

## Lord of the Grief

“All he does is sit by that window,” whispers the housekeeper Edyth of Harchester Castle to the butler Reynolds as they huddle by the castle’s drawing room.

Reynolds shakes his head: “As Shakespeare's Brutus cried, 'My heart is in the casket there with Caesar, and I must wait till it come back to me.’”

“Well said, Reynolds.”

“Miss April!” the butler turns, “I didn't know you were...”

“Of course you didn't,” the vivacious April Dodge smiles, smoothing the velvet collar of her riding jacket. “I'm like the fog rolling in on little cat's feet.”

“Ah, the literate flapper,” teases her brother, Oliver, bounding down the staircase.

“Uncle would have it no other way, if we are to gossip about him at all.”

“Right, April,” Oliver bows. He shifts his focus outside, “Now, about our riding competition.”

“You will lose gracefully, I dare say,” April says, pulling at the massive door of the castle as Reynolds rushes to open it for her. “To Burton-upon-Stather and back!”

Striding across the courtyard, Reynolds nods to Ames, the elderly stable manager, who is at the gate holding two coal black Irish racing horses, each standing eighteen hands. The brother and sister rush to mount Warlock and Cannon, putting the steeds through their paces in a paddock ringed with a stone wall. Suddenly, April takes off, prodding Warlock to jump the paddock wall.

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by Reggie Morrissey

Word count:2,765

“Not playing by the queen's rules, I see,” Oliver shouts, following suit.

April's cascading laugh trails behind her. Oliver urges on Cannon and is nearly in line with

Warlock when they both clear the first of three stone walls between the castle and village.

Inside the castle, a thick drape is brushed aside as the lord of the 15th Century estate watches the race and bellows, “Good show!”

“Sir?” asks Edyth.

“My niece and nephew are racing.”

“I'm happy to see you enjoying yourself, sir,” Edyth says as she stands on tiptoe to polish the tear-shaped crystals hanging from a fireplace luminary. “Perhaps you'll have a stroll in the garden yourself today?”

“Oh, I don't know,” Lord Gideon Harchester sighs. He glances about the high-ceilinged room, at its 17th Century Flemish tapestry, hand-painted silk lampshades and Chinese lamp bases, Indian incense burners and Venetian lanterns, Renaissance cabinets and carved Circassian walnut door.

“I rather like it in here,” Gideon whispers, stroking his salt and pepper beard. His foot taps on the Persian rug as he lifts binoculars to glimpse at the riders at the crest of the hill. “Jolly good to have the two of them here.”

“Miss April even looks like Lady Katherine, doesn't she, sir,” Edyth says, nodding at a portrait of Gideon's deceased wife above the marble mantel.

“Oh no. Not at all, Lord Gideon says with some irritation. “Why, you know Lady Katherine was far more beautiful, Edyth.”

“”She was, sir.”

“My wife had hair that flowed to her waist, not chopped off around her ears like these Cake Eaters or Flappers, whatever April is.”

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“Yes, sir,” Edith nods.

“I brushed her hair every evening of our married life.”

“I meant no harm, sir,” the housekeeper says, dusting with a flurry of a feather wand.

“Katherine's skin was soft and pink, not tanned to leather from weeks in the Mediterranean.”

“I'll be going to polish the silver now, sir,” Edyth says, wiping her brow as she fled.

Lord Gideon stares out the window at a large swatch of his ancestral home. He observes a gardener trimming hedges that form an archway into his once-adored rose garden. His gaze moves past the stooping gardener to rest on a flock of sheep grazing on the same hill April and Oliver's horses had thundered across moments earlier.

The butler Reynolds arrives. “May I get you anything, sir?”

Gideon shakes his head. “Someday, I suppose I will go out to the garden again, greet the merchants in the village and mouth hymns in the local minster.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Reynolds, I am still an apprentice in grief,” Gideon sighs. “My life was so graced by Lady Katherine's unfailing good humour I have no way to handle her sudden loss.”

“As to be expected, my lord.”

“I awake each dawn and grope about for the proper attitude to shoulder the heavy wheel of another twenty-four hours without her.”

Gideon sinks into a wing chair and stares into the past as the butler quietly leaves the room.

In the afternoon, the butler reads aloud to his lord from “The Complete Works of William Shakespeare.” At night, Edyth recites passages from the King James Bible. In between barely touched meals and fitful sleep, Gideon converses in whispers with his dead wife.

“Remember when we first sat together at the Captain's table on the voyage in 1903, darling, you

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the loveliest 19-year old on the whole Atlantic. I bribed a cabin boy to find out that you were an American orphan traveling to London with your aunt, and the young man with you was your brother, Matthew, thankfully not my rival, or I would have had to toss him overboard.”

Gideon continues recollections aloud when he dines with April and Oliver, son and daughter of Katherine's brother, a Montanan who had remained in Edenborough to make his fortune.

“Your Great Aunt Daphne was determined to return her beautiful charge to Montana after a summer abroad, and I was equally keen on never letting Katherine out of my sight..”

“Father told us he and Aunt Katherine stole away from a London hotel to stay in the village and rendezvous with you,” Oliver says.

“Yes, I looked out the drawing room window one morning and there she was, riding bareback, Western-style across the hills from the village, her hair flowing in the wind.”

“She was so pretty and gay,” April sighs. “I always wanted to be just like her.”

“Everyone adored her in the village,” Lord Gideon sighs.

“The poor children from Leeds and Manchester she arranged to stay the summer loved her,” Oliver says. “She had parties for them and led such intriguing treasure hunts.”

“Oliver, remember all the young friends we made when we came to visit,” April asks. “We all thought Aunt Katherine was a fairy godmother to so many children when she couldn't have ever have her own ... I mean.”

“It's a blur of faces and seasons,” Lord Gideon says, ending an awkward silence. “Twenty-two years of entertaining, traveling the world, collecting beautiful things, of Katherine's fawning over Christmas presents and beagle puppies, whipping me at lawn tennis, almost at croquette.”

Gideon falls silent.

“Uncle, may we listen to my gramophone?” April asks.

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As music fills the room, Gideon, handsome in dinner jacket and ascot, smiles faintly across the table at the face of his niece in frothy lavender flapper's gown. He closes his eyes and listens to her lilting voice as she relates the wicked details of her race with Oliver.

"I throttled him."

"There's always tomorrow," Oliver says. "I dare you to beat me starting on your mark."

Leaning across to pat his arm, April says, "Come with us, Uncle!"

Mesmerized, Lord Gideon looks at April and nods.

But next morning Edyth is wringing her hands as Lord Gideon dons his velvet riding hat and snaps its strap under his chin. His boot heels tap the marble floor as he paces, waiting for a tardy April and Oliver.

"I thought first you might have a walk, sir."

"Another day."

"It looks cloudy today for a ride."

"Edyth, I am going riding, and that is that!"

Lord Gideon would tell no one he feels terribly shaky when mounting the Arabian Ivory, his wife's wild-eyed favorite ride. Prancing in the paddock with the whinnying Warlock and Cannon, a skittish Ivory snorts and rears. Gideon leans forward on his mount, gently patting and talking to the steed until he calms Ivory enough to obey the rein. April and Oliver wait by the stables.

"Uncle, we don't have to race," Oliver says, glancing back at the frantic Edyth.

"Nonsense, let's go."

"You'll stop if it gets tedious, Uncle?" April calls out.

But Lord Gideon is too far ahead to hear her. Edyth watches the three riders cross the first meadow, galloping to the crest of the hill. Despite the lord's lead, the black horses race past

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Ivory and seem to fly across the wall. Gideon presses the horse for speed and a high jump. But Ivory fails to clear the wall.

“Reynolds!” Edyth cries as she runs to find the butler.

“He's fallen?” Reynolds asks.

Edyth nods. “We must fetch the doctor.”

Reynolds and Edyth watch Ames and a stableman driving a horse-drawn cart from the stable toward the fallen rider and his grazing horse. April and Oliver are doubling back and reach their uncle as Ames halts his cart.

Nearly unconscious, the pale Gideon seems distant, toying with death.

“Katherine?” he asks as if answering her call from beyond. He speaks as hallucinations of her collide with glimpses of the people carrying him to the cart and heading to the castle.

Edyth and Reynolds hover over Lord Gideon from the castle's courtyard to the drawing room.

They are startled as he points insistently to his wing chair. He leans his head against the burnished leather and allows the servants to set his feet upon a needlepoint-covered stool.

Reynolds pulls off his boots.

“And Ivory?” Lord Gideon asks.

“Ames is checking Ivory, sir,” Reynolds says. “Can you tell us where you are hurt?”

At Reynolds' words, tears spring from Gideon's eyes, rolling down his cheeks to his beard. He waves away the servants, April and Oliver, a circle of loving and concerned faces. When Cecil Barnes, the village physician, arrives at the castle, the butler takes him aside.

“Doctor, you may find my lord rather stoic.”

Dr. Barnes crosses the room to Gideon, sighing. “Not long ago I came here for Lady Katherine, and a sad day that was.”

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“Indeed, grave markers in the family cemetery around her grave are for people who lived to be forty and fifty years older, so I would say you are right, Barnes.”

The doctor frowns at the odd tilt of the lord's arm. “Off kilter, is it?”

“Yes.”

“Let's have a look.”

As Barnes helps Gideon shrug off his riding jacket, the lord nearly faints with the effort.

“This won't do,” Dr. Barnes says. “I'll have to strap it in place.”

“Have done with it.”

A few moments later a bandaged Lord Gideon leans back again, his face beaded with sweat and tears. Dr. Barnes signals Reynolds to come forward with a tray of brandy and sniffers. The doctor settles onto the couch, sipping his brandy.

“Would you tell me if anything else hurt?”

“My heart.”

“Good God, man!”

“I don't mean physically, Barnes,” he says. “I am sick at heart.”

“Expect that, Lord Gideon,” the doctor says. “Grief works itself out in its own time.”

“But I just want to gallop through it and come out on the other side.”

“When you're ready, sir, you tell your mind and body when that will suit you.”

“I barely wish to breathe.”

“And, one day you won't breathe.”

The doctor stands, clasps his black bag and leaves the castle.

In the days ahead, Gideon mopes in the drawing room, waiting for his shoulder to mend.

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Bored, he agrees to play a game of cards with chatty April. Next day he notices a look of unease on his nephew Oliver's face, and presses him to know what troubles the young man.

“I'm not sure how father and mother will feel; but I've rather fallen in love with a girl.”

“They'll be happy for you, my boy.”

“Aunt Katherine would be, but well, Mary is not what my parents would have in mind.”

“Mary?”

“A girl I met here ten summers ago whose family lives in Leeds.”

“One of Lady Katherine's ... children?” Gideon asks. “Well, invite her to tea.”

Strangely warmed by Oliver's confession, Gideon calls Reynolds to the drawing room the next day to sift through piles of correspondence left to gather dust after Katherine's death.

“Sir, this appears to be an invitation to a ball held last month.”

“Toss it out.”

“These are solicitations for Lady Katherine's pet charities, sir.”

“The world still has such use for Katherine,” Gideon says. “I should have died.”

Oliver stands at the doorway. “Uncle, you made it possible for Aunt Katherine to spread her goodwill and cheer.”

Smiling, Oliver leads a willowy young woman into the room, so graceful she seems to float.

“A privilege to see you again, Lord Harchester.”

Gideon nods agreeably at Mary. “Forgive me, I don't remember the first meeting.”

“Sir, do you want me to show you the rose bushes we planted together?”

“I planted rose bushes with you?”

Mary nods.

“I suppose we could stroll in the garden after tea; but you two should walk now.”



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Outside the drawing room, Edyth gazes heavenward and smiles, a Cheshire cat, whispering, “Finally, my lady, he'll walk in the garden!”

Lord Gideon says, “Reynolds, let us make three piles of solicitations; Katherine's pet charities, her pride, and her promises.” “We'll do something with all of them, I suppose.”

The lord and his butler proceed through most of the mail until Lord Gideon lifts a letter bearing Katherine's handwriting and addressed to him. Paling, he waves the butler out and reads:

“Darling, if you are reading this, you are making progress on the strange path life set before us. I beg you next to please, please take my place in the charities. There is so much to do for the poor children. Second, I challenge you to a game beyond the drawing room and beyond my grave. In the spirit of a merry treasure hunt, I hid messages to you. Be a good boy and listen to me.

My messages are in the garden, the conservatory and the stable tack room. Each contains a clue for the next hiding place, all the way to the village green and minster.

When you arrive at our minster pew, I will be with you in spirit, thanking heaven I knew such a magnificent, kind and generous man. Get going. Rose garden, first. Conservatory, tack room, apple orchard. The rest is yours to discover in our game and your new life.”

Gideon sits holding the letter through the afternoon, but at tea he surprises everyone by calling for champagne. He insists Edyth and Reynolds join the party, and all raise their glasses.

“To Lady Katherine!”

Gideon takes young Mary's arm and strolls toward the gardens. “Let's get started with our walk,” he says, patting her hand. “Katherine has my work cut out for me!”

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“Grandpa, don't make me watch this old movie one more time!”

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“Why not, sport, nothing better to do on a rainy day?”

“But I don't want to see it again!”

“When your mother gets home from work, you can go downstairs to your own TV.”

“Then, turn to the part where Lord Gideon falls off the horse cause it's funny.”

“How could you think it's funny a man gets hurt?”

“It's just a really old movie, Grandpa!”

“Hey, Dad, what's going on?”

“I like this movie.”

“And I don't, Mommy!”

“Well, it's starting to clear up, so let's all go out for a walk.”

“To the park, Mommy?”

“How about by the pond?”

“You two run along while I watch my movie.”

“Dad, you know mom would want you to go out and get some fresh air.”

“I don't want to, but when you come back, I'll play the home movie video.”

“Like when Mommy was in school?”

“Oh, I've got movies going back years and years to when your mom was a baby in the crib.”

“See you later, Grandpa.”

“Kiddo, I don't know what I'm going to do with your grandpa, when all he does is sit grieving by that television.”

“Dr. Barnes says grief works itself out in its own time.”

“Who?”

“Cecil Barnes told Lord Gideon,” the grandson says. “Why don't we make Grandpa a treasure

map from Nana?"

"A treasure map from Nana?"

"Yeah, so Grandpa has to go out to the yard and Home Depot and Burger King and..."

"So he gets out of the house?"

"And goes to church, too."

"Okay, we'll make the treasure map when we get home."

"And he can go to horse races."

"Let's just stop this hunt at church."

"Nana is there in spirit."

"Honey, where do you get such ideas?"

"The only show on Grandpa's TV."

END