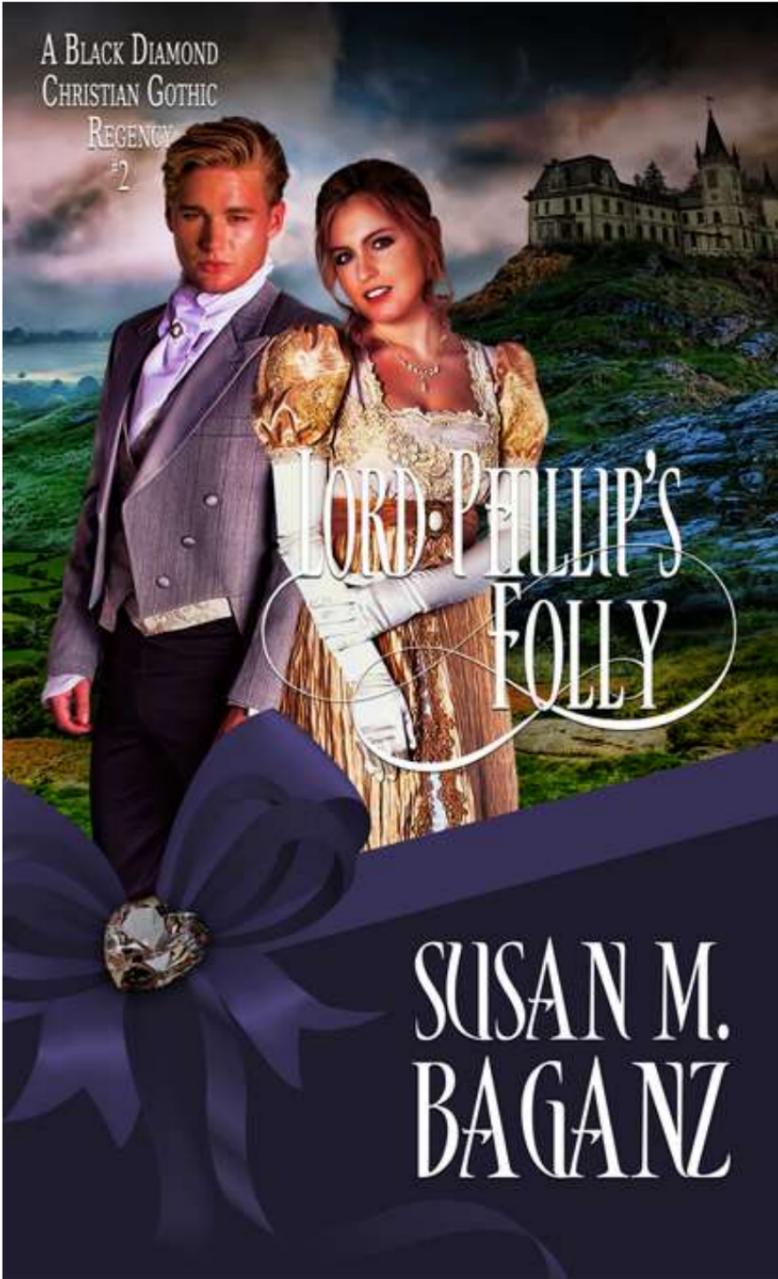


A BLACK DIAMOND
CHRISTIAN GOTHIC
REGENCY

#2



LORD PHILLIP'S
FOLLY

SUSAN M.
BAGANZ

Lord Phillip's Folly

Susan M. Baganz

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Lord Phillip's Folly

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Dedication

To Elizabeth Grace Herman

You were the first person to ever read and edit my novels and encourage me on my writing path. Thank you for all the ways you've invested in me.

BOOKS BY SUSAN M. BAGANZ

Black Diamond Regency Romantic Suspense

The Baron's Blunder (Prequel) novella

The Virtuous Viscount (Book 1)

Lord Phillip's Folly (Book 2)

Sir Michael's Mayhem (coming soon)

Lord Harrow's Heart (coming soon)

The Captain's Conquest (coming soon)

Orchard Hill Contemporary Romances

Pesto & Potholes

Salsa & Speed Bumps

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Root Beer & Roadblocks

Bratwurst & Bridges...

and others coming soon!

Historical Christmas Novella

Fragile Blessings

Gabriel's Gift

Short Story Compilation

Little Bits O' Love

Author's Note

During the tempestuous years between 1800-1820, or the more specific "Regency" years of 1811 to 1820, it was common for the upper classes, especially the men, to drink various forms of alcohol as part of their daily life. The men often savored a glass of port wine after the evening meal. French brandy was considered superior and highly coveted even though England was at war with France. In these stories, my characters do at times drink, and sometimes even to excess with serious consequences for their overindulgence. This is not in any way a recommendation on the part of the author or Pelican Book Group to advocate the drinking of alcohol or to abuse any substance. Laudanum is actually an opiate that was often prescribed medicinally (although many did become addicted to the drug). The use of these in the story are merely an attempt to use this period in history and its notorious excesses as a backdrop where appropriate.

Lord, protect me from foolish men.
The Honorable Elizabeth Follett

Folly:

Greek ἀρέτη anoia an'-oy-ah
Stupidity; by implication rage
- folly, madness.

(Strong's Exhaustive Concordance)

*But they shall proceed no further:
for their folly shall be manifest unto all men,
as theirs also was.*
1 Peter 1:5 (KJV)

Prologue

London

Across the misty sky flew a dark figure with wings flapping silently amidst the noise of the city of London where the elite of the *ton* prepared for this night's entertainments. As the black bird swooped and dipped amongst the chimneys, he found what he searched for. Make that "whom" he searched for. He spied her on the balcony gazing up at the sky awaiting him. He dove from his height only spreading his wings within a few feet to slow descent and land lightly on her outstretched arm.

"Duke," the young woman whispered. "You're back. I've been waiting for you."

His head bobbed but he refrained from speaking. His mistress frowned. He longed to see her smile. He tilted his head to the right, straightened it, and reached his neck forward to put his long dark beak to her cheek and rub gently.

Tears dangled at the edge of her eyelashes. "Tonight is the night, Duke. I cannot go through with what Papa plans. I must escape. All these years... I cannot endure any longer."

Duke was silent, listening. He bobbed his head.

She continued. "Lord Wolton has to be sixty, if not older and has the most nauseating odor. He is creepy and I'm certain he has some evil hold over Papa. But I cannot. I will not allow myself to pay the price for Papa's salvation. He's acted foolishly, and I love him,

but I won't..." She glanced up at the sky. "Why would God allow this to happen?" She shivered, although the mid-April evening was warm. "Why couldn't I simply be loved for who I am? Why all this unrelenting... evil?"

Duke ruffled his feathers and shook them, once again rubbing his beak against her cheek.

"Watch over me tonight. I've no clue how I'll escape, but I don't want to lose you when I do. Wait outside in the garden and follow wherever I go. Can you do that, sweetheart?" Her intense golden-green eyes gazed into his.

"I love you," Duke squawked, nodding and making a kissing sound. He'd do anything for her.

"I love you too, Duke. What would I have done this past year without you?"

Movement from the dressing room alerted him to danger. Duke flapped his wings and took off, circling twice above her before settling on a nearby tree. She blew him a kiss.

He bobbed his head in acknowledgment as she turned to step back off the narrow balcony and close the doors to the bedroom behind her.

He would protect his mistress.

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Spring 1810

Manchester

Despicable town. Infuriating family. Frustrating obligations. In spite of all that Lord Phillip Westcombe had returned to London. He enjoyed hibernating in the North Country the past few months. Peace and solitude had become a comfortable companion since his friend, Lord Marcus Remington, married Miss Josephine Storm at Christmas. Their happiness was something he did not begrudge them, but he found it difficult to be around. It pointed to a gaping hole in his own heart.

Instead, he spent the time studiously applying himself to his estate, and enjoyed managing the property. He was happy for Marcus and Josie, but the process of falling in love tended to be messy and complicated if their path to the altar was any indication. He did not want that in his life.

Yet here he was, back in London for the season.

If it hadn't been for his mother's pleas, his father's command, and his little sister's enthusiastic encouragement, he would still be at Stanton Hall. Avoiding the matchmaking mammas and the cloying attempts of young debutantes trying to trap him into the parson's mousetrap was one of his least favorite pastimes. At five and twenty he had spent the last few years gaining some town polish along with experience in how to avoid the snares of the marriage mart.

It was primarily his adoration for his sister, Penelope, that brought him here. He hoped she would find a man worthy of her hand. As one of her family, he owed her the courtesy of squiring her through the season, keeping a careful watch on the court of admirers she was sure to develop.

As Fenway, his valet, stepped away from tying his cravat into a spectacular waterfall, Phillip looked in the mirror. His blond hair carefully combed off of his face—every hair in its place. His ice-blue eyes scanned the image before him as he attached a ruby pin into the folds of the linen and smiled. Perfect white teeth set in a long face with a strong jaw and aristocratic nose and full lips. His new black coat fit like a glove. Perfection was an art. With the help of his tailor and valet, he was a master.

It was time to do his duty to his sister, please his parents, and dance with the wallflowers. With a final tug to his jacket, he nodded to Fenway. “Don’t bother waiting up for me.” He left his chambers determined to make the best of the evening.

~*~

The Earl of Manchester and his wife of thirty-two years stood ahead of him in the receiving line. They had asked only that Phillip, their second son, remain by the side of his sister Penelope for her come-out ball. He was the last person to greet people before they entered the ballroom.

Faces swam past him in a blur of color and stench. Why some in the upper ten-thousand refused to bathe perplexed him. He greeted each gentleman with a bow of his head and every woman with a lift of their gloved

hands within an inch of his lips. His sister simpered next to him, giddy that this evening was in her honor and likely to be a 'crush,' to propel his mother into rapturous delight.

Waiting for an escape, he discovered an unknown face presented to him.

"I'm Lord Follett." The older man gave him a bow. Phillip could see the balding head, and the odor of alcohol on his breath warned him the man was already in his cups. "This is my daughter, the Honorable Elizabeth Follett."

Phillip sucked in a breath at the vision before him. Her soft red hair was pulled up and held in place by small white flowers. Her dress did not do her coloring justice. But it was the eyes, those green eyes that drew him. They spoke a message to him he couldn't quite decipher. It wasn't one of desire or seduction as he so often saw. More of abject terror.

Because of him?

He held her hand. "Welcome to Manchester Hall, Miss Follett." He allowed his lips to touch the glove and a shock traveled through him as she gasped. He straightened as one corner of his lips rose. *Ah, she'd felt it too.* Instead of terror, there was curiosity, and, as those lashes lowered, he sensed a mystery.

"You are too kind, my lord." Her husky voice whispered as the crowd pushed her forward toward the ballroom. He watched her go, the sway of her hips barely discernable beneath her gown.

"Phillip?" His sister nudged him.

"Yes, Penny?"

"Will you escort me in? Father said he would lead me out for the first dance. Anthony is to dance with me next and then you. You won't forget, will you?" Her

brown eyes held an eagerness he knew would someday turn to *ennui* as the years marched on and she was subjected to these now exciting activities over and over again.

"How could I ever forget? You are by far the most beautiful woman in the room and I would be honored to dance with you."

She slapped him with her fan and giggled. "I'm glad you came home, Phillip. I've missed you."

He tapped a finger on her nose and lifted his elbow. She placed her hand on his forearm and he escorted her into the ballroom. Handing her off to his father he skirted the room, periodically shaking hands with people he knew but not stopping to chat. He wasn't in the mood for talk. His eyes scanned the mass of bodies. The Earl of Manchester determined it was late enough to begin the ball.

Phillip hated these events. When he was younger, he didn't mind attending and flirting with the available misses, but now it wore thin. Was he getting old or growing up? Managing the estate left to him by his maternal aunt, Martha, upon her removal to the hereafter two years hence had been a better use of his time and energy. He'd encountered success in turning a modest inheritance into profitable investments after Lord Remington took him aside and encouraged him that even as a second son, he could be prosperous and productive.

Phillip failed in his attempt to share his successes with his family. They persisted in the belief he was a ne'er-do-well, frolicking around aimlessly, gambling, and wenching his way through his monthly allowance and inheritance. As if he were still a callow youth fresh on the town.

Before Lord Remington's warnings and direction, that might have been true.

Yet his family considered him to be a wastrel, doomed to destruction if he didn't settle down with a wife soon. His father even suspected he was hiding in the north with a mistress. As if he'd waste money on such as that? He was long over his dalliances with ladies of the night. It irked him that his father would hold such a low opinion of him.

Phillip was fully cognizant that although his family loved him, he was far from the perfection of his older brother. He glanced around the ballroom and spied Anthony, only two years older than himself. Anthony tended towards portliness and while he pretended adoration toward his wife, Phillip knew that Anthony's excesses far surpassed his own when he was younger. He feared his father was misled in the belief that his heir was honorable and trustworthy to inherit the earldom someday. Phillip shrugged. Since Anthony's wife had presented him with two sons already, the title would never pass to Phillip. He found contentment in establishing his own path, and a wife was not integral to his success.

If his mother and sisters were any indication, women usually spent money, which did not help much in increasing wealth. Marcus's bride might be the exception, but it was really too early to tell on that account as they were fairly new to marriage. They had come in earlier and were on the dance floor, besotted with one another.

The orchestra finished playing the first dance. Phillip sought out his mother to lead her into the next one.

~*~

The Honorable Elizabeth Follett escaped the first dance with an excuse to check her hem but now she couldn't avoid the inevitable as she was led to the floor by Lord Wolton.

His face quickly grew red. He started wheezing with the execution of the steps of the dance. At over three times her own age, he was a prosperous landowner and neighbor. He possessed small dark eyes, bushy eyebrows, and very little hair on top of his head, which perspired terribly. His long sideburns only served to emphasize his jowls. His hands were plump and clammy to the touch.

A shiver of distaste overtook Lizzy every time his reached for hers as required by the movements of the dance, and even more at the lascivious look in his eyes as he would scan her body. His smile, crooked with a few darker teeth accompanied by his foul breath, made her fight against the bile threatening to rise inside when they drew close.

The only highlight of the exercise was the sight of the golden god dancing two couples down. Occasionally his eyes met hers in the course of the dance and she only hoped he could read her desperation. Ah, but beautiful sons of earls were not known to rescue the daughters of barons were they?

Led back to her father after the dance, she nodded her head and murmured a soft thanks to Lord Wolton.

Lord Follett had no real repute in the *ton* and felt his position keenly. He nudged his daughter and urged her, "Smile, Lizzy, for heaven's sake. Lord Wolton desires your hand, the least you could do is encourage him a little."

Lord Phillips Folly

Lizzy once again tried to suppress a cold shiver at the very thought of any more interaction with Lord Wolton. Her father blustered and yelled when she stated her objection to the match. There would be no rescue for her from that quarter. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, clenching her hands tightly together silently praying to a God she wasn't quite sure even existed, for a way out of the hell destined for her.

Opening her eyes, she glanced across the room to observe Lord Phillip Westcombe leading his sister out in the country dance. She could not take her gaze off of him. His kindly manner as he interacted with his sister was charming. And that smile. Would she even be able to breathe if he ever smiled at her like that? He was the stuff dreams were made of. She felt hope surge through her. Maybe, just maybe...

~*~

The evening dragged on with one dance after another. After supper, Phillip returned his young partner to her chaperone with an elegant bow. He found his attention captivated by the young woman who'd haunted him since her introduction earlier. She was difficult to miss with her red hair, although red was a bit strong to describe its softer hue. Hair that once curled around her face hung straight. She was pale, standing alone near a potted plant by the doors leading to the gardens below, as though she were hiding. She glanced his way and their gaze held. He read a silent plea and began to move in her direction.

He wove through the crowd surrounding the ballroom, stopping for brief handshakes and pats on the back as he maneuvered to that side of the room. He

kept an eye on the young woman. She tracked his progress at times furtively searching the crowd. His curiosity was aroused.

"Miss Follett." Lord Phillip bowed over her hand and spoke softly so as not to be overheard in the noise of the ballroom. "May I be of assistance?"

"Lord Westcombe..." Elizabeth sighed. "Yes...I wonder..." Her eyes once again held a silent entreaty.

"Would you perhaps like to stroll in the garden?" Phillip extended his arm, and nodding, she wound her hand around it and walked outside into the fresh, cool evening air. Heat radiated up his arm at her touch. With every step, he was more aware of the woman by his side than any he'd ever known. It puzzled him. They stepped down into the garden lit with lanterns. Her lack of chatter perplexed him. Most women he met attempted to talk their way into a proposal. Few couples were in the gardens this early in the evening although lamps had been lit. He knew all the best places to engage in less than gentlemanly behavior due to his wayward youth. He led her down a path to an area by a small pond. Open and exposed. He would not compromise this young woman.

Phillip assisted Miss Follett to the bench, leaned against the tree next to it, and waited. She clenched her hands in her lap, took a deep breath, and began. "I need to escape. My father is forcing me into a marriage I do not want." Cautiously, she raised her eyes to meet his and he noted the tears at the edges.

He reached for his handkerchief and extended it to her as he came to sit beside her. "Is there no other way out of this marriage? Surely, they cannot force you to the altar. We do live in a civilized society."

"Civilized?" A short bark of laughter escaped the

young woman. "My life has never been civilized. You'd be truly horrified if I told you the things I've endured." She turned slightly to look him in the eye and reached forward to put her hand on his arm. "Truly, if I do not escape tonight I have no other hope except—"

Phillip's eyes narrowed as she considered her words. Was she being overly dramatic? Was this a manipulation? Miss Follett wasn't trying to trap him into marriage herself, was she? From what he understood, she came with a healthy dowry, something he certainly didn't need. She was far from unattractive and given time during the season her own court of admirers would vie for her favors. Yet he sensed truth in what she claimed and that before him sat a desperate woman. The knight-errant in him fought its way to the surface disturbing the peaceful waters he tried hard to maintain. "What is it you require?"

"To disappear. Somewhere, anywhere they cannot find me."

"And then what? You re-appear elsewhere? How would that be explained? The scandal-mongers would have a feast that could destroy any hope you would have of making a respectable match. What about your future? Where might you live and how would you marry if you are cut off from your father and your inheritance?"

"You fully understand the complexities of my circumstances, Lord Westcombe. To me this matter is of life and death. My life. My certain death. If I am forced to marry, I guarantee I will be dead within the year. So, my only hope is to escape. Will you assist me?"

Phillip stared at her, considering, as the silence stretched taut between them. He tended to be a good judge of people and this woman told the truth. Finally, he came to a decision and nodded to her. "Can you remain here for a few minutes? Will you be all right?"

"You won't fetch my father?"

"No, merely a discreet friend who might assist. Trust me. I am a man of my word."

"I'll be fine. I'm not alone." Her face relaxed as she looked up past the tree to the stars twinkling in the sky.

Phillip wondered at her odd statement. There were other couples in the garden, but none near here. Giving her a short bow he surreptitiously returned to the ballroom. Once he entered he searched until he spied Lord Marcus Remington finishing up a dance with his bride. Phillip wove his way through the crowd to Marcus's side and whispered in his ear, "I require your assistance."

Marcus raised one eyebrow, nodded, and together all three made their way to the hallway and a private room. Phillip shut the door behind them.

"Well, Phillip, what is it?" Marcus relaxed one hand on his wife's waist as he stood beside her.

"I need shelter for a young woman in desperate need." *Now* who sounded melodramatic?

Marcus and Josie exchanged looks before staring at him.

"Phillip? Why does this woman need immediate shelter?" asked Lady Remington.

"I've done nothing wrong or to be ashamed of. She came to me for help."

"What do you want?" asked Marcus.

His wife nodded her head in agreement.

"I must spirit her away immediately. Could you depart and have your carriage go down to the corner alley? I'll bring her there unnoticed. After we arrive at your home, you can hear her story for yourselves."

Marcus nodded and escorted Josie out of the room.

"Dearest, I'm feeling tired and would like to go home now," Josie simpered as she fanned herself.

"Certainly dear. You look fatigued." Marcus's strong deep voice would suggest they were leaving for that reason alone.

Phillip slipped out the door of the library and wandered back to the garden, avoiding the few partygoers there. He accidentally came upon a few couples engaged in flirtation before he found his way back to Miss Elizabeth Follett. "Come," he whispered as he gave her his hand to help her stand.

"Where...?"

"You ask for my help yet now you resist? Trust me. I shan't harm you."

"I never doubted that for a minute." She rushed alongside him as they slipped through a spot in the hedge and made their way down the alley. Staying in the shadows they waited silently for the Remington coach to pull up. The rise and fall of her chest as she caught her breath was distracting.

He forced himself to focus elsewhere.

The carriage arrived and Lord Phillip assisted Elizabeth inside, entering behind her and closing the door. Marcus tapped on the roof to signal for them to start and they headed for the Remington home.

"Lord and Lady Remington, may I present the Honorable Elizabeth Follett to you?" Lord Westcombe intoned.

"Miss Follett, it is our honor to meet and assist you