

*From The Rake Review*

*Dearest reader,*

*I must admit I had another rake in mind for this month's column, but a surprise appearance by Mr. Notorious himself, Mr. M—N—, has shaken this author to the core. Mr. Notorious has been depriving London ladies of the sight of his auburn hair and tawny eyes for several years now. Rumor has it, in his absence Mr. Notorious frequented every known brothel and den of iniquity on the Continent and in the Americas as well. And that's not the only rumor, dear reader. This Brazen Belle has it on good authority that Mr. Notorious pierced a most delicate part of his anatomy with a silver ornament. One can only imagine the purpose of such a piercing—his pleasure or yours?*

*Are you fanning yourselves yet? I hear some of you protesting that you are not at all acquainted with a rake known as Mr. Notorious. Allow me to enlighten you. Mr. M—N— was well-known to every fashionable young lady and debutante only seven years ago. One dance with this rake and a lady's reputation was tarnished. More than one widow bemoaned his quick exit from her bedchamber once his aims had been achieved (although there was a different sort of moaning at his entrance).*

*But before Mr. M—N— could be taken to task for his deplorable conduct, he disappeared. Some say his exit from Society had to do with the marriage of Baron H—'s daughter to Mr. M—N—'s best friend. Others say more than one irate papa called for his head, and Mr. M—N—'s disappearance was solely a matter of survival.*

*Do keep an eye out for him, especially if one has a coveted invitation to any of the events surrounding the nuptials of Miss L—N— to the Duke of R—. How will you know Mr. Notorious? Look for that ginger hair and those unmistakable eyes. He's a man over six feet in height with shoulders that fill a coat and a physique that has caused more than one grown woman to weep with joy. No word as to whether his years of debauchery have ruined said figure, but given his well-known dedication to riding (ahem), this author speculates the rake has retained his musculature. All in all, rake watchers will find Mr. Notorious simple to spot and avoid. And avoid him you must if you hope to keep your heart and your good name intact.*

*If, however, you fail to heed the advice offered herein and do fall into bed with Mr. Notorious, write at once and let us know if the rumors about that silver piercing are true...*

*Until next time, when I enlighten you about the rake who escaped notice this month, stay brazen,*

*The Belle*

## Chapter One

People were staring at his trousers. Men and women alike were ogling him. Munro Notley had been on English soil approximately thirty-two hours before that blasted column had been published and since that moment, the first thing anyone did upon encountering him was stare at his cock. If he ever discovered the identity of the so-called Brazen Belle, he would unleash a torrent of words so vile, her ears would ring for a week.

He stood just outside the ballroom at Notley House, the family town house in Berkeley Square, one of the most fashionable addresses in London's Mayfair. He'd been summoned here by his eldest brother, Viscount Notley, to celebrate the impending nuptials of Arthur's first-born, Lavinia, to the Duke of Ramsbury. Munro wouldn't have heeded the summons except that his brother had threatened to call in every favor the powerful viscount possessed to ensure Munro was turned away from every inn, posting house, and hotel between London and China.

And so Munro had taken the first packet back to England, telling himself he could survive three weeks. Twenty-one days, give or take. The banns must be called three times and then his niece could marry her duke, and Munro could slink back to the Continent.

Arthur's butler announced the couple just in front of Munro, and the two swept into the ballroom, arm-in-arm. The orchestra continued to play a lively reel, and no one seemed to take notice. Munro supposed now was as good a time as any to make an entrance. If he were fortunate, the music would be too loud for anyone to hear his name.

He stepped forward, offered his card. The butler took it, stared at it for a moment, then glanced at Munro.

"Hullo, Frobisher. I believe His Lordship is expecting me."

"Yes, sir." The butler's gaze dropped to Munro's breeches.

"Not you, too, Frobisher."

"Sir?"

"Eyes above my waist, if you please."

"Of course." The butler cleared his throat then shouted in a clear, loud voice, "Mr. Munro Notley."

Clearly, Frobisher had missed his calling. He might have made a fortune treading the boards with that projection and enunciation. Every single head turned Notley's way, even that of the members of the orchestra. One violin screeched, and the music fell silent. And then every eye dropped from his face to his breeches, and Munro could feel their gazes burning a hole through the fabric in their efforts to catch a glimpse of his cock.

He wanted to position a protective hand over his manly member. Instead, he gave the assembled company a courtly bow and forced his own gaze not to roam the faces gathered before him for her face. He had no hope of avoiding her this month. She was the viscountess's sister—the sibling of his sister-in-law. Beatrice Haddington—no, she was Beatrice Barnet now, Solomon's widow—would be present at every single function Munro would be forced to attend.

“Uncle Munro!”

He looked up from his bow to see a dark-haired young lady dressed in an ivory and silver gown coming toward him across the dance floor. He had a moment to wonder who this child might be, and then he recognized her, and his face broke into an enormous grin.

“Lavinia.” He caught her up and lifted her, turning her about in his arms. She was eighteen now and too big for such antics, but he couldn’t stop himself. He set her down, took her shoulders in his hands, and studied her face. “You’ve grown up,” he said.

She laughed. “Of course, I have. That’s what happens when you don’t come home for six years.”

“The last time I saw you, you were this high and wore your hair in plaits.”

“The last time you saw me, I was twelve!”

And yet, surely she was too young to marry. She still looked like a child, her expression sweet and her eyes innocent. What could his brother be thinking, allowing her to marry?

“I am so happy to see you, Uncle. I told Papa my one wish was that you would return for the wedding. You’ve always been my favorite uncle.”

Considering his brother Dudley was her only other uncle, this was no surprise. Dudley was an avid collector of antique footstools who took every opportunity to expound of the virtues of his collection.

“I would not miss your wedding for the world,” Munro said, genuinely glad he had come now that his niece was before him. She, at least, did not look at his breeches, which meant she had probably not been allowed to read *The Rake Review*.

Lavinia took his hand and pulled him into the throng of guests. The orchestra had begun to play again, and the dancers, realizing he wasn't about to drop his breeches and show them the appendage on everyone's mind, were slowly taking positions for a quadrille.

"I must introduce you to Ramsbury."

The Duke of Ramsbury was her betrothed. Munro knew of the duke, of course. He was a man nearing fifty with a daughter just a few years Lavinia's junior and no heir. Clearly, he was marrying again to secure that son and heir. Munro would have preferred the duke marry someone other than his eighteen-year-old niece. Again, what could Arthur be thinking?

But, of course, the viscount was thinking his daughter had the good fortune to attract a duke. She would be a duchess, the mother of the next Duke of Ramsbury, and her future and that of her offspring would be secure.

As Lavinia tugged him across the room, Munro couldn't quite stop himself from perusing the faces he passed for Beatrice's lovely visage. He had no idea what she looked like now. He hadn't seen her in seven years, since the night before her wedding, when she'd refused to elope with him and insisted on marrying his best friend instead. He could still remember the tears shimmering in her green eyes. He'd left saying, "Those tears are only the first you'll shed. Mark my words." Munro sincerely hoped he'd been wrong and Solomon had been a better husband to her than Munro expected.

Munro couldn't quite stop himself from seeking out Solomon Barnet's face too, even though the man had been dead almost three years. It hardly seemed possible London could exist without the tousled blond locks of Solomon. He had been every inch the rake Munro had been, but Solomon's angelic face and charming smile made everyone fall in love with him and forgive him any sin. *He* hadn't been given a sobriquet. But Munro, with his ginger hair and unwittingly

sardonic smile, had been christened Mr. Notorious. The name was one Munro still hadn't been able to shake, if the Brazen Belle's column was any indication.

Lavinia stopped in front of a man of medium height with graying hair and blue eyes. Munro recognized him as the duke even before Lavinia said, "Your Grace, might I introduce my uncle, Mr. Munro Notley? Mr. Notley, His Grace, the Duke of Ramsbury."

Munro bowed and the duke followed, his own bow still and formal. The man looked very much as he had the last time Munro had seen him, more than a decade before. He was in good health, but when Lavinia went to stand at his side, Munro couldn't help but think she looked more like his granddaughter than his bride-to-be.

"Congratulations on your impending nuptials," Munro said.

"I am a fortunate man indeed to have secured the affections of a lady so lovely and intelligent."

A figure appeared at Munro's elbow, and he turned to see Judith, Viscountess Notley, at his side. She gave him one of her signature glares. "The prodigal son returns. Lavinia, your wish has been granted."

"Thank you, Mama. And you, Papa."

Arthur, Viscount Notley, moved to his wife's side. "I'd heard you were back in Town, Munro," Arthur said. He raised a brow, but to his credit, he did not look at Munro's breeches. "We expected you yesterday."

"I'm staying at the Clarendon Hotel," Munro said. "I didn't want to inconvenience you."

Judith looked relieved at this revelation, but Lavinia said, "But Uncle Munro, you must stay with us at Notley House. It's your home too."

“Now, Bunny,” Arthur began. *Bunny* was the pet name he’d always used for his first-born, probably because Lavinia had a sweet little nose and, as a child, fluffy brown hair. That hair had been tamed into an elaborate style tonight and festooned with silver thread and white flowers. She looked beautiful, just like her mother.

Just like her aunt.

No. He was not supposed to be thinking about Beatrice. Lavinia did bear a resemblance to her Haddington relatives, but there were plenty of Notley traits as well.

“Munro is happy at the Clarendon. He’s a bachelor and must have his space.”

“But we never see him,” Lavinia protested. “Lydia couldn’t attend tonight. She will be heartbroken at having missed you, Uncle.”

Lydia was Lavinia’s younger sister, still too young to attend a ball. Lavinia had two younger brothers as well, but Munro assumed they were still at school and would not come to Town until closer to the day of the wedding.

“I’ll call on everyone soon,” Munro promised, not particularly concerned about Lydia’s heartbreak. He hadn’t seen her since she was a toddler. He doubted she would remember him. A footman with a tray of champagne passed by, and Munro snatched a glass. He’d had a dose of liquid courage before arriving at the ball, but he needed another if he were to survive this night.

“Lavinia, you mustn’t neglect your other guests,” her mother said. Lavinia’s mouth turned down into a pout, but Ramsbury, hearing his cue, offered his arm and escorted his betrothed away. That left Munro with Arthur and Judith, neither of whom looked overly pleased to see him. Munro lifted his champagne to his lips, found his glass empty, and flagged a footman over, taking two glasses this time.

“I see you managed to find your way to London,” Arthur said.

“I didn’t have much choice,” Munro shot back. “Someone threatened to make me unwelcome at every inn and residence in the whole of the civilized world.”

“Had we known you would make a spectacle of yourself upon your return, we might have tried to convince Lavinia you were unreachable,” the viscountess said. Her blue-green eyes were smaller and harder than her sister’s but still lovely. Now they narrowed in accusation.

“You act as though I wrote the column,” Munro said.

Arthur crossed his arms. “Then you’ve seen it.”

“I no more stepped foot in my club than I had it thrust under my nose. Who the devil is this Brazen Belle? I’d like a word with the chit.”

“You and every other man she’s called out,” Arthur said. “Last month it was the Earl of Belmont.”

“Surely, the earl knows who she is. I’ll speak with him, expose her, and then I’ll save us all from the humiliation of my presence and hie back to Italy.” He finished his third glass of champagne and felt his anger about the column receding. One more glass and the constant stares at his cock wouldn’t even bother him.

“Oh, no you won’t,” Arthur said. “Bunny wants you at her wedding.”

“I’ll speak with her.” Where the devil was that footman?

“No, you will not,” Judith said. “She is marrying the Duke of Ramsbury at St. George’s. This is the wedding of the year, perhaps the decade. No expense has been spared, and we must have the entire family in attendance. We will do the Notley side of the union proud.”

“You have Susan, Mary, Dudley, and their assorted offspring for that. Surely you don’t want Mr. Notorious in attendance.”



“Shh!” Arthur looked over his shoulder. “Keep that name to yourself. We don’t want it resurrected.”

“It’s far too late for that—”

“Munro, this is your chance at redemption,” Judith said. “For once, show the world you are more than Mr. Notorious. You might play the part of the doting uncle and upstanding citizen.”

“It’s time you returned to England and ceased gallivanting about the Continent,” Arthur said. “I need your help here. God knows Dudley can’t be pried away from his footstools for long enough to help manage any of our estates or business affairs.”

Munro would have dropped his champagne glass if Judith hadn’t taken it from him. Arthur needed help? The heir and perfect son wanted Munro’s assistance? Had hell frozen over? Were pigs flying? He must have looked completely dumbfounded because Arthur clapped him on the shoulder. “Think about it, Munro. Now is the chance to repair your reputation. In the meantime, move your things to Notley House. Bunny wants you here.”

And then Lord and Lady Notley were gone, and Munro was standing alone, looking for another glass of champagne.