedge where the bird resided.

The shrubbery rustled as if retreating from his aim.

“Shakespeare?” Bernie’s second asked.

“Montague,” Nick concluded. “Although one never can be quite certain. His brainpan is stuffed with an encyclopedia’s worth of knowledge.”

As the two combatants finally primed and loaded their chosen weapons, Bernie’s second said dolefully, “Books don’t stop bullets.”

Since Blake still limped badly from a mending bullet wound, he didn’t think that observation deserved a reply.

Eager to escape the chilly September rain, one of the onlookers herded the duelists into position, back to back, and gave the signal for them to begin pacing off their distance. The tension of the final count dispersed at a demonical shriek from the hedge. “Ackkkk, kidnapper, murderer, help, helllppppp!”

Ignoring the cries, Blake swiveled steadily at the count of ten and aimed his pistol. But Bernie was no longer in position.

Instead, coat tails flapping, the duke’s nephew was racing for the shrubbery. “She’s stealing Percy!” he shouted.

Sure enough, a dark, cloaked shadow could be seen darting through the deluge away from them, up the hill, and into a grove of trees.

In disgust, Blake fired at Bernie’s hat, sending the expensively inappropriate chapeau bouncing across the saturated grass with a hole through its middle. The rain had stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and a glimmer of dawn appeared on the horizon. His opponent’s balding pate glistened as he fought his way through tangled yew branches in hopes of reaching

his pet.

The bird screamed again from the field beyond the hedge.

Jumping up and down and pointing, Bernie shouted, “A thousand pounds to anyone who catches her. Devil take the damned witch!”

“I say, did he promise a thousand pounds for that paltry poultry?” Blake asked, reloading the smoking pistol.

“He did, old boy, he did.” Nick pushed himself away from the oak trunk. “But everyone knows Ladybyrd took him. She’s been sniffing around Percy, complaining that he’s ill-treated. He’ll never see the creature again.”

Blake snorted. “For a thousand pounds, I’ll follow her to the Outer Hebrides.” Chasing Jocelyn Byrd Carrington, commonly known as Ladybyrd, anywhere was exactly what he needed. He could still smell the damn woman’s exotic scent. Her laughing violet eyes and her molten silver tears haunted his sleep. Shooting her would be good for the soul and would relieve the world of a silly, annoying widget.

“For all your education, you have ale for brains, professor,” said Nick. “With that game leg, you can barely walk. You’re supposed to be recuperating. Haring after a crackbrain will only get you killed sooner.”

“She’s carrying a damned squawking parrot. How far can she get?” Donning his coat, Blake tucked the pistol into his pocket, and trudged toward the hedge.

Blake had despised his enforced idleness. The last fumes of liquor evaporated with the exhilaration of action priming his blood. He didn’t know a woman alive who would travel without bags and boxes, and the lady in question had only recently acquired loads of both. If she was fleeing with the parrot, she wouldn’t part easily with them. *Voila*, she could be found with

the parrot.

A thousand pounds would buy his colors and free him from the need to marry for money. For the first time in recent memory, his spirits soared, and the thrill of the chase was on.

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“Methinks he thinks too much,” Jocelyn crooned to the parrot, stroking it beneath the dark cloth covering the warm, dry box she’d provided for the mistreated creature. The parrot batted its head against her soothing finger, then settled into sleep.

Shivering in her wet cloak, Jo tried not to think too hard about Blake Montague. Tonight, aiming a pistol in her direction, he had looked the part of a dangerous rogue.

She tucked the bird’s box among the rest of the baggage in the wagon. Hearing the crunching of gravel up the carriage drive, she glanced toward the ducal mansion nearly a quarter mile from the stable where she stood. She had hoped the combatants were all too drunk or involved in the duel to follow her, but she didn’t underestimate the provoking Blake Montague.

Montague was a lethal weapon. His cynical wit had a cutting edge she couldn’t hope to match. And for all his education, he didn’t seem to like anyone very much. She’d seen scorn in his eyes each time he looked at her. Men disliked rejection and she had rejected him.

With no hope of reaching the house before Montague caught up with her, she abandoned the wagon and slipped into the shadows of the stable. Nickers and whoofs and the pungent odor of manure permeated the early morning air as the animals stirred in anticipation of their breakfast.

She’d learned the value of stealth and diversion very early in life, while avoiding her half-brother Harold’s rages. Spreading her thick cloak, Jocelyn settled in a rear stall where a barn cat fed her newborns.

“I know you’re in here,” a husky baritone called from the entrance. “You have disappointed me. I had hoped to have to hunt you down.”

Jocelyn wanted to ask what he intended to do to her, shoot her? But she saw no reason to disturb the kittens.

She suffered a nervous chill at the thought of being alone with an enraged man, but for all his brooding gloom, Mr. Montague was widely reported to be an honorable gentleman. He might scald her with his acid scorn, but a gentleman would never lay a hand on a woman. Behind him, dawn was lightening the sky, silhouetting his square shoulders. She wished she didn’t admire his strength so much.

She’d stationed herself so she could see the length of the barn and knew when he approached. When his tall outline loomed close, she looked up so he could see her white face against the stall.

Good soldier that he was, he spotted her instantly. She could almost swear he growled as he limped forward. She held a finger to her lips to indicate quiet.

“Quit posturing and admit the bird is better off free,” she whispered.

“Free?”

If he’d worn a hat, she thought he might have stomped on it. He really was a dashing dangerous figure of a man—and regrettably not at all suitable for her purposes. But then, no man she’d met these last six months had a care for her purposes—only her money. Picking up a kitten, she returned Montague’s glare. “What else could be done with such a rude creature than set it free?”

“You did not let a tropical bird loose in chilly England. You may be nicked in the nob, but no one ever said you were stupid.”

She slanted her eyes thoughtfully. “Actually, Harold said it quite often. And my brothers-in-law had occasion to mention it once or twice. Lord Bernard certainly said it over these past days. I think I prefer *nicked in the nob*. What, precisely, does that mean?”

He ignored her effort to distract him. “The bird belongs to the duke. You cannot keep it. It’s theft. Just tell me where you’ve hidden it, and I’ll see it’s returned without question.” He crossed his arms over his soaked waistcoat and glowered.

Jocelyn beamed at him in return. “Nature cannot be owned, sir.”

He blinked as if he’d just realized she truly was dimwitted—the reaction she was most accustomed to receiving.

He recovered more quickly than most, unfortunately. He reached down, grabbed her arm, and hauled her to her feet, much to mama cat’s consternation. “That’s the most preposterous idiocy I’ve heard all week, and I’ve heard a lot. *Where is the bird?*”

“Really, sir, you’ll ruin the drape of my gown.” She probably ought to be afraid. Blake Montague was more raw male than she normally encountered. He didn’t stink of perfume or hair pomade but of male musk, perspiration, and damp wool. His hands on her weren’t the polite escort of a gentleman. She sensed he was passionately determined for reasons she could not perceive, but she couldn’t believe he would harm her over a bird.

“Would you like me to summon an audience?” he asked maliciously. “What will Lady Bell have to say to the scandal if we are discovered here alone at dawn?”

Jocelyn cocked her head thoughtfully. “Oh, something pithy and intelligent like *birds of a feather flock together*. Or *dross sinks to the lowest depths*.”

She thought she almost caught a quirk of humor in the curl of his lip, and a thrill of totally unjustified pride swept through her. She really ought to be concerned about her reputation, but he

was a baron's youngest son, and until recently, she had been no more than the impoverished daughter of a deceased viscount. Their families were Quality, but not of vast import to most of society.

But Lady Belden, Lady Bell as they called her, had been more than kind to her, and Jocelyn tried not to disappoint her hostess. She set the kitten down and left the stall so the mama cat might rest easy. "Wouldn't you rather explain your concern for a half-dead old bird than cause a scandal?" she asked.

"Personally, I'd wring the foul-mouthed featherbrain's miserable neck, but Bernie has placed a thousand-pound reward on its return."

"Surely you cannot still be set on buying colors!" Jocelyn declared in dismay. "You've already been grievously injured. It would be suicide to return to the battlefield."

Blake Montague bared his considerably white, strong teeth and hauled her past the stalls. "What I choose to do is no concern of yours. Now tell me which of these stalls contains the damned bird, or I shall open them all."

"Then I hope you enjoy chasing the duke's cattle," she agreed merrily.

Montague shot her a disgruntled look, studied her amused expression, and withdrew a pistol from his coat pocket. He aimed it carefully at the luggage cart clearly visible through the barn doors. "What if I proceed to shoot those boxes?"

Jocelyn shrieked, jerked his arm downward, and the delicate firing mechanism of the expensive firearm exploded.

In dismayed horror, Jocelyn covered her mouth to prevent crying out, as Montague lifted his boot to reveal a smoking hole through the toe.

