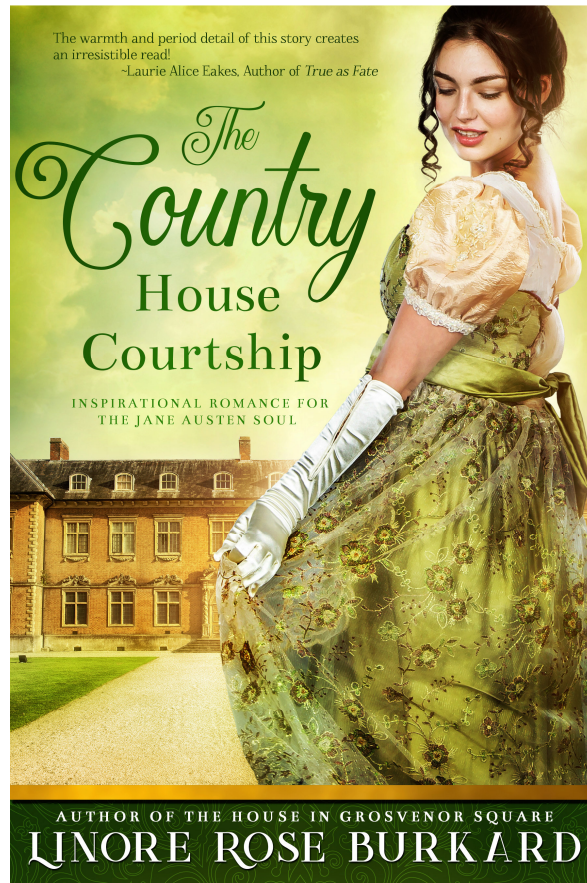


The Country House Courtship



An Excerpt

Aspindon House, Middlesex, England, 1818

Ariana Mornay looked for the hundredth time at her younger sister Beatrice sitting across from her in the elegantly cozy morning room of the estate. Here in the

daylight, Beatrice's transformation from child to attractive young woman was fully evident. When Beatrice arrived the prior evening with their mother, Mrs. Forsythe, Ariana noted the change in her younger sister, of course. But the daylight revealed budding beauty as neither last night's flambeaux (lit in honour of their arrival) or the interior candlelight and fire of the drawing room had. Beatrice's previously brown hair was now a lovely luminous russet.

Ringlets peeked out from a morning cap with ruffled lace, hanging over her brow and hovering about the sides of her face. The reddish-brown locks emphasized hazel-green eyes, smallish mischievous lips and a healthy glow in her cheeks.

Beatrice noticed her elder sister studying her, and smiled. "You still look at me as if you know me not," she said, not hiding how much it pleased her to find herself an object of admiration.

"I cannot comprehend how greatly you are altered, in just one year."

"I regret that we did not come for so long," put in Mrs. Forsythe. She was still feasting her eyes upon Ariana and the children (though the nurse, Mrs. Perler, had taken four-year-old Nigel, the Mornay's firstborn, from the room, after he had spilled milk all over himself minutes ago). "We wished to come sooner, as you know, but Lucy took ill, and I dared not carry the sickness here to you with your new little one." At this, she stopped and cooed to the infant, who was upon her lap. "No, no, no," she said, in the exaggerated tone that people use when addressing babies, "we can't have little Miranda getting sick, now can we?"

Ariana smiled. "It matters not, Mamma. You are here, now. I only wish Papa and Lucy could have joined you."

Lucy, the youngest Forsythe sister, and their papa had been obliged to stay home until the spring planting had been seen to. Mr. Forsythe did not wish to be wholly bereft of his family, so Lucy, who was a great comfort to him, had been enjoined to remain in Chesterton for his sake.

"I could not bear to wait upon your father a day longer," Mrs. Forsythe answered with a little smile. "They will come by post chaise after Papa has done his service through Easter. And then we will all be together—except for the Norledges. Perhaps when Papa comes, he may bring your elder sister and her husband."

"I would want Aunt and Uncle Pellham too, in that case," Ariana said.

"Oh, my! With your Aunt and Uncle Pellham, and the Norledges, even this large house would be filled with guests, I daresay!" said her mother.

Beatrice, meanwhile, barely listened. She was still happily ingesting the thought that Ariana had noticed her womanhood. At seventeen, hers was not a striking sort of beauty—one did not stop in instant admiration upon spying Beatrice in a room, for instance, as had often been the case for Ariana; but the younger girl had no lack of wits, a lively eye and countenance, and, not to be understated, an easy friendliness. Among a

group of reserved and proper English young ladies, Beatrice would be the beacon of refuge for the timid; she was welcoming where others were aloof; inquisitive and protective where others looked away. Nor was she the sort of young woman to glide across a floor, dignified and elegant. Instead, Beatrice was ever having to keep her energy in check; though when rising from a chair (her mamma had made her practice doing so countless times) she could appear as elegant as the next young woman.

She ate nicely, even daintily. But left unchecked, her natural enthusiasm might propel her through a room with alarming speed. Her shawls were ever hanging from her arms, never staying in place over her shoulders; and her mother forbade her from wearing hair jewellery, as it tended to lose its place upon her head. Bandeaux were her lot—besides bonnets.

“It is fortunate that you allow me to wear bandeaux,” she said to her mamma only last week, while the woman was draping a wide one of taffeta artfully around Beatrice’s head, “or I believe you would exile every manner of female head attire from this house, saving turbans. And my hair holds a curl twice as long as Lucy’s!”

Mrs. Forsythe paused from her ministrations and met her daughter’s eyes in the looking glass before them. “I daresay you are suited for turbans; perhaps we should shop for some. I believe they are very popular just now.” Since the last thing in the world Beatrice wished to wear upon her head was a turban—no matter how many ladies in the pages of *La Belle Assemblée* wore them—she simply gave voice to an exasperated huff, evoking a knowing smile upon her mamma’s face.

“I should adore a full house of guests,” Beatrice said, now. “Please do invite the Norledges, Ariana! Only think of the diversions we could have; play-acting with enough people to fill all the roles for a change! Or charades; or even a dance!”

Ariana looked at her sister fondly. “Which dances do you like best?”

“The waltz!” she quickly responded, with a smile to show that she knew it was mischievous to prefer the waltz—the single dance which entailed more contact with the opposite sex than any other ballroom fare. Mrs. Forsythe clucked her tongue, but Beatrice blithely ignored this, taking a peek at her brother-in-law to gauge his reaction. The host of the gathering, already dressed crisply to go riding, was reading his morning paper and not listening to his wife and relations.

And relations surrounded him. In addition to Beatrice and Mrs. Forsythe, there was his aunt, Mrs. Royleforst, staying with them; and her companion, the skinny, nervous Miss Bluford. These two ladies had not appeared for breakfast, which was probably on account of Mrs. Royleforst. She found mornings difficult and either slept in, or took a tray in her room.

“What do you think, sir?” asked Mrs. Forsythe, of her host. “Shall my daughter invite her sister Mrs. Norledge and her husband to join Mr. Forsythe and Lucy when they set out for your house? Or will your home be filled too much for your liking?”

Mr. Mornay looked over his paper to acknowledge that he had heard her question. “As it is your and my wife’s family, I think the two of you must decide upon it. As long as there are bedchambers enough,” he added, looking at Ariana, “you may fill them with guests as you please.”

“Thank you, darling,” she said, making Beatrice stifle a titter. Her sister and her husband were still inordinately romantic, to her mind. Good thing no one else was present save her mother. She would have been mortified in company.

“Shall I take the baby, Mamma?” said Ariana, for Miranda was beginning to fuss.

“I suppose she wants to be fed,” agreed her mother.

Ariana nodded to a maid who was seated against the wall, who went and received the child from her grandmother and brought her gingerly to her mamma. Ariana’s eyes sparkled with happiness as she took her little girl. She murmured to the baby, by turns picking her up and kissing her face, and then just holding her in her arms and gazing at her in loving adoration. “I shan’t feed her yet,” she said. “She isn’t insisting upon it.”

Beatrice’s thoughts were still upon the diversions that would be possible with a large group staying at the house. “If they all come, will you hold a ball, Ariana? Or”—she pressed her lips together in anticipation for a moment—“will you take me to London this year for the season? Then I may go to as many balls as I like, and you will not have the expense of holding them!”

“If she takes you to London for the season,” put in her mamma, “she will have a great deal more expense than just that of a ball. Besides which, you are too young for such.” Beatrice looked at her mamma, her enthusiasm temporarily dampened.

“But my sister sees I am older, now,” she said, looking at Ariana with a silent plea in her gaze. “And I am not too young for a season, according to the magazines. Many girls my age have their coming out, Mamma.”

“Many girls,” she returned instantly, “have little sense, and their parents, no better; your papa and I did not allow either of your sisters a coming out at your age. London society is out of the question.”

Beatrice settled her eyes upon her brother-in-law. “I daresay Mr. Mornay has seen many a girl my age—and younger—make their debut during the season. And to no ill effect. Why, I am sure some of them have made the most brilliant matches! Many a man of good standing prefers a younger lady for his wife. You had ought to let me go while I am young enough to enjoy this advantage.”

Mr. Mornay frowned behind his newspaper. He knew his young relation wanted his support in the matter, but he was assuredly not in the habit of supporting young women in their wishes regarding a London season. So he said nothing, though an ensuing silence in the room told him the ladies waited for his opinion.

Ariana, who knew better, offered, “Let us discuss it another time. There are months, yet, before the season. And with Miranda so young, I cannot decide at this point, in any case.”

Beatrice, who had no idea she was treading on dangerous ground, said, “Only let Mr. Mornay tell us his thoughts! I know my mother will listen if you tell her, sir,” she said, directly to him.

He put his paper down reluctantly, and looked at Beatrice. “Ariana was young to face it at nineteen. At your age, you need to be sheltered, not put forth among the wolves.” Her face fell so entirely that he almost chuckled at it. “Why are you so eager for a season?”

“I can never forget my sister’s tales of her experiences in London,” she said. “She met you there!” Beatrice eye’s roamed to Ariana as she continued, “Her coming out is what brought her to marriage, to Aspindon, to a better life. I have had my fill of Chesterton, I assure you! The prospects for marrying well in that region are dismal,” she said. (Ariana closed her eyes at this; she could hardly bear to hear her sister telling all the reasons Phillip would most despise.) “All the eligible young men in the county are either in a regiment somewhere or at sea, or in need of a fortune. I must go to London or Bath, where there are more gentlemen.” She turned back to her brother-in-law and regarded him earnestly. “I have no fortune, sir, as you are well aware. But with my connexion to yourself through my sister, I am certain to make advantageous acquaintances!”

“Beatrice,” said Ariana warningly, but her tone was lost on the younger girl’s ears.

“But what could be more certain?” Beatrice asked, looking at Ariana in surprise. “I shall end up, no doubt, just as you have.” She turned back to Mr. Mornay with shining eyes. “With a man like you, sir!”

Beatrice evidently thought she made him a great compliment. Mr. Mornay stood up after folding his paper. He said, “It takes more than wearing a corset to say a young lady is grown up.” He directed his remark to the whole room, and then settled his eyes upon Beatrice for one second too long, before giving a small bow to the women in general, and turning to leave the room. Beatrice blushed lightly. Mr. Frederick met his master at the door, holding out a salver with a letter. Mr. Mornay took it but then looked curiously at the butler.

“It arrived in that condition, sir! I daresay it was lost in the mail or some such thing.”

“Hmm, very good, Freddie.” He held up a battered and mud-stained missive for his wife to see, while eyeing it dubiously. She looked amused. “Who is it from?” He unfolded the paper, as the sealing wax was almost entirely worn off, and scanned the signature at the bottom. “Colonel Sotheby. I’ll read it in my office.” He went and kissed Ariana’s cheek. Their eyes met for the briefest second; then he left the room.

Beatrice was smarting from his earlier remark, and said, as soon as he’d gone, “How ‘grown up’ can I be, when I am forced to exist in a small country village with no prospects, and genteel company only upon a Sunday?”

“You overstate your case,” reproved her mamma.

“And as for wearing stays,” Beatrice continued, after taking a sip of tea, “I do not pretend that is what makes me of age for a season. I have sat beneath the tutelage of my father and of Mr. Timmons—and of his curate, and I should say my principles are well-founded.”

“We are glad to hear it,” Ariana said, with forbearance, “but really, you should not be setting your mind upon seeking a man like my husband; you should be intent upon finding the man God has chosen for you.” “And so I am!” she protested, her eyes wide. “But look at the advantage He gives me in having you for my sister! Am I to ignore it? When you could be the very means of bringing me and my future husband together?”

Ariana played absently with little Miranda’s blanket, tucking it in about the infant’s chin more snugly. She met her sister’s eyes. “London is not the only place a young woman may meet a husband. And if you want my husband’s approval of your plan, the last thing in the world you should tell him is that you want to meet a man like him! Or that you wish to marry above you in any way.”

“But is it above me to marry well? When my sister is Mrs. Mornay of Aspindon House?”

“’Tis above you,” said her mother, “because you are Miss Forsythe of Chesterton.”

“I am a gentleman’s daughter,” she replied.

“With no dowry to speak of,” said her mamma. Beatrice’s cheeks began to burn. “With a brother-in-law of great fortune and consequence!” she said, petulantly.

“That may not signify,” said her mother. Mrs. Forsythe was glad Mr. Mornay had left the room, as Beatrice’s sentiments embarrassed her.

“It must signify, Mamma!” Beatrice continued.

“You have said quite enough on this topic. I think it wise if you said nothing more regarding a season. In fact, I forbid you to mention it to Mr. Mornay again. Do you understand me?” There was a short silence. Beatrice nodded unhappily, deciding it would be a simple matter to keep from mentioning her hopes to the man, for he evidently would not encourage her in them. But she would continue to think of the season in London. She would continue to hope; and some other day, when Ariana was in a good disposition, she would prevail upon her to sponsor her.

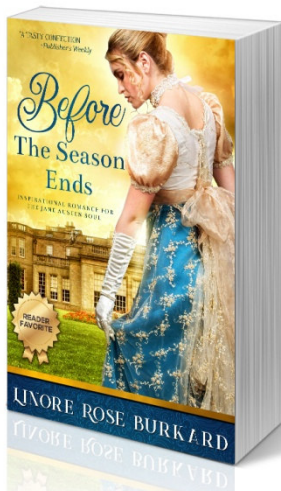
Beatrice did not want to be disrespectful, but she knew that Mr. Mornay was quite in error regarding her. He did not know, for instance, that a man of means *must* be her object in marriage. Every inch she saw of Aspindon confirmed her sense that a rich life awaited her. She was born for it. Her sister’s house and grounds were precisely the quality she adored. Not to mention, servants aplenty, a beauteous bedchamber all to herself with its own little sitting room; meals to delight in; yes, all was opulent, indeed. There was an enormous park and grounds that went on for near a mile, and actual tenants—to make one feel truly important! Mr. Mornay didn’t realize it was her lot in life to marry well. And now all that was necessary was to meet her future husband—the man

who could make it happen. She had long prayed for just such a meeting, and knew that it was bound to occur. All she had to do was be properly outfitted, and in the proper company. All she had to do was change her sister and brother-in-law's minds on the matter.

How difficult could that be?

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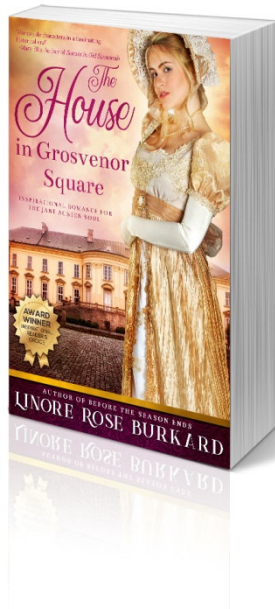
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