

Ponder This...



SUSAN KARSTEN



*Whatever is
Pure*

*Charlotte's
Dilemma*

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Susan Karsten

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Charlotte's Dilemma
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1

Dear Mother, you'll be happy to learn that I have arrived at my destination. The arranged hideaway exceeds expectations. The village is remote and on the outside edge of civilization and therefore perfect for stashing away a shamed maiden.

~*~

Charlotte chewed on the end of her steel-tipped pen. What more did she want to share with Mother dear? A mother who allowed her to be shunted out of sight, shipped to the hinterlands without a hearing. The court of public opinion took precedence over maternal loyalty and above the truth.

She set down the pen with finality. Writing to her mother gave an outlet, but only so much could be written at once. The letter to Mother could be set aside and completed over time. No hurry, it wasn't as if Charlotte's incoming mail included any personal, family letters that had to be answered—indeed, no letters at all arrived at the dismal thatched abode that served as her dwelling. To call it a cottage would be dishonest.

Bordering on hovel, the damp structure boasted one room serving as parlor and kitchen. A sleeping

alcove, marked off by a saggy tattered curtain of ancient provenance, made it habitable—barely. A fireplace with a pot crane, toasting rack, and Dutch oven sufficed for meal preparation. The chipped pitcher and bowl provided for daily hygiene and sat on a rickety chest next to the sleeping area.

Praise God a small tub and bucket came with the property. They were stored under the table—itsself a scarred, wobbly affair complete with two mismatched chairs and surmounted by a motley assortment of dishes, cups, and cutlery gracing the center board.

Charlotte sank into a chair and lowered her face into her hands. Oh my, how did it come to this? One misstep caused a severe chastening descent—a fall from grace, if you will. Eyes closed, she marshalled her thoughts and attempted to center them in prayer. *Oh, God...* was all she mustered, but the entreaty caused an answering glimmer of peace to flutter in her breast.

The rumble of wheels pierced her reverie, and she raised her head. The cry of a coachman rang out, “Whoa,” and the window provided the glimpse of a shiny black carriage halting out front.

Odd to interact without a maid or chaperone near, but she took a deep breath and emerged onto the stoop. Back to the door, hands behind her back, she clutched the handle in case retreat proved necessary. The coachman used the tip of his crop to lift the brim of his hat, and then resumed staring straight ahead.

The side window panel slid open. A young man’s face showed itself ever so briefly and then disappeared into the gloom of the lavish conveyance. A deep, pleasant voice sounded forth, “I’d been informed the new teacher arrived. Is all to your satisfaction?”

The hovel could certainly be improved upon, but

this was not the time to deliver a litany of ills. Besides, this could be a representative of the connection that allowed her placement here. It wouldn't do to ruffle those feathers. "Thank you, sir. Quite adequate."

"You're welcome. First day tomorrow. You have all necessary instructions and supplies, correct?"

Whatever he looked like; he surely owned a pleasing voice. "Oh, yes, sir." She exuded deference— whoever the man was, he was in command, and she had no ground to quibble. "I've been to the schoolhouse over the hill, swept it out, and all's in readiness."

"Very good."

A rap sounded from inside the carriage, the coachman tipped his hat again and smacked the horses with his reins. The vehicle rumbled away, leaving her bemused by having a conversation with a disembodied voice—something she'd never experienced. Why didn't the man introduce himself—or show his face, except for the brief glimpse? Perhaps he didn't take to communicating with lowly teachers.

A sinking sensation overtook her. He might know, and therefore not want to meet her. The story of her disgrace could have reached this hinterland. Somehow. Maybe he heard the rumors.

But she'd been hired. They wouldn't have hired her if they had qualms, connection or not. She must rein in her fears and doubts. The hastily patched-together plan for her removal from scandal's vicinity included a false name. Her short time in society gave little enough opportunity for many of the *ton* to learn of her existence, let alone her true name, or appearance. Thus, her fears were mostly groundless.

The juiciness of the gossip about her, however,

flew like the wind and blew her away before she'd even met more than a handful of the *haute ton*.

Enough of rueful ruminations. Miss Charlotte Broughton would do her duty to this opportunity. Brought-on...a humorous choice of alias, considering she "brought on" her own troubles.

This morning, in the village church, she sat in a back pew, bonnet and veil anchored in place. She slipped away during the benediction and scuttled down the lane, arriving home out of breath. After hanging her hat and cloak on a hook, she fluffed her hair and glanced into the mirror inside the lid of her bandbox. Yes, she was pretty, but that wasn't her fault, was it? She had not enticed the man who rained folly into her life. She stretched out her arms and wiggled her fingers, visualizing her sorrows flying out of the tips.

She needed to be grateful for her unmarried status. Many a scandal was quelled by forcing an offer from the offending male. Her particular disgrace did not allow that unsavory action to be taken. And she had a roof over her head, be it ever so humble. The privacy of a new name, a new place where people—she hoped—knew nothing of her shame.

The last teacher succumbed to consumption, she learned from the carter, on the wagon ride from the coaching station to her new situation. He'd also indicated the presence of a Lord Hipwith in the vicinity. Hipwith being the name of the village, she surmised this lord to be the benefactor of the school, and the owner of most of the village and surrounding farms.

Done reviewing the sad state of affairs, she set out her clothing for the next day—selecting the most

school teacher-ish dress in her possession. It was green—never her color, and though made of expensive fabric, the cut and style plain. The children wouldn't notice the fineness of the gown's construction. She had a fichu to fill in the stylishly low neckline and a knitted shawl formerly belonging to her nanny to cover her bare arms. Sufficient garb for tomorrow—the first day of her new life.

2

The dwelling is rustic, the rooms small, but adequate. It will have to be sufficient as I am content to remain on the shelf for the rest of my life and will be living alone forevermore. As to my occupation, the governess, tutors, and lessons you provided me over the years shall stand me in good stead. Six students, village and farm children, who appear to show no signs of recognizing a shamed woman when they see one. Mayhap the parents will follow suit when they meet me.

~*~

Assessing how well, if at all, the students could read and write took most of the first morning. She glanced out the window and saw no shadows, which indicated noon and time to ring the dented brass hand bell found in her desk drawer.

“Children. Attention! It is noon, and since the weather is fine, you may take your lunch pails or packets out into the schoolyard. I shall join you in a few minutes.”

After an unseemly scuffle between the three boys, the group exploded out the door, yelping. The girls followed, chattering and smiling—glad to be together again and back in school.

A form, in the shape of a dark-clad man, passed by the side window. One of the parents? Between the wavy old glass, and the white curtain, she couldn't make out details. She slipped through the doorway. The raised stoop provided a view of the entire schoolyard, which sloped away from the front of the building.

The children, clustered together, laughed and crowed over the licorice one of the boys shared. But, there, a few yards away from the students, the man leaned against a tree. His back to her, she yet discerned a certain sophistication to the cut of his apparel. He stood over average height and appeared to be a younger man. He must be the man who passed the window.

She watched and waited. When it became clear he wasn't leaving, she approached him, stared at his back, and stopped about four feet distant. "Have you a message?"

He didn't turn.

She cleared her throat and tried again. "Excuse me, I'm asking why you're here? Are you one of the student's parents checking on him or her?"

He pushed off the tree and pivoted toward her.

A flicker of suspicion skittered through her brain—the man in the carriage? The one who didn't introduce himself or show his face.

He lifted his hat and then replaced it upon his auburn waves. His thick-lashed hazel eyes drew hers, and she knew what a butterfly might feel like, pinned to a board. The words catastrophically handsome came close to describing the man—typical superlatives did not suffice. The noble nose, the sculpted jaw, the lips, the physique—all blended to the image of perfection,

despite a look of sadness around the edges. "I'm the school's patron. Hipwith."

He gave a slight bow and then stood silent, intent on watching her. Was he waiting for a reaction? Yes, he was as handsome as Adonis, but she'd sworn off men and walled off her heart. She schooled her features to blandness, and gave a mere bob, matching his informality. "And I am Miss Broughton, the new teacher."

No intimation of recognition. A relief.

He glanced at the children, who were now occupied playing tag. "Did the morning go well?"

Now this she understood—he'd merely stopped by in his overseeing capacity. "It did go well. All except the youngest two could read and write. The last teacher saved me some work."

His eyes took on a faraway mien. "Master Chesterstone became teacher here at the village school, after I no longer needed a tutor. He was a fine scholar and a good neighbor. The community suffered at his loss."

Perhaps this explained the man's sad aura. Yet she stiffened. Was his inference reflecting on her abilities? "I assure you I will do my best to fill his shoes."

His brows lifted. "Indeed."

Her patience thinned. "Have you seen my letters of reference? My qualifications?"

"Yes. Not many schoolmarms can boast so many languages, if I recall, at least two modern and two ancient?"

"Correct." Somewhat mollified, but still at a disadvantage, she added to the list. "I can teach arithmetic, geometry, and the rudiments of higher maths—though we may not get that far. The village

families can't commit to lengthy years of study. My true passion, however, is literature."

Her fingertips covered her lips. She said too much. She wanted no man to possess any more than the bare facts about her. This man probably didn't care, but she didn't want to sound like a silly goose, rattling on about her literary passions.

"You came highly recommended, and we are grateful you accepted the position. Please forgive me if I implied otherwise."

"No, no. Forgive me for being defensive. Thank you for stopping by. I must call the children in for their afternoon lessons."

She turned away and then clapped her hands. The children ceased their games and trooped behind her. She held the door as they entered, and as she stepped in after them, she glanced back. Hipwith stood by the tree yet, and he raised a hand of farewell. She gave a cool semblance of a smile, belying her inner turmoil, and closed the door.

3

The school patron stopped by. He is an interesting-looking man, one might say. A man of few words, but altruistic. I hope he is not predisposed to interfere regarding educational matters. Potato stew is easy to make, and one pot lasts many days, you'll be glad to know.

~*~

The first week of school passed with notable success. A broken slate, a bout of tears, and a skinned knee were the worst events. The students resolved from a mass into individuals. On Friday afternoon, from the stoop, she watched them amble away down the lane. She turned back inside, to do some tidying, and to plan for Monday.

Silence fell over the school. A windless day—no leaves rustled; no gusts keened against the walls. Intermittent chirps from a distant bird her only companion.

She packed her things into a covered basket and closed and locked the door. On the wheel-rutted lane she stared at the ground as she walked, wondering how to spend the next two days in the solitude she wasn't yet used to. She had a novel, a tatting project, meals to make, a hovel to clean. The options held little

savor, but she supposed it could be borne.

In light of her dread of the coming loneliness, her heart gave a happy skip at the sight of a chaise standing in front of her domicile. Its passengers a robust middle-aged woman with a whey-faced maid.

"Good afternoon." All in yellow, and with a cheerfulness suggesting a sunbeam, the lady extended her hand through the open carriage window.

Charlotte neared. A waft of floral scent drifted down. She reached up and gave a gentle squeeze and a small shake then hid her ungloved hands behind her back. "May I be of help, ma'am?"

The lady gave an elegant wave of her upraised fingers. "Indeed you can, if you are Miss Broughton?"

Best to act mild-mannered and somewhat afraid. It wouldn't do to act too comfortable with her betters. She tilted her head in humble fashion and raised a shy shoulder. "I am she."

The smiling lady gave another swirl of her hand. "Wonderful. I am Lady Hipwith. I'd like you to come to tea at the manor tomorrow afternoon at four."

Oh, my. A social entanglement—just the thing to lessen her anonymity. But since this was Lady Hipwith, and Charlotte already met Lord Hipwith, more than likely this woman's son, damage should be minimal. Besides, being completely alone for the rest of her days held little appeal. The short taste of exile already served proof of her need for a friend or two. The decision made, she answered. "I'd be delighted. Thank you, my lady. May I have your direction?"

Lady Hipwith picked up the reins. "No need. I'll send the carriage. Ta-ta."

Charlotte stood dumbfounded for a moment and then rushed into the cottage. Once inside, she slowed

to a halt. *Why am I rushing?* The invitation for tea lay many hours in the future. She wondered if the tea included Lord Handsome's presence. Why a man like him was hidden in the back of beyond during the height of the season was beyond her guess.

~*~

Heart pounding, she accepted a footman's assistance to descend from the carriage. She glanced up at the imposing three-story granite home which loomed over her like one more cloud in the overcast gray sky. A rumble of thunder sped her steps. A butler swept the door open, allowing her to enter, then shut it with a muted bang.

In the past, social occasions held no trepidation. The same friendly and open-hearted demeanor which gave her ease in company, made her a perfect victim for a lascivious predator who thought nothing of besmirching her spotless reputation. And over what? That she had the temerity to rebuff his advances? No more than any young miss would do, whilst taking her first, cautious steps into London's marriage market.

The world had crashed in on her. Those events seemed a lifetime away, but tell that to her trembling fingers. Without time to either quell or increase in nervousness, she was ushered into a dim drawing room. Eyes not adjusted to the gloom—why were the curtains drawn?—she made out a vaguely feminine form and headed toward it.

Lady Hipwith greeted her with a now-familiar hand motion in which she twirled her fingers in an upward sweep. The elegant and charming motion held nonchalance too natural to be an affectation. She patted

the settee. "Good afternoon, Miss Broughton. Please do be seated."

Charlotte's eyes became accustomed to the gloom in time. About to speak, the approach of Lord Hipwith caught her off guard, and the words died on her lips. The lack of expression on his face barely dimmed his good looks, but she wondered what lay behind the studied flatness. Perhaps he wanted to suppress her getting any intentions. She snorted inwardly. The day she got any intentions toward a man would be the day Hades froze over.

He neared to do the pretty, and then bowed over her reluctant hand. "Miss Broughton. Welcome to our family home."

She withdrew her hand. "Thank you. It's imposing, but I'm sure it's your *dulcis domus*."

His eyes flickered. Was that surprise? "Quite. This has been my sweet home since birth. So glad to be back. The pleasures of London pale in comparison."

London. When had he returned? Could it be recent enough that he heard the gossip? The story about her, which roared like a bonfire?

Lady Hipwith poured a cup of tea with steady, assured hands, though the large pot appeared to weigh at least ten pounds. "How do you take your tea, young lady?"

"A dot of milk and one sugar, please."

A footman zoomed forward to deliver Charlotte's cup and saucer made of finest, translucent porcelain. Good, her hands weren't trembling anymore, so no rattles gave away any lack of poise. The Hipwiths surely couldn't perceive her accelerated heartbeat. Being out socially for the first time since her downfall made her nervous, but she could sense the light at the

end of the tunnel, so to speak, dark though the room may be.

Thunder rumbled, followed by a crack of thunder. Lady Hipwith set her gaze upon Charlotte. "The storms of life can be just as daunting, can they not?"

4

A neighbor invited me for tea. An interesting family. My students are showing promise, though it's early days yet. Perhaps the school's patron will provide me a new broom soon. You and father must appreciate the peace and quiet now that I am gone, it is certainly quiet here.

~*~

Halfway through the week, mad with loneliness late one afternoon, her heart soared at the sound of a knock on the cottage door. She leapt up; tating fell in a tangle at her feet. "Who is it?"

Cautious, she pressed her ear to the door.

"Jimmy."

Jimmy?

"I's a letter fer ye. 'Twas me as was asked to bring it. From the manor."

She opened the door. There stood a smallish boy, too young to be a footman or groom. He thrust an envelope toward her. She took it. "Wait here."

Turning aside, she reached into her reticule, which hung near the door, and extracted a penny. "Hold out your hand."

Jimmy obeyed. She plunked the coin into his hand, and he closed his fingers around it, face aglow.

"Thankee."

"Why aren't you in my school, Jimmy?"

"Dunno, miss."

"Do you work at the manor?"

"Yes'm."

"Jimmy, would you like to learn to read, write, and cipher? At my school? You're the right age and would fit in."

He tugged the lock of hair above his forehead. "I reckon. But ye'll have to get permission from them, up there."

He jerked his chin in the general direction of the manor.

"Thank you, Jimmy. I shall look into the matter. You may go."

He dashed off down the lane, and she turned slowly, savoring the stationery's fine texture. She set the letter on the table, and then swung the kettle over the fire. She stirred the coals and added a log. She readied a mug, small teapot, and spoon. While the water heated, she slit open the envelope and drew out the contents. One sheet, not much writing.

Miss Broughton,

As patron of the school at which you are employed, I'd like to offer you...."

At this point, she clutched the letter to her chest and closed her eyes, dreading a slip on the shoulder. Her hands, of their own volition, crumpled the paper. She took several deep breaths to steady herself.

Smoothing the letter, she read on.

"...access to Hipwith Manor's library."

Relief flooded her breast, and a breath she hadn't realized she held escaped in a sigh.

The steaming kettle caught her attention, so she set

the letter down, to read with her tea. For there was more. A reprieve from unexpected fears made her giddy. She laughed to herself, gently chiding her inner fool. Though she had to admit her own unbidden attraction, Lord Hipwith hadn't shown a flicker of interest, nor made a hint of proffering his charms. Far from the oafish and unpleasant attentions of the married rake who'd trapped her in the corner of the hall on her way back from the ladies' retiring room. If only she'd chosen a different party to attend that night. The stack of invitations gave so many choices. Why had God allowed her innocent choice to lead to scandal? A scandal that scorched her hopes, dreams, and future?

Father's anger simmered like a burning coal held close to his breast. The outcome was her banishment, afar from London, far from the gilded, pleasure-seeking pastimes of the *haute ton*. The *ton*, in whose waters she simply dipped a tentative toe. As the daughter of a mere solicitor, she had limited access to the round of balls, picnics, routs, and salons making up the milieu of the upper crust of English society. In fact, the party during which she became an ingredient in the latest scandal broth was her first foray in that exalted territory.

Enough thoughts of the past. It was set in stone. Now she was a teacher with a worthy calling. Shocking how a visit from a messenger boy and a one-page missive put a spring in her step as she returned to the letter.

First, a sip or two of tea. Now for the rest of the letter.

Lady Hipwith requests your presence for tea again this Saturday at four. A carriage will be sent for you. While you