

THE CASE OF THE PURLOINED PAGES - SAMPLE

GRAVESYDE PRIORY MYSTERY, #5



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ONE



MINERVA AND PAUL: TUESDAY MORNING

JUNE 20, 1815

RAIN STOPPED BEATING AGAINST THE CARRIAGE ROOF AS THE horses halted under a dilapidated portico attached to the most horrendous Gothic monstrosity of a manor Minerva Peniston had the displeasure to encounter. *This* was Wycliffe Manor? Once the home of the wealthiest earl in the kingdom?

Charming. Well, monstrosities did not matter to her task here. Rain blurred the harsh gray stone of the walls around the cracked and aging wooden side door. A proper butler awaited, as if he'd been watching for them. Which he couldn't have been, because they hadn't told anyone they were arriving. The fewer who knew, the less prepared the thieving assassin would be.

Their footman swung down, and a lad ran out of the manor to help unload their trunks. Lady Catherine anxiously plumped her skirts, adjusted her bonnet, then tied her cloak. Minerva had learned to endure her companion's constant primping. Well, *she* was supposed to be the companion. Lady C was her camouflage.

"This is so exciting," the older woman whispered. "My

husband talked so much about the late Earl of Wycliffe. To actually see his library. . . Do you think they have luncheon? I am fair starved."

In her urge to investigate, Minerva refrained from shoving the lady out but tolerated her chatter until their footman set the stairs and assisted them down. Once the lady was inside the building, Minerva could look around. She wouldn't melt from a few leaking rain drops.

An urchin dashed under the portico, out of the rain, shaking a sodden cap and approaching the rather massive butler attending the luggage. "Mr. Upton says as he needs Mrs. Walker right away. Mrs. Brown is a'having her baby!"

Not her problem any longer, Minerva told herself, watching the servants carry in their trunks to be certain hers was properly unloaded.

"Mrs. Walker has gone to Birmingham," the butler intoned. "I will see if Mrs. Brown's mother is in the sewing room."

"Her ma is with her! She says somethin' is wrong." The lad looked anxious. "She's screamin' somethin' fierce."

A stout older woman in an apron emerged in the hall, presumably the housekeeper. She did not appear pleased at their arrival. "I don't have rooms prepared for ladies. We had no warning. You will have to wait in the parlor."

"We have an invitation." Minerva indicated her bag as if it might be in there. She didn't intend to identify herself by sharing it.

"Mrs. Upton," the lad cried over their dispute. "Mrs. Brown is a'havin' her baby!"

Minerva tried to maneuver around the housekeeper and this domestic crisis. She didn't like letting Lady Catherine too far out of sight. The lady would have them both thrown out on their ears if left to her own devices. Discreet was not in the garrulous woman's vocabulary.

Whereas Minerva's mission required being unobtrusive, a skill in which she excelled.

With trunks piling up, the carriage driver impatiently holding the restive horses, and the boy wailing, more people gathered in the dark, narrow hall to view the entertainment. Devil take the boy, calling attention to their entrance. She had not counted on this. She couldn't afford failure—her father's position rested on her success.

The housekeeper and butler frantically consulted. Minerva caught snippets about Mrs. Brown being all the help the curate had for his invalid grandfather and the unlucky mother being the main provider for a houseful of siblings.

At the same time, Lady C was escaping down the hall, happily oblivious to chaos, admiring the ugly paintings and peering in doorways. Really, Minerva should have found someone with more class. But Lady Catherine knew things Minerva didn't.

She hated choices like this. It only multiplied her chances of failure. But if the mother might die anyway. . . Resigned, Minerva hid her face in her cloak hood before speaking. "I have delivered babies. Perhaps I can help."

At least she wouldn't be here to blame if Lady C got flung out in the downpour on her pretty curls before the auction even began.



PAUL UPTON OFFERED PRAYERS OF RELIEF AS YOUNG GEORGIE raced into the gloomy cottage, dripping from cap and coat and shouting he'd brought help. The anguished cries in the back room were escalating, and despite the cool damp, Paul wiped sweat from his brow.

He was a bachelor. This was his first parish. He'd been educated at Oxford and practiced under the tutelage of experienced clergymen, in towns much larger than Gravesyde Priory. He could read Latin and quote scriptures. With the right connections, he could become a vicar someday.

He had never delivered a child.

"Meera," he cried in relief, standing up to greet the manor's apothecary. Carrying her own unborn child, Meera Walker did not regularly visit patients. She was more chemist than physician, but she possessed knowledge a common bonesetter or midwife did not.

The cloaked woman entering behind Georgie was not Meera.

She was Meera's petite size, but she hurried across the cottage with a purposeful stride that in no way resembled the little apothecary's swaying step. Of course, Paul had never seen the colorful physician wearing black from head to toe either. He might be wrong. . .

The newcomer did not acknowledge his presence but strode straight to the chamber from which the cries emanated.

Had an angel dropped from heaven to rescue the babe? Paul might believe in Eternal Paradise, but he was fairly certain angels did not regularly fall to ground in Gravesyde, not even dark ones. He could see nothing of her beyond the black hooded cloak, but she acted with such authority, he had to assume she knew what she was doing.

She closed the door on the back room, where his grandfather's housekeeper screamed in agony, and the patient's helpless mother wrung her hands. Paul touched the small testament in his pocket and said a prayer before confronting young Georgie, who appeared prepared to bolt. "This isn't Mrs. Walker. Where did you find her?"

"At the manor, sir. She said she delivered babies. Mrs. Walker been gone to the city."

Meera needed her own midwife. Perhaps she'd found this one?

The screaming had blessedly reduced to long moans and grunts. Paul desperately wanted to leave. He knew nothing of women's troubles, which was why he needed a wife and helpmeet to aid in his parish duties.

But aside from the fact that he could barely support himself, Gravesyde Priory was a wasteland of few inhabitants. The return of some of the late earl's family had brought in a few more people, not enough. He was grateful at his good fortune in finding Mrs. Brown to help with his invalid grandfather. Beyond her, there were very few young village ladies.

And as much as Paul admired the single ladies at the manor, they were not cut out to be an impoverished curate's wife.

Georgie ran off. Paul wished he could too. He was singularly useless for anything except flinging coal on the fire to keep water boiling.

Mrs. Brown's mother bustled from the back room to gather towels and blankets. She nodded at him. "You go on, parson. Thank ye for sending the lady. We'll be all right now."

Properly dismissed, he gathered his hat and cloak and didn't even ask the lady's name. He supposed he'd find out in due course. Perhaps she was a lady's maid.

That raised his hopes a little too much. A lady's maid might make a curate's wife.

TWO



CLARE: TUESDAY NOON

BITING HER BOTTOM LIP, DIPPING HER PEN IN THE INKWELL, CLARE Knightley neatly copied a fresh page. With Elsa and Jack's wedding over, she really ought to be anticipating her own, but they had to wait on her fiancé's mother to arrive from Philadelphia.

So instead of dreaming of her own delayed nuptials, she was hastily attempting to finish copying her novel so she might be paid. She had so many needs for the funds. . .

A polite scrape at the door interrupted. A maid bobbed a curtsy. "Carriages arriving, miss."

"Warn Mrs. Upton." Clare continued writing, afraid she'd lose her place. Not until she completed the line did the warning sink in. *Carriages?* More than one? The duke had said he'd simply send all the bibliophiles in his barouche.

Could it be *Mrs. Huntley*? Already? Wouldn't she have sent word from the port? Clare placed a hand over her pounding heart. She wasn't ready. . .

Her seven-year-old nephew skidded in before she could even start to conjure problems. "New map!" he cried, waving aging papers.

Young and a little too handsome, his tutor followed. He

made an apologetic bow. "Oliver worked the code on his own. I believe this letter is related to Captain Huntley's family since it mentions a ruby *across the water*."

Across the water—Hunt's family lived in America. Although—the earl had died before Hunt's mother married. "Oh, my. Let me see." Excitedly, Clare spread the papers on her desk.

Her great-grandfather, the late Earl of Wycliffe, had become eccentric in his last years. He'd left Wycliffe manor to *all* his relations. The Reid kith and kin were numerous, but they were predominantly female.

Oliver was an exception, descended through a female line, as was Captain Huntley—although Hunt was the result of an illicit liaison and not actually a blood relation. Hunt was doing his best to hand off the responsibility to the entire family. Unfortunately, most of them had estates of their own and little interest in what one had called a *ramshackle abode*.

The few heirs who had taken up residence in the manor had discovered that codes in the portraits of the earl's immediate family led to eccentric maps hidden in the library. They'd discovered three letters and two maps, and here was another? To Clare, the drawing looked like a square with niches and an X. It wasn't any clearer than the others.

"The letter is cryptic," the tutor reported. "A riddle, perhaps?"

They hadn't found the maps in any particular order. One of the letters had indicated there had been earlier ones that they had not found.

"*Rubies over the water, diamonds in squares within squares*? I do not understand. Perhaps it's a clue to the other maps?"

"Rooms are rectangles," Oliver offered. He did not talk often and seldom exhibited excitement, but he loved puzzles.

"None of the room proportions match the maps," Clare agreed, "but if we don't look for rooms, what do we search?"

She glanced up as their housekeeper appeared in the door-

way. Mrs. Upton was actually another cousin, but she'd spent her life in parsonages, and preferred domestic order, which the manor sadly lacked. Her housecleaning knowledge exceeded that of all the other inhabitants combined.

"The guests have arrived. We did not arrange for ladies," Mrs. Upton intoned.

"Lady bibliophiles? Surely they did not bring their wives!" The house was already full of wedding guests. Those who had arrived for Jack and Elsa's wedding, lingered for Hunt's and hers. Add in solicitors and bankers and the unexpected arrival of French relations. . . The manor hadn't seen this many people since medieval times, she suspected.

They'd prepared the small rooms in the visitors' hall for the bibliophiles that Baron de Sackville had invited for the library auction, but they were only suitable for male guests.

The baron was a noted booklover. Since his son, Jack, and new daughter-in-law, Lady Elsa, had chosen to live at the manor, he had offered to quietly auction off some of the Wycliffe library after their wedding. He had sent out invitations to a few hand-picked collectors, and Clare had added the auction to invitations to both weddings. The letters had gone out before they'd learned Hunt's mother was preparing to sail from Philadelphia. So now, their wedding had been postponed, but the auction must go on.

They needed the funds too badly to delay.

"There are rooms on the west side of the gallery hall, but the only one with windows is in disrepair," Mrs. Upton said. "We have a few almost furnished in the east wing, but those newer suites are finer than the one Lady Lavinia and Lady Spalding currently occupy."

That would raise a fuss should the old ladies find out. "Oh, fiddlesticks. Where is Hunt? He should be greeting these guests while we figure this out." Taking off her spectacles, Clare handed the papers back to Oliver. Lost jewels had to wait. "Make neat copies, please."

Her nephew might not possess social skills, but he was quite obsessive about measuring and numbers. Mr. Birdwhistle would turn it into a learning project for Oliver and his other student, Davy. The two hurried off with their treasure.

At mention of Hunt, Mrs. Upton looked as if she'd swallowed a lemon. "The captain is repairing the plumbing. The last I saw, he'd dismantled the upstairs sink," she admitted in a voice of dread.

"The *plumbing*? With an entire houseful of guests?" Horrified, Clare abandoned her writing. Her silly notion that retiring to the country with servants would give her plentiful time to write novels had vanished quite some weeks ago.

"I have steered the lady into the parlor and ordered the luncheon buffet opened. I will check the chambers on the west end of the visitors' hall to see if any can be made suitable. Luncheon should satisfy the arrivals while you speak with the captain." Mrs. Upton bustled off, content that Clare would take her betrothed in hand—which most likely had been her intent from the first.

Capping her inkwell, Clare gathered up her skirt and—hearing guests in the front—rushed in the opposite direction, for the service stairs in the back hall. They were closest to the sink in question anyway.

The original medieval—*Elizabethan*, she corrected—manor had been haphazardly updated over the centuries. When the two new wings had been built at the rear, they'd added a kitchen in the cellar in the east one, near the stable. Cisterns on the roof now piped water to the kitchen and the family floor so staff needn't carry water through the entire house. There was even a small tub, except it leaked. Hunt should be looking at that, not the sink!

Despite her ire, once she reached the next floor, she halted in the washroom doorway at the sight of her large fiancé sprawled beneath the sink, wrenching at pipes. For a change, he'd remembered to remove his coat and waistcoat and worked in

rolled-up shirtsleeves, with the shirt tailed tucked into tight trousers. She gulped. Seeing his bare, muscled arms for the first time nearly caused an attack of vapors. But a bird's eye view of his breeches placket. . . caused bridal palpitations. She grabbed the door frame and diverted her eyes.

"Whatever are you doing?" she asked crossly, to cover her agitation. "We have guests arriving. They will be expecting water in which to wash off their road dirt, and we simply do not have enough maids to carry pails! You need to be down there—"

He slid out, sitting up, narrowly missing whacking his head on the edge of the metal sink. Glowering, he hit the pump handle unnecessarily vigorously. Water splashed. "Men are not like women."

That stopped her incipient tirade. "I cannot argue that."

"We cannot sit idle." Hunt was a large, broad-shouldered man with a square jaw and a scar running down the side of his blinded eye. The glare from his good eye was fierce. "If I do not keep busy—" He hesitated, then finished bluntly. "I have been without. . . a woman. . . since well before my injuries. Right now, all my thoughts turn to copulating. This wedding delay is worse than I anticipated. I thought you'd prefer that I repair plumbing to chasing you around your desk."

Clare was fairly certain her mouth hung open. How did she cope with that image while the house filled with guests? She couldn't. "Next time, give me a choice. I cannot leave Quincy and Mrs. Upton to handle the visitors alone. Dress quickly." She picked up her skirt and fled.

Copulating! She should not even know the word, but she was a writer and a reader. Her cheeks flamed shamelessly.

Male voices echoed up the marble stairs as she stopped in her chamber to change into one of her refurbished afternoon gowns. How did she face them believing all men thought of—she flushed too hard to even finish the thought.

She hoped marriage would relieve her of this missishness.

After borrowing Elsa's maid to help her change, Clare stopped in the late viscountess's salon to inform the aunts of the new arrivals.

In her seventies, wearing her gray hair in the towering pompadour of her youth, Great-Aunt Lavinia, glanced up from her needlepoint. "Has Mrs. Huntley arrived?"

"No, we are hoping she will let us know when she reaches port so Hunt might fetch her. These are Lord de Sackville's guests."

The lady returned to her needlework. "We do not have to dine with the upstarts, do we?"

Hunt's aunt, Lady Spalding, examined her knitting. "They will only be one or two nights, correct? I believe we can avoid them."

"Bibliophiles are seldom interesting, dear," Lady Lavinia explained. "Auction off Wycliffe's books, if you must. Use the funds to buy pretty things for your trousseau, but let us be."

That was not at all what the book auction was intended to do. Wondering about the state of the ladies' finances if they could not contribute to the household's needs, but thought only of frivolous uses, Clare took her time descending the stairs, trying to determine who was where.

Hearing nothing from the breakfast room where luncheon would be laid out, she peeked in to look for stragglers. While she'd changed clothes, the buffet had been stripped and the room was now empty. Picking up one of Elsa's delicious rolls for fortification, she lingered, hoping Hunt might join her before she had to confront the baron's guests. She watched the corridor from the doorway, but instead of seeing Hunt, she noted a squat fellow in garish green and gold waistcoat and brownish tailed coat attempting the lever of the library door across the hall. He didn't have the grace to look guilty when she stepped out where he could see her.

"No one is to see the books until the bidders are all present. If you are in search of a washroom, you need only ask one of the

staff. Come along." She swept past him and toward the great room, where she assumed Quincy had directed their guests after the meal.

"It shouldn't hurt to see what we are on bidding on," the man said, affably enough, following her. "We are all booklovers."

"I am sure. Please join your fellows." She waited to be certain he did not stray. She was blond, fine-boned, not tall, and easily disregarded. Of necessity, she'd learned to be abrupt to be heeded. For all she knew, she bossed around a duke. She didn't know Lord de Sackville's guests.

Inside the two-story, oak-paneled great hall with its pointed, Gothic, mullioned windows, threadbare carpets, gilded chairs, and massive Jacobean tables, the arguing gentlemen did not glance up at her arrival. Or even stand. They no doubt thought her a maid.

Before she could disabuse them of this notion, two women rushed in. The older, plumper one cried merrily, "Miss Clarissa, how providential to find a familiar face!"

Chatty Cathy. Clare bit back a groan.

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