

Excerpt from "The Courtesan's Courtship" by Gail Ranstrom

Geoff let himself into his office through the garden door and dropped his key on the desk. He was still too tense, too unsettled, by his argument with Miss Lovejoy to do anything but toss and twist in his sheets. A little physical exercise would be just the thing to relax him.

At the door to the ballroom, he paused and stepped back into the shadows. Miss Lovejoy, in her trousers and shirt, was moving through the various postures and positions, fencing with her reflection. Prescott must have taught her that method of improving one's form.

She'd tied her glorious blond hair on top of her head with a green ribbon and he was amazed anew by how different she looked without the dark wig. As Lizette, she was exotic and seductive, but as Dianthe, she was fresh and innocent. God help him, he wanted them both.

She lunged at the mirror, her trousers tightening over her buttocks and legs in a way that left nothing to the imagination. A slow fire kindled in his loins. When she straightened and rolled her shoulders, her breasts pushed against the fluid drape of her shirt, and he gritted his teeth.

He started to retreat but her voice, barely above a wistful sigh, stopped him.

"Oh, you've been such an idiot! How are you going to unravel this knot?"

What knot? He glanced back into the ballroom. She was speaking to her reflection.

She sensed him there and turned to meet his eyes. He expected her to accuse him of peeping but she smiled instead. Here was an opportunity sent from God to begin unraveling that twisted knot.

"Lord Geoffrey." Raising her blade, she saluted him, then bowed. "Have I thanked you for the fencing lessons? I'm finding them quite helpful,

especially when I cannot sleep."

He gave her a wary smile. "I usually come here before going to bed."

"Shall I leave?"

"I think you need the practice more than I."

A wicked idea made her smile. "Come, then. Teach me what you know, sir. I could benefit from your...instruction."

Something almost humorous flickered in his hazel eyes. "Are you suggesting a match?"

"Oh, I see. You are rusty and need time to hone your skills?"

The corners of his mouth twitched. He shrugged out of his jacket and vest and tossed them over the lone chair. He went to the rack to consider his choices. He glanced back at her foil and chose one for himself.

She smiled, flexed her blade in a challenge and moved to the center of the room to face him, waiting for him to join her.

"Would you rather use blunts?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I haven't used blunts since my second lesson. Mr. Prescott says it is cheating. He says you must always fence as if your life depends upon it."

"Very well. Let me secure a button--"

"Not necessary," she said. "I trust you."

He studied her for a long moment. "You are using a button."

"I do not trust *me*."

He laughed as he came to face her. They stood in the center of a large circle drawn on the marble floor with chalk. "Mr. Prescott has been teaching you the Spanish Mysterious Circle method?"

"He says it is the quickest route to perfection."

Morgan nodded and stretched his arms over his head to loosen his muscles. Coming back to the *en garde* position, he nodded that he was ready. "*Veney?* A practice bout to three? Shall we see what my money has bought me?"

She grinned and returned his nod. They crossed swords and she quickly pressed her button to his heart. "Hit," she called. She stepped back and bowed, knowing she'd caught him completely off guard.

He laughed and spread his arms. "Your point, Miss Lovejoy. I'll be better prepared next time."

She slashed her blade to the side flamboyantly. "Do not underestimate me, Lord Morgan."

"What happened to Lord Geoffrey?"

She shrugged, circling him. "You are the one insisting upon formality. Have I not invited you to use my given name? I think you prefer the formality to keep distance between us. Your choice, sir."

They crossed swords again and this time Lord Geoffrey was ready. He parried her thrusts and scored a hit by slapping her upper arm with the side of his blade. "Hit," he called.

"Aye," she conceded, stepping back.

"I am bound to say, *Dianthe*, that you exceed my expectations."

Her heart skipped a beat and she warmed with pleasure. She loved the sound of her name on his lips--drawled with a hint of softness. A cautious heat crept through her.

The next encounter forced her to pay closer attention. She managed to hold him off nearly three minutes before he scored a hit. When she conceded with an 'aye' and a bow, he smiled.

"Enough practice, Dianthe? Are you ready for a competitive match?"

A few wisps and curls had escaped her ribbon and she blew them out of her eyes. "To five," she nodded. "*En garde*, Geoffrey."

His mouth curved in a delicious smile as he lifted his sword to the *garde* position. He was obviously pleased that she'd used his name. After a strenuous exchange of blows, Geoffrey traversed and, before she could turn to face him, she felt a tug at the top of her head. Her hair tumbled down around her shoulders and she spun around to find her green ribbon dangling from the point of his foil.

She grinned, knowing the degree of skill that had required. She liked this playful side of him. She'd seen flashes of it before, but she'd managed to crush it rather quickly. "Your point," she conceded.

They crossed swords and moved into the next bout quickly. She focused on his rhythms and began to anticipate his moves, pleased to see the look of surprise and approval on his face. She feinted to the left, then slipped her sword under his, pressed the button to his neck and moved close to his chest to deny him an opening.

"Hit," she panted.

He froze, obviously unwilling to risk injury, but his eyes shifted to meet hers. They were filled with something akin to pride. "Aye," he acknowledged.

But Dianthe did not disengage at the concession. She smiled and slid the button down the side of his neck to the bottom of his cravat. Very carefully, she pushed the button between his neck and the fabric. At last he flinched.

"Tch-tch, Geoffrey. Don't breathe, yet. I have never done this before." With an upward slicing motion, and just missing his earlobe, she cut the silk folds and the cravat slipped to the marble tiles.

His chest started to rumble and she realized he was trying to contain his laughter. She grinned and stepped back before he could retaliate.

"Your point," he acknowledged. "One each." He saluted her and assumed the *en garde* position.

She crossed his sword and they were engaged. She realized he had merely been amusing himself with her when he applied himself to the attack. It was all she could do to defend herself, parrying his thrusts, but he gave her no opening for a riposte.

He lunged in a lightning move, his sword drawn back and his left hand extended toward her to stop her advance into his blade. As it was, the foil's point dimpled the skin at the V of her shirt. Very slowly, he lowered his foil, flicking the buttons off her shirt one by one. Her shirt gaped, but the tight tuck into her trousers kept it in place.

Heat washed through her and she resisted the impulse to look down to see if she was still decent. Instead, she looked up, into Geoffrey's eyes. His expression was guarded, as if he were waiting for some reaction from her. Given their prior relationship, he would be expecting anger, indignation, or an accusation. Instead, taking heed from Miss Osgood's lecture on a woman's power, she ran her tongue over her lips and smiled. Something glimmered in his eyes, and she knew she'd scored a hit of her own.

"Will you call it?" she asked, reminding him of his privilege.

"Hit," he muttered, his voice thick with emotion.

"Aye," she agreed to his claim. He was going to kiss her. He was leaning toward her, his head tilting ever so slightly to cover her mouth. She lifted her chin to meet him halfway.

He blinked and shook his head as if he'd forgotten himself, then stepped back into *en garde* position.

Oh, shame! *She* wanted *him* more than he wanted her. From the night he'd brought her to Salisbury Street, she'd fought her feelings, tried to keep distance between them, afraid of what loving a man like Geoffrey Morgan would do to her reputation and marriage prospects. She'd only wanted to find Nell's killer and regain her place in society. Now she didn't care about society. It was Morgan's good opinion she wanted. Reputation and eligibility were nothing balanced against a moment in his arms.

Trying to forget her gaping shirt, she raised her foil and traversed to the left. Geoffrey followed her steps, keeping in step with her. After exchanging a few blows with their blades, she took the initiative to score a hit and lunged. The button at the tip of her foil pressed into his navel. He spread his arms wide in a gesture of surrender.

Peeved, instead of calling the hit, she drew her foil downward, cutting the fastening of his trousers. He scarcely breathed. She used the button to lift a corner of his shirttails out of the waistband. Only then did she step back and say, "Hit, Geoffrey."

He cleared his throat. "Aye. Match point?" he asked, his sword point angled toward the floor.

She brought her blade up in position and concentrated on his face looking for a blink, a shift in his gaze, anything that would betray that he was preparing to advance on her. *Concentration, calm, detachment.* But, in the end, it did not matter. Nothing of Geoffrey's icy calm betrayed his intentions. After a moment of unnerving stillness, he lunged and flicked his unprotected point

upward, slicing the tapes of her waistband. He stepped back, as lithe as a panther, his blade back to *garde*, making it clear he would not call the hit.

She parried with a blow against his blade and he executed a blinding riposte, sliding his blade the length of hers as he continued his advance, causing her arm to come up until their hilts locked. At that exact moment, his chest landed against hers and he grabbed the wrist of her sword arm, rendering her helpless.

With her arms upraised, her chest pressed to his, he looked down at her and said, "I can think of quicker ways to do this, Dianthe."