

An Excerpt from A Very Dutiful Daughter

“I think mama is going to faint again,” remarked Augusta from her position at the keyhole.

“Oh, Gussie, not again!” responded her older sister, Prudence, in tones of deep disgust. “Get away from the door and let me see.”

“It’s *my* turn,” whined Clara, the youngest by several years. “I haven’t had *one chance* to peek. You both have been positively piggish about that keyhole ever since Letty and Aunt Millicent came home and locked themselves up in there with Mama!”

The accusation, though totally ignored by the two older girls, was quite true. Gussie and Prue had taken alternate turns at the keyhole for the past half-hour, pushing aside the fourteen-year-old Clara heartlessly and ignoring her persistent questions as if she did not exist. Indeed, the entire morning had not been a good one for Clara. The day had begun with a message from their governess, Miss Dorrimore, to the effect that she intended to remain in bed to nurse her cold and that the girls were to spend the morning working on their French declensions. The older girls, ignoring these instructions, had spent most of the morning poring over the fashion plates in a treasured copy of *La Belle Assemblée*. Clara, not yet old enough to be concerned with modish gowns and the art of hairdressing, had threatened to report her sisters’ transgressions to the indisposed Miss Dorrimore. Her sisters had responded with threats and jibes of such malignity that Clara had been reduced to tears. In the midst of this *contretemps*, they’d heard the sound of a carriage pulling up at their front door. They’d rushed to the window in time to see the door of their Aunt Millicent’s impressively ancient equipage open to discharge their eldest sister, Letitia. Letty looked woebegone and red-eyed, and Gussie and Prue had exchanged looks of surprise. The

surprise soon turned to consternation, for Letty had been followed out of the carriage by their Aunt Millicent whose customary cold, forbidding features were so distorted with suppressed anger as to make her ordinarily stern expression seem positively beneficent in comparison.

“Something’s gone wrong,” Prue had remarked, in sepulchral tones. “She must have botched it somehow.”

“Oh, no!” Gussie had moaned. “It can’t be! Prue, didn’t you tell me that Lord Denham was *certain* to make an offer?”

“Yes, it *was* certain. I overheard Aunt Millicent telling Mama all about it. Lady Denham assured her that her son Roger was ready to take a wife, and Letty was the girl they wanted.”

“You *overheard* all that? Ha!” sneered the put-upon Clara. “*Eavesdropped*, more likely.”

“And who’s eavesdropping now, may I ask?” Gussie had asked quellingly. “This conversation is not meant for the ears of *children*, if you please. So take yourself off to your bedroom, or the nursery, or somewhere out-of-the-way.”

“Listen to you, Miss Augusta High-and-mighty Glendenning! Just because you’re sixteen, don’t think you can queen it over me!” Clara had declared bravely, sticking out her chin in defiance.

“Stop squabbling,” Prue had demanded with all the authority of her seventeen years in her voice. “Letty is in some sort of fix, and we ought to find a way to help her, not stand here brangling.” With a toss of her red-gold curls, she’d turned quickly to the door and run to the landing. The two younger girls had followed hastily behind, and the three had peered over the banister to the floor below. They were barely in time to see Mama, the epitome of confused alarm, following Letty and Aunt Millicent into the small sitting room and shutting the door behind her.

Prue had lost no time in getting to the door and kneeling down with her eye at the keyhole. Gussie had cupped her hand to her ear and pressed it against the door. And thus it had been ever since, the two of them changing places periodically and pushing poor Clara aside whenever she

attempted to come close to the door.

Gussie now surrendered her place at the keyhole to Prue, who reported promptly that Aunt Millicent was holding a bottle of vinaigrette to Mama's nose. "Can you hear anything?" Gussie asked impatiently.

"No," Prue muttered, "but they've not permitted Letty even to take off her bonnet and pelisse. She's just sitting there, staring at the floor. Aunt Millicent appears to be furious with her. But I don't see *why!* Is it *her* fault that Lord Denham didn't come up to scratch?"

Gussie looked down at her sister questioningly. "Do you think that's what happened? That Denham didn't offer after all?"

Prue, without taking her eye from the keyhole, shrugged. "What else could it be?"

Further speculation was interrupted by the opening of the front door. Their brother, Edward, strode in, his riding boots clattering loudly on the worn marble of the entryway as he hurried to the stairs. But he stopped short at the sight of the three girls grouped before the sitting-room door.

"What on earth are you doing?" he demanded suspiciously.

Two pairs of eyes looked at him guiltily. "Oh, Ned, it's Letty!" Gussie said breathlessly. "Aunt Millicent is furious with her, and Mama has fainted twice, and—"

"They're eavesdropping, that's what they're doing, Neddie," Clara declared self-righteously. "You ought to make them stop."

"That's just what I intend to do, infant," Ned said, looking down at his youngest sister with distaste, "though you needn't think I'm doing it as a result of your tattling."

Prue had returned to the keyhole and now made her report. "Aunt Millicent is pacing again. And Letty is biting her lip. That means she's about to cry, the poor thing."

Ned pretended a disinterest he was far from feeling. "Get up, Prue, before someone catches you! Hang it, it ain't the thing for a girl your age to behave like a parlor-maid!" he scolded.

Prue rose calmly and brushed off her skirt. "And what do *you* know of parlor-maids? Was *that* why you were sent down from Oxford? For shame, Ned!"

Ned took a threatening step toward her. "Mind your tongue, goosecap! Get back to the schoolroom at once, and take your sisters with you, or you'll have to deal with me!"

Prue regarded him speculatively. He was only one year her senior, and barely an inch taller than she, but although he had not yet reached his full height, his shoulders were broad and the muscles in his arms fully developed. Previous experience had taught her that he was not easily bested in a fight. Besides, now that she was seventeen, it was no longer seemly to engage in a tussle with her brother. She shrugged and marched in brave retreat to the stairs. Gussie, meeting his glare, took Clara's hand and ran quickly after Prue. Ned waited until they had disappeared around the bend in the stairs. Then he listened for the closing of the schoolroom door, after which he promptly knelt down and peered into the keyhole to see for himself what was going on.

Inside the room the tension was palpable. Letty, seated in the far corner of the room, seemed immobile, her back straight, the hands in her lap hidden inside her fur-trimmed muff, her head lowered, her face shaded by the brim of her plumed bonnet, her eyes fixed on a worn patch of carpet at her feet. Only the sharpest of observers could have detected the movement of her fingers inside the muff as they clenched and unclenched in distress, and the frequent flicker of her eyelids as she battled valiantly to keep the tears from flowing over.

Her aunt paced the room with an angry stride, the stiff silk of her rather old-fashioned skirts whispering with matching anger every time she turned about. Letty began to count her aunt's paces . . . eight steps to the window, swish . . . eight steps back to the sofa, swish . . . eight steps to the window, swish . . .

A groan from the sofa caused Letty and Aunt Millicent to turn their heads. Lady Glendenning, stretched out full-length, sighed and raised her hand from her eyes. Her arm made a tremblingly nervous arc through the air and fell to her side where it dangled over the edge of the sofa in listless despair. "Whatever are we to do now, Millicent?" she asked in a quavering voice. "Whatever are we to do?"

"Ask your daughter!" Millicent said with asperity. "*She's* the one who whistled a fortune

down the wind!”

“Letty, my love,” her mama asked tearfully, “*how* could you have done it? How could you have *refused* him?”

Letty, her lovely hazel eyes filling with tears, merely shook her head. Her aunt looked at her closely. Aunt Millicent, the formidable Lady Upsham, was no fool. No girl in possession of her senses could turn down a man like Lord Denham without a very good reason. “There *must* be someone else,” she said for the third time. “You’ve fixed your heart on some ineligible wastrel, no doubt, and hope to make a match of it, in spite of your mother’s wishes and your family’s need, isn’t that it?”

Letty looked up, blinking, as two tears rolled down her cheeks. “I’ve told you and told you. There’s no one else. N-no one. I j-just c-could not . . .”

“You could not accept an offer from the most eligible bachelor in England? I fail to understand you, Letitia. It is not as if we were marrying you to an ogre. Or even to an old dodderer with nothing to recommend him but his purse. Denham is *more* than a wealthy peer. He is nothing if not charming and witty. His address is excellent, his mind superior to most of the young men of your fliberty-gibberty generation, and God knows he’s as handsome a man as I’ve ever seen, even if his complexion is darker than I like, and his eyebrows somewhat heavy . . .”

“Was *that* it, Letty dear?” her mother asked in concern. “Did you take an aversion to his eyebrows?”

Letty had to smile, even if somewhat tremulously. “Oh, Mama, of course not!”

“His complexion, then?”

Letty’s smile faded, and she returned her eyes to the patch in the carpet. “There’s nothing at all amiss in Lord Denham’s appearance,” she said in a flat voice.

Lady Glendenning pulled herself up on one arm and peered closely at her daughter. She had never seen Letty in such distress. The poor girl looked positively haggard, although Lady Glendenning had to admit that even her excessive pallor failed to detract appreciably from the

loveliness of Letty's face. Letty was blessed with thick auburn hair, high cheekbones, a clear complexion and a full, expressive mouth. And her eyes, even when red-rimmed and tearful, were large and lustrous and showed clearly the gentleness and intelligence that were her nature. Lady Glendenning had waited for two years, ever since Letty's come-out at eighteen under the auspices of her sister-in-law, Lady Millicent Upsham, for Letty to choose one of her rich suitors to marry. It was Letty who would save the family from sinking into a mire of debt. But Millicent had urged Lady Glendenning to curb her impatience. Millicent had a match in mind for Letty that would solve all their problems. Letty would marry the man most girls in London only *dreamed* of attaching. Millicent was saving Letty for Roger Denham, the Earl of Arneau.

Lady Glendenning sighed. Millicent's hopes for Letty had made her, Letty's own adoring mother, uneasy from the first. Lord Denham was past thirty and had never succumbed to matrimony. All Millicent's assurances that Roger Denham would come up to scratch failed to ease her mind. Lovely as her daughter was, Lady Glendenning knew that there were others more beautiful, more well-connected or more lively, and that Lord Denham had ignored them all. Letty, quiet and self-effacing, was not likely to catch quite so big a fish. Couldn't Millicent be content with a lesser prize?

But Millicent had been adamant. Her connection with the Dowager Lady Denham was very close, and she knew that she, Roger's mother, was quite taken with Letty. And, just as she had predicted, Lord Denham had taken an interest in Letty and had *offered!* Millicent and Lady Denham, between them, had done the trick. It was Letty herself who had ruined everything! What maggot had found its way into her devoted and very dutiful daughter's head to cause her to do such a terrible thing?

Lady Glendenning lay back on the pillows with a groan. "I don't understand you at all," she said tearfully. "If you don't hold his appearance in aversion, what *is* it that made you refuse him?"

Aunt Millicent snorted. "The answer is obvious. There's nothing about Lord Denham to

revolt a girl. Why, there's not another girl in all of England who would refuse him. Your daughter has her eye on someone else. It's the only possible explanation."

Lady Glendenning shook her head. "No, Millicent. Letty wouldn't lie to us. She has always been the most devoted, the most obedient, the best behaved of all my children. She's never lied to me or given me the slightest trouble. She would not ruin her family by refusing a fortune—not for such a reason as that. You are not in love with some penniless fellow, are you, my darling?"

"No, Mama," Letty said quietly. "I swear I'm not. I'll marry anyone else you say. *Anyone.*" Her eyes filled with tears again. "But not Lord Denham."

"Then at least tell us *why!*" her aunt demanded impatiently.

She shook her head. "Please don't ask me to explain. I . . . can't explain it to you. I c-can't!" she answered in a choked voice.

"Don't you realize, you silly pea-goose, that there's not much chance of finding someone else now?" Millicent asked in disgust. "No one will believe that you turned Denham down. They will all say that he found *you* unsatisfactory and did not come up to scratch."

"Oh, my God!" wailed Lady Glendenning from the sofa. "I'd never thought of that . . ."

"Neither had your daughter, apparently," Millicent muttered angrily. "Perhaps if she had, she would not have been so quick to refuse him."

"It would have made no difference. I would have refused him in any case," Letty said in a flat, dead voice that her mother barely recognized.

"Stop badgering the girl, Millicent," Lady Glendenning said helplessly. "I can't bear to see her so unhappy."

"What about *your* unhappiness? And the rest of the family's?" Millicent demanded. "Why didn't she think of *that?*"

There was no answer. Lady Glendenning covered her eyes with trembling hands, and Letty stared in miserable silence at the carpet. Finally, Millicent sighed in defeat. "Well, go up to your room, Miss. I want to talk to your mother in private."

Letty rose quickly and hurried out, almost colliding with her brother who had not moved quickly enough from the door. “Ned!” she gasped.

“Quiet!” he hissed nervously, carefully shutting the door behind her. “Do you want Aunt Millicent to know I’ve been eavesdropping?”

“Then you heard—?”

“Most of it. Whatever made you do it, Letty? Do you really dislike him so much?”

“Oh, Neddie, don’t *you* start on me, too!” Letty cried, and she burst into long-suppressed tears and fell against his shoulder.

Ned looked down at his sister’s bonnet in perplexity. “There, now, don’t cry,” he said, patting her shoulder awkwardly. “You know I can’t abide water-works. Besides, there’s no need for tears *now*. It’s all over and done with.”

“D-done with?” Letty raised her head from his shoulder. “W-what do you m-mean?”

“You’ve turned him down, haven’t you? It’s done with. However much they may scold, they can’t make you marry him now.”

This brought out a fresh flood of tears. “You d-don’t understand,” she sobbed against his shoulder. “You d-don’t unders-stand at all!”

“What is there to understand? Lord Denham asked you to marry him. You didn’t want to marry him, so you refused him. Let Aunt Millicent carry on all she likes. It’s too late for her to force you to marry him now, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” his sister nodded, still sobbing.

“Then I’m dashed if I can see what you’re crying about. Stop it, will you? You’re soaking my riding coat. Here.” He lifted her head and handed her his handkerchief. “Dry those eyes, you silly puss. Everything is going to be fine.”

Letty took a deep breath and tried to control her tears. Sniffing bravely into his handkerchief, she muttered, “Everything is going to be dreadful.”

“Nonsense,” her brother said decidedly. “You’ve only to weather a little scolding. They’re

bound to give up sooner or later. And when the noise is all over, you'll no longer have to marry a man you dislike."

"That's just it," Letty said, gulping back her tears and thrusting his wet handkerchief into his hand. "I *don't* dislike him. In fact, if you want to know the truth, there's no man in the world I'd *rather* marry than Roger Denham!" And she fled up the stairs, leaving her brother staring after her in open-mouthed bewilderment.