

[PDF] The Heart Of Christmas: A Handful Of Gold\The Season For Suitors\This Wicked Gift

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Description:

About the Author USA Today bestselling author Nicola Cornick has written over thirty historical romances for Harlequin and HQN Books. She has been nominated twice for a RWA RITA Award and twice for the UK RNA Award. She works as a historian and guide in a seventeenth century house. In 2006 she was awarded a Masters degree with distinction from Ruskin College, Oxford, where she wrote her dissertation on heroes.

Courtney Milan lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, an exuberant dog, and an attack

cat. Before she started writing historical romance, Courtney experimented with various occupations, none of which stuck. Now, when she's not reading (lots), writing (lots), or sleeping (not enough), she can be found in the vicinity of a classroom.

You can learn more about Courtney at <http://www.courtneymilan.com>.

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The gentleman sprawled before the dying fire in the sitting room of his London lodgings was looking somewhat the worse for a night's wear. His gray knee breeches and white stockings were of the finest silk, but the latter were wrinkled and he had long before kicked off his shoes. His long-tailed evening coat, which had molded his frame like a second skin when he had donned it earlier in the evening, had now been discarded and tossed carelessly onto another chair.

His finely embroidered waistcoat was unbuttoned. His neck cloth, on the arrangement of which his valet had spent longer than half an hour of loving artistry, had been pulled open and hung unsymmetrically against his left shoulder. His dark hair, expertly cut to look fashionably disheveled, now looked unfashionably untidy from having had his fingers pass through it one too many times. His eyes were half-closed—and somewhat bloodshot. An empty glass dangled from one hand over the arm of the chair.

Julian Dare, Viscount Folingsby, was indisputably foxed.

He was also scowling. Drinking to excess was not among his usual vices. Gaming was. So was womanizing. And so was reckless living. But not drinking. He had always been careful to exclude from habit anything that might prove to also be addictive. He had every intention of one day "settling down," as his father phrased it, of being done with his "wild oats," another of the Earl of Grantham's clichés. It would be just too inconvenient to have to deal with an addiction when the time came. Gambling was not an addiction with him. Neither were women. Though he was exceedingly fond of both.

He yawned and wondered what time it was. Daylight had not yet dawned, a small comfort when this was December and daylight did not deign to show itself until well on into the morning. Certainly it was well past midnight. *Well* past. He had left his sister's soiree before midnight, but since then he had been to White's club and to one or two—was it one or two?—card parties at which the play had been deep and the drinking deeper.

He should get himself up from his chair and go to bed, but he did not have the energy. He should ring for his valet, then, and have the man drag him off to bed. But he did not have even the energy to get up and ring the bell. Doubtless he would not sleep anyway. He knew from experience that when he was three sheets to the wind, an approximately vertical position was preferable to a horizontal one.

Why the devil had he drunk so deep?

But drunkenness had not brought oblivion. He remembered very well why. That heiress. Miss Plunkett. No, *Lady* Sarah Plunkett. What a name! And unfortunately the chit had the face and disposition to match it. She was going to be at Conway for Christmas with her mama and papa. Emma, his youngest sister, had mentioned the fact in the letter that had reached him this morning—no, yesterday morning. He had put two and two together without further ado and had come up with the inevitable total of four. But he had not needed to use any arithmetical or deductive skills.

His father's letter, which he had read next, had been far more explicit. Not only were the Plunkett chit and the Plunkett parents to join their family gathering for Christmas, but also Julian would oblige his father by paying court to the girl and fixing his interest with her. He was nine-and-twenty years old, after all, and had shown no sign of choosing anyone for himself. His father had been extremely patient with him. But it was high time he finished with his wild oats and settled down. As the only son among five sisters, three of them still unmarried and therefore still unsettled, it was his duty....

Viscount Folingsby passed the fingers of his free hand through his hair again, unconsciously restoring it almost to simple dishevelment, and eyed the brandy decanter a short distance away. An impossible distance away.

He was not going to do it—marry the girl, that was.

It was as simple as that. No one could make him, not even his stern but annoyingly affectionate father. Not even his fond mama and doting sisters. He grimaced. Why had he been blessed with a singularly close and loving family? And why had his mother produced nothing but daughters after the initial triumph of his birth as heir to an earldom and vast properties and fortune—almost every last half penny of which was entailed and would pass to a rather distant cousin if he failed to produce at least one heir of his own?

His lordship eyed the brandy decanter again with some determination, but he could not somehow force resolution downward far enough to set his legs in motion.

There had been another letter in the morning's post. From Bertie. Bertrand Hollander had been his close friend and coconspirator all through school and university. They were still close even though Bertie spent most of his time now overseeing his estates in the north of England. But Bertie had a hunting box in Norfolk-shire and a mistress in Yorkshire and intended to introduce the two to each other over Christmas. He was avoiding his own family with the excuse that he was going to go shooting with friends over the holiday. He intended instead to spend a week with his Debbie away from prying eyes and the need for propriety. He wanted Julian to join him there with his own mistress.

Julian did not currently have a resident mistress. He had dismissed the last one several months before on the grounds that evenings spent in her company had become even more predictable and every bit as tedious as evenings spent at the insipid weekly balls at Almack's. Since then he had had a mutually satisfactory arrangement with a widow of his acquaintance. But she was a respectable woman of good ton, hardly the sort he might invite to spend a cozy week of sin in Nor-folkshire with Bertie and his Debbie.

Damn! He was more foxed than he knew, Julian thought suddenly. He had gone somewhere tonight even before attending Elinor's soirée. He had gone to the opera. Not that he was particularly fond of music—not opera at least. He had gone to see the subject of the newest male gossip at White's. There was a new dancer of considerable charms, so it was said. But in the few weeks since she had made her first onstage appearance, she had not also made her first appearance in any of the beds of those who had attempted to entice her there. She was either waiting for the highest bidder or she was waiting for someone she fancied or she was a virtuous woman.

Julian, his father's summons and Bertie's invitation fresh in his mind, had gone to the opera to see what the fuss was all about.

The fuss was all about long, shapely legs, a slender, lithe body and long titian hair. Not red, nothing so vulgar. Titian. And emerald eyes. Not that he had been able to see their color from the box he had occupied during the performance. But he had seen it through his quizzing glass as he had stood in the doorway of the greenroom afterward.

Miss Blanche Heyward had been surrounded by a court of appropriately languishing admirers. His lordship had looked her over unhurriedly through his glass and inclined his head to her when her eyes had met his across the room. And then he had joined the even larger crowd of gentlemen gathered about Hannah Dove, the singer who sang like her name, or so one of her court had assured her. For which piece of gross flattery he had been rewarded with a gracious smile and a hand to kiss.

Julian had left the greenroom after a few minutes and taken himself off to his married sister's drawing room.

It might be interesting to try his own hand at assaulting the citadel of dubious virtue that was Blanche Heyward. It might be even more interesting to carry her off to Bertie's for Christmas and a weeklong hot affair. If he went to Conway, all he would have was the usual crowded, noisy, enjoyable Christmas, and the Plunkett chit. If he went to Norfolkshire...

Well, the mind boggled.

What he *could* do, he decided, was make her decision his, too. He would ask her. If she said yes, then he would go to Norfolkshire. For a final fling. As a swan song to freedom and wild oats and all the rest of it. In the spring, when the season brought the fashionable world to town, the Plunkett girl among them, he would do his duty. He would have her big with child by *next* Christmas. The very thought had him holding his aching head with the hand that had been holding his glass a minute before. What the devil had he done with it? Dropped it? Had there been any brandy left in it? Couldn't have been or he would have drunk it instead of sitting here conspiring how he might reach the decanter, on legs that refused to obey his brain.

If she said no—Blanche, that was, not the heiress— then he would go down to Conway and embrace his fate. That way he would probably have a child *in the nursery* by next Christmas.

Julian lowered his hand from his head to his throat with the intention of loosening his neck cloth. But someone had already done it for him.

Dammit, but she was gorgeous. Not the heiress. Who the devil was gorgeous, then? Someone he had met at Elinor's?

There was a quiet scratching at the sitting room door, and it opened to reveal the cautious, respectful face of his lordship's valet.

"About time," Julian told him. "Someone took all the bones out of my legs when I was not looking. Deuced inconvenient."

"Yes, my lord," his man said, coming purposefully toward him. "You will be wishing someone took them from your head before many more hours have passed. Come along then, sir. Put your arm about my neck."

"Deuced impertinence," his lordship muttered. "Remind me to dismiss you when I am sober."

"Yes, my lord," the valet said cheerfully.

Several hours before Viscount Folingsby found himself sprawled before the fire in his sitting room with boneless legs and aching head, Miss Verity Ewing le...

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