

An Artless Demise

Lady Darby Book 7

By Anna Lee Huber

Chapter 1

“So full of artless jealousy is guilt, it spills itself in fearing to be spilt.”

--William Shakespeare

*November 5, 1831*

*London, England*

I didn't know whether to laugh or feel sorry for the poor fellow. For all his tailored clothing and the jaunty angle of his hat, which refused to stay on his head properly, he was in a ragged state. A scraggly tuft of hair flopped over one eye and his arms dangled limply at his sides, hindering rather than assisting the pair of footmen who struggled between them to guide him into his place.

With one last grunt of effort from the servants, he was hoisted into position to stare down at us with unseeing eyes. A crooked grin stretched across his face. I wasn't sure I wouldn't rather his expression have been more fierce. Gnashing teeth or a disapproving scowl would surely be more appropriate.

“I say, now, he looks *much* too jolly to torch,” my brother Trevor remarked beside me,

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echoing my sentiments.

One of the footmen ascended a small stepladder before being handed a bottle of brandy from the butler. He reached up over the lip of the raised serving bowl to douse the enormous oval of dried plum pudding at its center, and then proceeded to pour a liberal amount of the liquor down the wooden stake stabbed into the dessert's middle on which the smiling effigy had been mounted. The caramel liquid trickled down over the entire concoction to form a lake in the bottom of the crystal dish, perfuming the dining room with its pungent aroma.

“Ten quid it sets the flowers on fire,” Alfred, the newly minted Lord Tavistock, muttered under his breath just beyond my shoulder.

The lush floral arrangements on either side of the display did appear a trifle too close for comfort. As was the greenery draped from the glittering chandelier overhead. The Guy was not so tall as to become tangled in them, but considering the copious amount of brandy the footman had used to drench the pudding, who knew how high the flames would leap.

Trevor scoffed. “Twenty, it sets the entire table alight.”

At this dire prediction about the demise of the Countess of Redditch's lavish spread of food, my stomach rumbled, as it did so often of late.

My husband's gaze dropped to mine from where he stood at my other side, his lips quirking in amusement.

I lifted a hand to my abdomen self-consciously. “I can't help it,” I whispered. “Not when there are tartlets being dangled before my eyes.”

“Well, you are eating for two.”

“True.”

“I just wish they would get on with it,” Lorna, Lady Tavistock, huffed.

I glanced over my shoulder at her heavily-lashed green eyes.

Her pretty pink mouth twisted into a moue of displeasure. “This is torturous for a woman

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in my state.”

I couldn't withhold a laugh.

“What?” Her lips creased into a coy smile. “I'm sure you know what I mean, Kiera, being in the same predicament.”

Before I could reply, a murmur of excitement swept through the room. I turned back to see that the Earl of Redditch had stepped forward, brandishing a long spill of wood. He lit the tip in one of the candles positioned down the center of the large table and then paused for dramatic effect, grinning at the assembly before him, much like the effigy looming over his silver head.

“What say you? Shall I burn the Guy?”

Several of the men replied with hearty approval, while others began to clap. We soon all joined in, applauding as he lowered the spill toward the pool of brandy at the base of the pudding. Many of us gasped as a burst of flame flared upward, igniting the dessert and the base of the effigy's clothing. I pressed a hand to my chest, giggling at my reaction as the fire settled into a steadier blaze. Albeit, one more intense than would be to my liking were the spectacle taking place in *my* dining room.

I was not unfamiliar with the traditions of Guy Fawkes Night celebrations, which commemorated the foiled Gun Powder Plot of 1605, when Guy Fawkes and his collaborators schemed to blow up the Houses of Parliament. But my past experiences had been limited to the country. There we attended a church service in the morning for the reading of the Observance Act, and then gathered with a small party of local nobility and gentry, sometimes walking out to see the bonfires lit in the nearest village after nightfall. These bonfires inevitably featured their own effigy of Guy, but this was the first time I'd seen one burned inside someone's home, and an earl's palatial residence, at that.

The celebrations among the nobility in London were generally quite tame. However, due to the King's coronation in September, a larger number than usual of the aristocracy had

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remained in town for autumn and all the fetes following the royal event. So the Countess of Redditch had decided to host a Bonfire Night Ball, complete with a makeshift bonfire on her dining room table.

“I do hope they anchored that effigy in more than that mound of pudding.” Gage’s brow furrowed as he studied the burning spectacle.

“Well, let’s not stand around waiting to see. You and Tavistock fetch us some food before the whole thing goes up in flames,” I declared as I swiveled to thread my arm through Lorna’s.

“Yes, do,” she enthused.

Gage’s face split into a grin, but it was his cousin, Alfred, who prodded him forward.

“Far be it for me to disobey such an order. If I’ve learned anything in the last three months, it’s never to stand between a woman who is increasing and her food.” His eyes twinkled at us devilishly as he danced out of the way, narrowly missing his wife’s playful swat with her fan.

Trevor escorted us, as well as his own dinner companion, Miss Ellen Newbury, through a maze of puffed sleeves, some so voluminous as to double the width of the wearer’s shoulders. I wasn’t sure I would ever reconcile myself to this ridiculous style, much preferring the narrower shoulders of my parma violet gown with a la Reine sleeves of blond net. Then again, I had never cared much for what was fashionable. Only recently had I made an effort, so as not to embarrass my new husband.

Sebastian Gage was one of the most dashing and attractive gentlemen in all of Britain. That he had wed me, a scandalous outcast, had shocked more than a few members of the ton, and infuriated the mothers of debutantes who each thought their own daughter would be a better match.

After settling us at a table, Trevor went off to do his duty filling Miss Newbury’s plate.

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Unfortunately, I realized too late that we were situated much too close to where Lady Felicity Spencer held sway. Our gazes locked for a moment across the short distance before I looked away, not wishing to incite her antagonism. Though she had in no way confronted me directly—in fact, I believed I'd only exchanged greetings with her twice—I was well aware of her scorn and not-so-silent ridicule. No, a woman like Lady Felicity would never be so overt with her contempt. Instead, she let her veiled comments to others and reminders about my past do the trick.

As such, I had navigated the past ten weeks since our arrival in London by avoiding her and her like. I'd discovered that not all members of society held me in disdain, and so I gravitated toward those who were more welcoming. Lorna herself was somewhat of a *persona non grata*, being the illegitimate daughter of a nobleman, though in time her status as Viscountess Tavistock would render that fact obsolete. However, the Newburys were among those of sterling reputation who viewed me with kindness, and so I found I could converse easily with Miss Newbury.

The sweet-natured girl had just finished describing to me the bonnet she had purchased earlier that day when my friend, the Dowager Lady Stratford, appeared at my elbow.

“Are these seats claimed?” She dimpled at me, her cheeks flushed with happiness. The proscribed mourning period for her rotten blackguard of a husband had only recently ended, and I was pleased to see her attired in a stunning azure evening gown which highlighted her golden beauty.

“By you, of course,” I replied, pleased to see my cousin Rye was once again her dinner companion. I strongly suspected he had something to do with my friend's radiance of late.

“In all the excitement over the effigy, I suspect you missed it,” Charlotte exclaimed in a hushed voice as Rye moved off to fill her plate with choice tidbits. “But several of the gentlemen nearly came to blows in the front hall.”

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“You’re jesting,” Lorna gasped.

She shook her head, her eyes wide. “For a moment, I thought Rye was going to have to step in to stop them.” She leaned closer. “And one of them was Lord Melbourne.”

“The Home Secretary?” I glanced over my shoulder toward the doors, though my view was blocked by those milling about the room.

“Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. And Lord Gage was able to help resolve the situation.”

This did not surprise me. Gage’s father was a gentleman inquiry agent of some renown, with a number of highly placed friends, including the former Prime Minister and war hero—the Duke of Wellington, and even King William himself. That he might also number Lord Melbourne among his associates was more than probable, despite Melbourne being a Whig when many of Lord Gage’s other allies were Tories. I’d long realized Lord Gage did not ascribe to one political position but adapted his words and views to move among them all.

“What were they fighting about?” I asked.

Charlotte grimaced. “What else? The Reform Bill.”

Much of London continued to be unsettled by the agitation caused by the House of Lords’s latest rejection of a second attempt at passing a Reform Bill some weeks earlier. The proposed law would have redistributed representation in the House of Commons, doing away with the so-called rotten boroughs—which consisted of a very small number of constituents controlled by a wealthy patron from the House of Lords—and increased the franchise to give the vote to more male citizens. It was popular among the middle and lower classes, a number of whom had reacted angrily at the upper class’s refusal to grant them this concession. Several small altercations had occurred in London, while other cities, such as Bristol, had seen widespread rioting. The populace was seething with resentment, and the aristocracy could no longer continue to ignore it. Not with memories of the French Revolution, and the way their

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peasantry had overthrown the government and guillotined countless numbers of the royalty and nobility, still fresh in many minds.

I sighed. “In truth, I’ve been braced for news of violence. In many ways, Guy Fawkes Night seems tailor-made for such displays of public defiance, even if we *are* celebrating the *foiling* of a past plot of rebellion. But I never expected it to erupt between two gentlemen.”

“Hadn’t expected what to erupt?” Gage asked, as he set a glass of claret and a plate laden with food in front of me.

“Apparently Melbourne almost came to blows with some chap in the entry hall over the Reform Bill,” I explained briefly. “But your father is managing the situation.”

A pucker formed between his eyes as he turned to gaze out over the assembled guests. “All the same, I suppose I should speak with him to be sure my assistance isn’t needed.”

“After you eat.” I pressed a hand to his arm. “The matter is resolved for the moment, so there’s no sense in hurrying off. Besides, you were correct. That effigy looks in danger of tumbling over into the food at any moment.” The Guy slumped to the side, consumed by flame, and a hazard to any who dared pass around that side of the table.

“They’re removing him,” he replied. “Just as soon as the footmen return with a large tub of water to dunk him in.”

“Thank heavens.”

“Yes.” His lips were tight with disapproval. “I gather our host did not think the matter through.”

“I imagine not.” I watched as a piece of smoldering cloth dropped into the serving bowl. “I doubt anyone will be enjoying that plum pudding.”

Alfred snorted. “Not unless they’re partial to burned yarn and wool.”

The men went to fill their own plates with the splendid fare before returning to join us in our enjoyment of the feast. The earl and countess had spared no expense for the evening. Roast

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fowls and lamb, ragout of veal, lobster, galantine, and for dessert sweet custards, meringues, and even luscious *gâteau mille-feuille*. I ate my fill, and lingered over another glass of claret, enjoying a pleasant hour of conversation. Not even the sharp glint I spied in Lady Felicity's eye when I happened to catch a glimpse of her could sour my delight.

Gage and I followed the others back toward the ballroom, where the notes of a waltz could already be heard spilling forth. Ladies in opulent gowns twirled in the arms of the men in their dark evening attire beneath the glittering chandeliers. The spectacular plasterwork ceiling and white paneled walls were gilded with rococo flourishes, and the floor gleamed to a high polish. Clusters of amaryllis and hyacinths were hung between each set of wall sconces, adding a welcome dash of color, as well as their pleasant scents, to the miasma of perfumes and body odor.

This was definitely an improvement over the stench of charred ash and fabric dueling with the aromas of food and spirits in the dining room, but only just. I'd discovered being with child made my already strong sense of smell even more acute, so we lingered for a moment at the edge of the ballroom where fresh air swept up the stairs from the entry hall below.

“Lady Darby!”

I swiveled to see our hostess, the Countess of Redditch, bustling toward me.

“My dearest lady,” she exclaimed gaily. “I was hoping to have a word with you.”

“But, of course,” I replied with a smile.

Some weeks after my return to London, I'd realized there was little point in continuing to ask those who were not close acquaintances to address me as Mrs. Gage rather than by the title accorded to me from my first marriage. For one, it was tedious, especially when the request was all but ignored. So amid society, I remained Lady Darby by courtesy, though not by right, since my late husband, Sir Anthony, outranked my second.

Judging from the bright sheen of Lady Redditch's eyes, I suspected she'd already drunk

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more than a few glasses of the madeira that scented her breath, but her carriage remained erect, her speech clear. Her soft brown hair, liberally threaded with gray, had been swept up onto her head in one of the most current styles and accented with ostrich feathers.

“I must compliment you on a lovely soiree,” I told her. “It’s an absolute crush.”

“Thank you, my dear. What with recent events, it seemed we could all do with a bit of amusement.”

What exactly she was referring to, I wasn’t certain. But given the fact her husband was an outspoken opponent of the Reform Bill, I could only speculate it had something to do with the attacks that had been made on some of the members of the aristocracy, both in the press and via shouts and recriminations—and sometimes produce—hurled at their passing carriages. The warmth of my smile slipped a notch.

Positioned as we were before the doorway, we had a clear view out into the hall. So when a young man hurried up to where Lord Melbourne stood conferring with a handful of men, including Lord Gage and my brother-in-law, Philip, the Earl of Cromarty, I couldn’t help but notice. Particularly when the messenger seemed anxious as he passed the Home Secretary a message. The letter must convey something of urgency if it was being delivered to Melbourne during the middle of the countess’s ball.

“The Guy was certainly a festive touch,” Gage told our hostess with every sign of having enjoyed it, even though I knew he had disapproved.

She laughed. “Yes, that was Lord Redditch’s idea. And I thought it would be quite a treat.”

Whatever the missive Melbourne had been handed contained, it must be concerning, for his brow was etched with deep furrows. He passed the letter to Lord Gage at his side, who read the note swiftly, before flicking a troubled glance toward where we stood.

Gage removed his arm from where it was laced with mine, squeezing my elbow as he

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withdrew. “If you’ll excuse me. I believe my father wishes a word with me.”

Lady Redditch waved him away with a flick of her wrist. “Lady Darby, am I correct? Are you still painting portraits? I believe Lady Morley informed me you had accepted a commission to paint her.”

I was surprised by the eagerness of her words, but I recovered quickly. “Why, yes. I’m composing Lady Morley’s portrait now actually.”

“Excellent! We would be so honored if you would consider painting our son George’s portrait. He recently reached his majority, you know, and I do find that is an excellent time to capture their likeness. Before the depravities of age can befall them,” she jested with a trill of laughter.

Distracted as I was by the conference happening between Gage and his father in the hall, I could still sense the anxiety which belied her lighthearted tone. There was something she wasn’t saying, something which distressed her.

“I would be honored,” I replied, puzzled by her uneasiness. “Though I believe I’ve yet to make Mr. Penrose’s acquaintance. He is your second-born, is he not?”

“I shall introduce you,” she declared. “He’s likely doing his duty, dancing with all the pretty girls in attendance.” She turned to tap her eldest son, who had suddenly materialized at her side, on the shoulder with her fan. “As you should be.”

Lord Feckenham smirked. “Yes, I’m certain he’s putting on a good show. But I’ve no need to.”

Lady Redditch frowned. “Have you been introduced to my eldest son?”

“Yes, I’ve had that pleasure,” I answered, though I felt anything but. From the spark of derisive amusement in Lord Feckenham’s dark eyes, it was evident he realized what I truly thought about him. He was a crude boar with ramshackle manners who delighted in making others uncomfortable, including young debutantes. Humble in appearance and address, as far as I

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could tell the only thing to recommend him was his status as the heir to an old and venerable earldom, and that consideration didn't rank high in my book.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the worried look Gage cast my way as he pulled Philip aside. Curious why the matter would cause him concern for me, I opened my mouth to make my excuses so that I might join them when Lord Feckenham spoke.

"I've no desire to take a skittish innocent for a spin about the floor, but I should be delighted to dance with you, my lady." His eyebrows arched, daring me to accept as he held out his hand.

He had mistaken me if he thought I would be goaded into such an undertaking by his challenge. Especially when I suspected he'd intended to insult me. The countess appeared to think so, for her mouth had pinched into a tight moue.

"How kind," I replied in as bland a tone as I could manage. "But my slippers are pinching my toes, and I must slip away to see if the problem can be remedied. I'm sure her ladyship understands," I added, applying to her.

Being the mother of four children, her eyes lit with comprehension. "Oh, yes. Yes, my dear." At least, in this delicate rebuttal I had not offended her. "Up the stairs and to the left."

"Thank you," I replied, gliding away as if to escape to the lady's retiring room. I felt Lord Feckenham's narrowed gaze following me, but paid it little heed. Let him wonder for a time if he'd been the one slighted.

Once outside the ballroom, I glanced about me, trying to discover where Gage and Philip had gone. They were no longer in the hall or on the stairs, and I was fairly certain they hadn't slipped past me. I turned to find my father-in-law's disapproving stare directed my way. Though it was not as hostile as in the past—since he wanted to at least appear amicable to his son's choice in his bride, even though he'd attempted to thwart us before our vows were spoken—I could sense the renewed animosity simmering beneath his hooded gaze.

I had hoped we'd moved beyond this, if not into friendliness—which I doubted we should ever feel—then at least into mutual regard. But something had happened in the space of the past few minutes to change that, and I suspected it was that letter.

As if to confirm this, Lord Melbourne's eyes lifted to meet mine. At first he didn't react as he continued to speak to the man at his elbow, but then something occurred to him that made his eyes crease at the corners. My chest constricted with uncertainty. What had that missive said to make them react this way?

I considered approaching Lord Gage to find out where his son had gone, but then decided against it. Much as it pinched to realize, I knew my father-in-law was capable of great cruelty, and if he should snub me that would mean dire things for Gage's reputation, not just my own.

So instead I climbed the grand marble staircase toward the lady's retiring room, hoping to intercept someone who could tell me where I might find my husband. Rounding the corner, I nearly collided with my brother-in-law, Philip. His hands reached out to steady me.

"Kiera! Just who I was looking for," he gasped in relief.

Seeing the concern in his soft brown eyes, I pressed a hand to his upper arm. "What is it? I saw you and Gage conferring..."

Before I could say anything more, he cut me off—an action completely unlike him. "It's Alana. She's suddenly feeling quite ill."

I stiffened, alarm for my older sister sweeping through me. "Where is she?"

"Gage is with her. I'm having the carriage brought around." His gaze flickered for a moment. "I wonder if you might be willing to accompany her home." He must have sensed my hesitation, for he rushed on to say. "I would attend to her myself, but regrettably there's a matter of business I must see to first."

I stared up into his strained visage. Calm, steady Philip was not acting like his usual self, and I could tell why. He was lying. The question was, why?

Undoubtedly, he and Gage—for I didn't for one moment believe my husband didn't have a hand in this—were trying to remove me from the ball without creating a scene. I felt my hackles begin to rise at this bit of high-handedness. Evidently, they were worried I would argue, which indeed, I wanted to do. Then Philip's gaze transformed to one of gentle pleading, and I realized he genuinely was concerned. But not for Alana, for *me*.

A trickle of unease ran down my spine. Given some of the events in my scandalous past, troubling scenarios began to form in my mind, but I shook them aside. "Of course. Take me to her."

The expression on Gage's face when we appeared in the entry hall, while restrained, did nothing to reassure me. I could read all too well the apprehension crinkling the fine lines at the corners of his eyes.

It was just as well that Alana had supposedly come down with some sort of complaint, for she could not hide her distress either as she reached out to clasp my hands. I gathered her close, falling in with their ruse, and allowed Gage to settle my fur-lined mantle around my shoulders. I pretended not to notice when he and Philip were also handed their hats and greatcoats.

However, once we were ensconced in the Cromarty carriage, hot bricks placed at our feet and blankets draped over our laps, and the door was shut behind us, I could no longer remain silent.

"You are doing it much too brown," I proclaimed, crossing my arms over my chest. "Alana is not ill." I glared at Philip and then Gage. "And you gentlemen obviously didn't have business to attend to. So why did you hurry me out of there?"