

Captain Fawley's Woman

Chapter 1

“Oh, no,” Susannah grumbled to her friend, Miss Deborah Gillies, snapping open her fan and raising it to conceal the lower part of her face. “Here comes Captain Fawley, hobbling over to ask me to dance again. And I cannot, I simply cannot.”

Deborah compressed her lips to hide her own revulsion – oh, not at Captain Fawley. The poor man could not help the way he looked. He had lost the lower part of one leg, and his left hand in the same explosion which had so badly disfigured his face. His left eyelid would forever droop into the scarring which covered his whole cheek, twisting his mouth into a permanently cynical expression. No, she could feel nothing but compassion for him.

It was Susannah's behaviour that upset her.

Captain Fawley bowed over her friend's hand, his dark eyes raised to hers with dogged determination.

“Good evening Miss Hullworthy, Miss Gillies.” Though he included Deborah in his greeting, he shot her only the briefest glance. “I was hoping I might prevail upon you to dance with me this evening.”

“Oh, dear,” said Susannah, with just the right amount of regret in her voice to sound convincing. “I am afraid my dance card is already full. And here comes my partner for the quadrille.”

She flicked him a soulful glance as he watched Susannah walk to the dance floor on the arm of her portly young partner. Captain Fawley must have been strikingly handsome once, she sighed wistfully. Dark haired as well as dark eyed, with features that were still discernibly pleasing, even under that horribly reddened and puckered skin.

Whereas there was nothing handsome about Baron Dunning. He had a weak chin, made more noticeable by a mouth full of prominent teeth, and his skin was a greasy broth of suppurating pustules.

“Many people suffer from spots,” Susannah had remonstrated when Deborah had pointed out that Baron Dunning's complexion was no better than Captain Fawley's. “He cannot help that!”

Besides which, he had a title. All the poor Captain had to offer was his devotion. And Susannah might protest that she would hate to look ridiculous hobbling about the dance floor with a man who had a false leg, but she never worried what it looked like to dance with the dodderly Earl of Caxton. Susannah was plainly ready to stifle her squeamishness for the sake of a coronet.

The impecunious Captain Fawley could expect no such consideration.

“How could I let him touch me, with that false hand?” Susannah had whined, only the previous night, when they had been preparing for bed at the end of an arduous day of husband hunting.

“It is very hard to tell it is a false hand, it has been so well made,” Deborah had pointed out. “It looks just like any other gentleman's hand, covered with an evening glove.”

“I would know it was a dead thing, resting on my arm,” Susannah had shuddered. “Eeugh!”

As the orchestra began to play, Captain Fawley came back to himself. Turning to Deborah, he inclined his head, and held out his arm. His right arm. She had noticed on previous occasions that if he offered a lady his arm, it was never what remained of the left one.

“Shall we take a turn about the room?”

Deborah smiled, and laid her hand upon his sleeve. As she glanced up, it occurred to her that placing her on his right side also had the effect of presenting the unblemished side of his face to her scrutiny. A pang of sympathy smote her. He was sensitive enough to his appearance, without girls like Susannah rubbing his nose in it. He had even grown his hair longer than was fashionable, sweeping part of his fringe over the left side of his forehead, in an effort to conceal the worst of the scarring.

They set out along the edge of the room, in the area behind the pillars that marked the boundaries of the dance floor. Captain Fawley’s gait was a little uneven, she had to admit in fairness to Susannah. But by no means did he hobble! And though she had never danced with him, she was certain he would look no worse than many of the men here tonight, lumbering about with straining waistcoats and florid faces.

“I can see you would much rather be on the dance floor,” said Captain Fawley, noticing the direction of her gaze, “than bearing me company. I shall escort you to your mother, and...”

“Oh, please do not!”

He eyed her curiously.

“I would m...much rather be promenading, than left to wilt on the sidelines.”

Her dance card, unlike that of her friend, bore very few names. If Captain Fawley abandoned her, it would be humiliatingly obvious that she had no partner.

She felt as though the only times she ever got to dance lately was when one of Susannah’s admirers took pity on her, as Captain Fawley was doing now.

And unlike some of those gentlemen, Captain Fawley was invariably attentive and polite, almost managing to make her believe he was enjoying talking to her.

When she thought of the adventures he must have had, in his soldiering days, she was amazed he could talk to her so kindly about the trivial concerns of a plain, provincial miss like her.

He gave her his wry, lop-sided smile, which somehow always managed to make her own lips want to rise in imitation.

“Then let us go and sample the refreshments,” he suggested, turning her towards a door at the far side of the room from where the orchestra was playing.

“Thank you, I should like that.”

She hoped very much that he would linger while she drank a glass of lemonade. Conversation would be limited, for after her initial burst of pleasure in securing his attention, she always became dreadfully tongue tied. He had experienced so much, when she had scarcely set foot outside her father’s parish before this trip to London. Not that he had personally related how he had fought his way across the Peninsula before suffering the horrific injuries at Salamanca that had left him hovering between life and death for months. No, that information had been gleaned from her mother’s friends, who made it their business to know everything about everyone.

They had shaken their heads, expressing pity as they related what they knew of his history, but she could only admire the determination with which he had clawed his

way back to his present state. He did everything an able-bodied man did, though it must take him twice the effort. He seemed to her to be so much more manly than the fashionable fops who lounged their languid way through London's drawing rooms.

She felt that first betraying blush sweep up her cheeks, which always assailed her at about this point in their meetings. For what could she say that might be of interest to a man like him, a man who had really lived? Though she knew, that whatever she said, he would never give her one of those condescending looks which so many eligible bachelors seemed to have got down to a fine art. He was so kind, so magnanimous, so...

"Tell me," he said, as they sauntered towards the table on which a large punch bowl sat, "just what a man has to do to secure a dance with your friend?"

Deborah's flight of fancy exploded in mid air, plummeting to earth like a spent rocket. He had not sought out her company because he wished for it. She was only a means by which he might be able to approach Susannah.

She pulled herself together with effort, and pasted a polite social smile upon her face, as Captain Fawley continued, "I purposely arrived early tonight, and still her dance card seems to be full."

"It was full before ever we arrived," she temporised. It was not her place to tell him that no matter what he did, Susannah would rebuff him. Not only did she find him physically repulsive, but she had her sights set on a title. Forming an attachment with an impecunious commoner was not part of Susannah's plan at all.

"Before you arrived?" Captain Fawley signalled a waiter to pour Deborah a glass of lemonade.

"Yes," she confirmed, her heart plummeting as the waiter handed her a drink in a tall glass. It would take forever to drink it down, and for some reason, she no longer wanted to spend a moment longer with Captain Fawley than she had to. There was an acid heaviness in her stomach, her throat ached, and to her annoyance, her eyes had begun to prickle with what she was afraid were burgeoning tears. She did not want him to see her cry. Lord, she did not want anyone to see her cry! What kind of ninny burst into tears at a ball, because every man there wanted to dance with her friend, and not her!

She took a gulp of the drink, appalled when the glass rattled against her teeth. Her hands were shaking.

"Are you quite well, Miss Gillies?" Captain Fawley looked concerned.

Her heart performed a peculiar lurch as she thought how like him it was to be so observant. "I..." Lying was a sin. She would not do it. And yet, she desperately wanted to escape. If she was to twist the truth, just a little... there could be no harm in that, could there? "I think I would like to return to my mother, and sit beside her after all, if you do not mind?"

"Of course." Captain Fawley took her glass and placed it on a convenient window ledge. He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm, pulling her hard against his body so that he could support her wilting form as he ushered her towards the door. She had never been held so close to any man before, except her father. It made her heart race to feel the heat of his body seeping through his uniform jacket. She could feel the flex of his muscled frame with every step he took, and a slight change of pressure every time he breathed in or out.

Her mother was sitting on a bench with several other chaperones, ladies whose task it was to ensure their charges maintained that delicate balancing act between doing

their utmost to entrap an eligible bachelor into matrimony whilst simultaneously behaving with sufficient decorum to avert scandal.

“Mrs Gillies,” said Captain Fawley, executing a polite bow, “I fear your daughter is feeling unwell.”

“Oh, dear!” Her mother’s eyes shot past her, to where Susannah was twirling merrily around the floor with Baron Dunning. “We have only just arrived, and Susannah is having such success...” She shifted to one side, so that Deborah could sit next to her. Taking her hand in hers, she gave it a squeeze. “Deborah was so ill over Christmas, I almost decided to put off coming to London at all. But Susannah was so keen...” she explained to Captain Fawley.

“I shall be fine, mother. If I may but sit quietly for a while...”

“Perhaps a turn about the garden, to get some fresh air?” Lady Honoria Vesey-Fitch, an old friend of her mother’s suggested with an arch smile. “I am sure the Captain would oblige.”

Oh, no. It was bad enough that he did not wish to dance with her, never mind dragging the poor man round the garden on what would be a fool’s errand. For no amount of fresh air was going to make her feel any better. On the contrary, knowing that Captain Fawley would wish himself anywhere rather than with her, would only serve to make her feel ten times worse.

“Oh no!” To Deborah’s immense relief, her mother instantly vetoed the suggestion. “The cold night air would be most injurious to her health, after the heat of this stuffy room. I do not want her to catch a chill, on top of everything else!”

Everything else? Had her mother guessed that her only daughter had been smitten by a severe case of hero-worship? Though how could she, when Deborah had only just worked it out for herself? It could be the only reason why her heart twisted at the look in Captain Fawley’s eyes every time Susannah turned him down, the little leap it performed when he turned, albeit with resignation, to her.

“I will be fine, if I may but sit quietly, for a while.”

“Oh, but thank you for your concern, Captain,” her mother put in quickly. “Please do call on us tomorrow, if you are still anxious over my daughter’s health.”

An arrested expression came over his face. “I shall certainly do so,” he said, a gleam coming to his eye.

Deborah glared down at her hands as she clasped them in her lap. He did not care a fig for her health! He had just worked out that if he called, he would be able to ascertain which social events Susannah might be attending the next evening. He was planning to join the ranks of admirers who called to deliver posies, and drink tea whilst vying for Susannah’s favours.

There was a smattering of applause as the music ended, and the dancers began to leave the floor. Baron Dunning returned Susannah, very correctly, to Mrs Gillies. Flicking her fan open, she waved it briskly before her face, pointedly ignoring Captain Fawley.

“It is so hot in here,” she complained.

“Indeed,” he put in, in an effort, Deborah was sure, to draw her sparkling gaze in his direction. “Miss Gillies has been quite overcome with the heat.”

“Really?” Instantly Susannah dropped what Deborah thought of as her ballroom manner, and looked at her with concern. “Oh, don’t say you are going to be ill again, Debs. We had better go home at once.”

“No, no, I do not want to spoil your evening.”

“And you have so many distinguished names on your dance card,” put in Mrs Gillies. “You don’t want to disappoint so many eligible gentlemen...”

“Oh, pooh to that!” said Susannah, bending forward and taking Deborah’s hand. “I can dance with them all tomorrow. Or the next night. But I would never forgive myself if Deborah sacrificed her health for my pleasure.”

Deborah was swamped by a wave of guilt. No wonder the men all preferred Susannah to her. Not only was she far prettier, but she was a much nicer person, too.

Captain Fawley certainly thought so. His eyes were glowing with admiration as he organized a footman to bring their carriage round. He was falling deeper and deeper under Susannah’s spell with every encounter. Just as she, she realized, stifling a sob, was growing more hopelessly infatuated with him. She had experienced an almost overwhelming urge to *cling* to him when he finally handed her over to her mother. To fling her arms around him and beg him to forget Susannah. In a ballroom!

She had carelessly lost her heart to a man who scarcely noticed she existed.