



Brief excerpts from *Seducing the Princess* by Mary Hart Perry:

#1

Gregory watched the queen's daughter weave down the alley of the dim barn and out into the sunshine. He laughed to himself. Girl didn't know it but she was his.

He had seen it in her eyes. They had dilated nearly all-black at his touch. She'd trembled and reacted to him with unmistakable sensual awareness. He'd waited patiently for such signs these months as they'd ridden together, as he'd gently urged her to open up to him.

At first he'd worried that she might cling to her hope of Battenberg coming for her, but the missing letters did the trick. She no longer seemed to believe the Prussian loved her. He just hoped his agent had destroyed their correspondence as they'd discussed. Without the princess's letters ever leaving London, and Battenberg's missives intercepted before they could reach Beatrice, communication had been completely severed between the two. Moreover, his spies assured him that, whatever had transpired between the pair in Darmstadt, or later in London,

their relationship hadn't yet progressed to the bedchamber. Kisses and hand holding maybe, but Beatrice was still a virgin.

Which meant she knew almost nothing about sex.

Which meant he could use her naiveté to his advantage.

And now? He'd wait and let today's little encounter sink in. Let Beatrice think about touching hands, about how much she missed Henry's kisses and how nice it would be to be kissed again—by someone conveniently close by, someone she'd learned to feel safe with, and who knew how to please a woman.

In the meantime, there was this bloody job in the mews to get rid of. He needed to move up in the world, and fast, if he was to woo a princess, the task set for him by Wilhelm. That's where he needed the help of the queen.

## #2

She gathered her skirts, dismayed by how odd she'd look on the dance floor, like a widow in her weeds among all the pretty young things in their floaty white and pastel tulle. A raven among peacocks. A toad among flitting rainbow damsel flies.

He drew back her chair for her as she stood, giving her room to step away from the table and ease her full skirts clear of the furniture, and offered his arm. She took it, her mind whirring with a long list of names, none of them fitting the tall, elegant, beautiful young man beside her.

*Oh, God...oh, God, who are you?*

His hair was dark, his eyes mesmerizing when he looked down at her. They seemed bright with curiosity, or amusement. What did he see when he observed her with such intensity? She feared it was unpleasant. She hoped she wasn't repulsive to him.

The music had faded from the previous gavotte by the time they reached the edge of the dance floor. Ladies were being escorted back to their seats, new partners located, couples sorted out. The orchestra tuned up again, and lively chatter filled the ballroom.

“I believe it’s to be a Viennese,” her partner said. “Does an aggressive waltz please you, Princess?”

She was momentarily terrified that she’d lost her voice but, miraculously, sounds crackled out. “Oh...why yes. Viennese. Lovely.”

“Battenberg! Liko, how goes it, old man?” A man in a black swallow-tail coat passed by, clapping Beatrice’s dance partner on the back.

Ah. Now she had it. One of bridegroom’s brothers. The youngest? No, there were four, she recalled, and she’d never met the youngest. But she had met the eldest, Alexander—Sandro to his friends and family. And the second son was Louis. Then came Henry, who also had a quirky family nickname, Liko. *Henry. Henry. Henry.* Yes, now she remembered. She recalled having played with him when they were very young. She should say something to show she was pleased to see him again.

Beatrice cleared her throat and straightened up as tall and slim as she could. “Henry,” she said, to let him know she really did recognize him.

“Yes?” He was still smiling but with a touch of restraint, perhaps even concern that he was now obliged to a dance with a woman incapable of expressing her simplest thoughts.

“It’s been a very long time,” the words burst from her lips all at once, “since you were last in England.”

“Yes, it has, Princess. I should like to visit again, soon.”

Violins broke into the opening strains of *The Blue Danube*, one of her favorites by Strauss. Beatrice felt her partner's palm settle gently yet firmly at her waist. His other hand opened, palm up, inviting her fingertips. She timidly rested her gloved hand in his. As soon as they were in proper position, he stepped bravely into the whirl of dancers. Off they flew, as if on a hawk's wings. Beatrice tensed, suddenly aware of the speed at which her feet must continue moving to avoid tripping herself up.

"It's all right," Henry whispered, his breath warm against her ear. "Relax, let me guide you."

It was the strangest thing. Just his saying those words made every taut muscle in her spine and shoulders loosen a notch. It hadn't sounded like an order, the way her mother would have made it seem, but her body obeyed instantly.

Beatrice tilted her head and gave him a shy smile. "You dance very well, Henry." She meant it. Her partner wasn't a hobbling octogenarian or, just as bad, a brother or cousin with a stiff gait and sweaty shirt front.

"Thank you. As do you." He executed a clever heel turn at the end of the room and brought them back into the swirling crowd with a roguish twinkle in his eyes. "I ought to, after all the damned lessons Mother and Father forced upon the lot of us."

"I love to dance," she said a little breathlessly.

"Do you? I'll have to ask you more often. If you like, that is."

"Oh yes," Beatrice said, "this is ever so much fun." Then she laughed because she sounded like a child, pleased to be taken out to play on the swings. *Push me higher...higher!*

He chuckled. "What's so funny?"

“Just that, I don’t know, I feel years younger when dancing, don’t you? Sitting all night and making polite conversation becomes so very dull.”

His eyes fixed on her face, and she thought she saw his mind working. “It does, doesn’t it?” he agreed. “All the silly gossip, the forced chit-chat. I’d rather be doing something too. I guess tonight we’ll have to settle for dancing. Though a carriage ride would be brilliant, on a full-moon night like this.”

She gasped in delight at the thought. “Oh, it would—wouldn’t it just be too perfect?” The music swelled, the tempo raced, pulling her pulse along with it. She tried not to think about her feet, letting them do the work for her. It was better that way. If she thought too hard about the intricate steps, she’d flub it up and they’d end in a sprawl on the floor.

“Do you ride?” he asked. “Horseback, that is.”

She gave him a sideways look that said, *Are you joking?* “Remember who my mother is?”

He blushed. “Of course. The queen is a dedicated horsewoman so certainly her daughter must be too. I understand you’re inseparable, the two of you. Mother and daughter.” Was there a question behind his words? Or teasing? She wasn’t sure.

“I love to ride,” was all she could think to say at first but then plunged on. “Riding fast is the best. Faster than *she* ever does. At a canter at the least, better at a gallop. Mother says running a horse is far too dangerous, but I think racing across a field is rather like dancing the Viennese.”

“Exactly.” He grinned. “Funny. I wouldn’t have thought you’d be so keen on speed.”

*No, of course not*, she brooded. *You’d think me dull and clumsy and uninteresting, like the rest of them do*. She ducked her head and lowered her eyes, feeling chastened and reminded of her many inadequacies.

Too late, Beatrice realized her mistake.

How many times had she been scolded by her dance master for peeking at her feet while dancing? It threw off the body's posture, disturbed the fragile balance between partners, and courted disaster.

Then, she missed a step. And another.

Before she could recover she felt herself falling forward, out of control, the toe of her slipper catching the hem of her gown, making everything impossibly worse. She imagined herself dragging Henry Battenberg down with her to the floor, other couples coming upon them at speed, so suddenly they would be unable to avoid the fallen pair beneath their feet. Dozens of dancers would plummet to the floor, creating a messy, embarrassing pileup.

All because of her clumsiness.

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