

# THE DEVIL'S MISTRESS

A Regency Romance

by  
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## Chapter One

The gentleman's arm tightened round the lady's waist, as he moved her effortlessly round the dance floor to the tune of the Viennese Waltz.

"Do you remove immediately from town?" he asked twirling her elegantly.

"By the end of the week my Lord." She said with a flash of her magnificent blue eyes as she turned her head on a graceful neck, glossy black ringlets bobbing with the movement.

"And where will you be spending Christmas?" he asked recapturing her in his embrace.

She flung her head back to look up at him "At Belmont with my uncle's family" she said and then dropped her eyes demurely and added "Unless I get another offer."

He pulled her closer as they turned with the music. "That could be arranged Miss Torrington." He said with a meaningful squeeze.

Her hand on his upper arm applied a momentary pressure, to keep her balance no doubt. "You will have to apply to my uncle, Sir" she said with a sideways look that was as captivating as it was teasing.

"Tomorrow at 12.00." he said. "You will be at home?"

She met the intensity of his stare with a considering look. And then she smiled "I believe I may, Lord Stanton."

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Lady Mary Wroxton watched her brother leading Miss Viviana Torrington through the waltz and sighed. She thought they were the best-looking couple in the room. Miss Torrington was an accredited beauty with fashionably dark hair, stunningly large, long-lashed eyes, striking features, including a perfectly shaped mouth, a lovely jaw line and swanlike neck and a tall slender, well-proportioned figure. Mary knew herself to be partial; however, there was no denying that her brother made an excellent partner, being tall and well made, with excellent shoulders that did not require padding and a trim waistline and muscular legs that showed the prevailing fashion of skin-tight pantaloons to advantage. Tapping her spouse's sleeve with her fan she said "Wroxton don't they make a handsome couple?"

"Eh?" said Lord Wroxton starting out of a brown study.

She waved her fan at the pair "Denzil and Viviana!"

"Oh aye! Very pretty!" said Wroxton. "Though if you ask me, she's got too much vivacity by half!"

"Wroxton! How can you say so?" said Lady Mary indignantly "Her manners are lively to be sure, but nothing beyond the line of what is pleasing!"

Wroxton snorted. "Miss Torrington is an outrageous flirt! What do you think she is doing now?"

"She has a partiality for Denzil I am persuaded!" protested Lady Mary

"Yes, and half the other eligible's she has making cakes of themselves over her too!" responded Wroxton with a sardonic smile.

"Denzil is not making a cake of himself!" said Denzil's loyal sister firmly. "He has by far too much address to be doing anything of the sort! And in any case," she added as if this were a clincher. "He is far and away the most attractive of her suitors, I am quite certain she could not prefer Avon, or Bentley or even Harcourt over him!"

The Devil's Mistress (an extract)

"I don't know!" said Wroxton "If she's a fancy to be a Duchess or a Marchioness rather than a mere Countess..."

"Wroxton you are teasing me!" said Lady Mary rapping his arm with her fan again. "She positively could not prefer that middle-aged fop Avon over Denzil even if he is a Duke! And as for Bentley, he hasn't the least style, why I swear he had gravy stains on his waistcoat at the Gatlings dinner dance the other night!"

"Very well, but you must admit Harcourt has the inside running. The bets are two to one at Whites in his favour."

Lady Mary sniffed. "Gentlemen are perfectly odious. I hope you haven't been indulging in such vulgarity Timothy!"

He smiled down at her. "No, I've no desire to lose my blunt and it wouldn't be seemly for me to bet against Denzil."

"You can't mean you really think Denzil will lose out to Harcourt?" protested Mary, opening her pale blue eyes wider.

For answer Wroxton nodded his head in the direction of the persons they were discussing.

The dance had finished and the Earl of Stanton had led his lovely partner off the dance floor, but before he could restore her to her grandmother, Lady Hartley, they were intercepted by a tall solidly built gentleman with hair as red as a flame.

Sir Anthony Harcourt bowed suavely.

"You will allow me to relieve you of your lovely burden Stanton. I believe the next dance is mine Miss Torrington."

"True Sir Anthony, but you are a little previous, it will not commence for at least ten minutes and I would like a little refreshment first," replied Miss Torrington.

## The Devil's Mistress (an extract)

Stanton felt her fingers tremble on his arm, caught the taunted undertone in her voice and glanced from her slightly flushed face to the overly bright light in Harcourt's dark blue eyes as they rested on her. Harcourt was possessed of the very rare combination of dark red hair and black eyebrows. His features were strongly handsome. He was known as a hardened gamester, rumoured to have lost and regained more than one fortune at play. From Stanton's perspective he was a ruthless devil with a shocking reputation. It would seem from her demeanour Miss Torrington was angry with him about something. All to the good as far as Stanton was concerned. Suppressing a smile, he added fuel to the fire by saying, "Perhaps you can retrieve your position by fetching the lady a glass of Ratafia, Sir?"

Harcourt threw him a savage glance and nodded, bowing punctiliously to Miss Torrington. "Certainly, if that is your desire, Miss Torrington?"

She nodded imperiously and he turned away making his way across the crowded ballroom to the refreshments that were laid out in a separate chamber.

"Has Sir Anthony done something to upset you, Miss Torrington?"

She laughed but it sounded forced. "Good heavens no, what ever gave you that impression my Lord?"

He looked down at her steadily, gently. "I would hope that you would trust me enough to confide in me my dear. I also hope that you know I am yours to command. If Harcourt troubles you –"

"So chivalrous my Lord. Are you offering to be my champion?" she said lightly.

"Are you never serious?" he chided, smiling to soften the words.

She lowered her lashes demurely. "You may find me more sober tomorrow, my Lord." She raised her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Tonight, I am too gay for that!"

"Miss Torrington, your glass." Harcourt proffered the wine glass and she took it with a nod and a cool glance.

## The Devil's Mistress (an extract)

“I thank you Sir.” Over it she glanced at Stanton and then away, clearly dismissing him.

Stanton stepped back, allowing himself to be ousted. A ballroom was no place for a show of possessiveness. In any case she had as good as told him what her answer would be. Perhaps she proposed to let Harcourt down gently? Watching that gentleman's fiery expression, he doubted the man would take it well.

Stanton retired to a safe distance to watch the proceedings. Miss Torrington sipped her wine and responded to something her companion said with a toss of her head. Miss Torrington was clearly not happy with Sir Anthony. Stanton smiled.

“What are you so pleased about Den?” drawled a familiar voice in his ear. “Ah the little Torrington. Gad man you're a dog with a bone. The clubs are all betting that she'll have Harcourt in the end. The old man won't last too much longer they say.”

“Ashley, I find your conversation offensive. And in any case, you're wrong.”

“No, no my dear fellow. Had it from Granville last week, the old fellow is on his last legs. Swear he won't live past Christmas. Once Harcourt has the title and the estate, there'll be no stopping him. She won't turn down the chance to be Duchess.”

Stanton looked round at his lanky companion, a thin faced gentleman dressed with careless elegance. “Damn it Ash, if you weren't my friend, I'd give you one in the jaw for speaking of Miss Torrington like that.”

“Den, you have become a dead bore since you fell in love. I swear, you've even lost your sense of humour,” complained the Honourable Ashley Morton.

Stanton ignored him and scanned the room realising that the object of his obsession was nowhere in sight. Nor could he see the tell-tale red hair of Sir Anthony. The next set was forming, the dance would commence within moments. He waited only until the musicians struck up. Certain that Miss Torrington was not among the dancers, he edged his way round

## The Devil's Mistress (an extract)

the ballroom towards the door to the refreshment room. Scanning that room, he found no sign of his quarry. There were doors at the end that led to the retiring rooms. There was also a door that led to a gallery that ran along the side of the ballroom. Surely, she had too much sense than to allow Harcourt to take her into the Gallery? It was most improper, and frankly dangerous. Harcourt, in Stanton's opinion, could not be trusted to keep the line.

He crossed the room and stepped into the Gallery. It was not deserted, there were a few couples strolling the gallery or seated on sofa's positioned at various points along the length of the long narrow room. But a quick reconnoitre told him that Miss Torrington was not of their number. He returned to the refreshment room and was gratified by the sight of Miss Torrington emerging from the ladies retiring room. Of her erstwhile companion there was no sign. Relieved he decided against advertising his presence to her. He didn't particularly wish to appear in the light of an overprotective lover. He hoped that he might soon have the right to play such a role. But until then it was better not to cram his fences. Miss Torrington was incredibly light at hand. He didn't wish to queer his pitch.

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"Do you wish to dance Miss Torrington?"

Viviana tossed a curl back from her shoulder. "I think not Sir Anthony."

"You are contrary tonight, Miss Torrington."

She sipped her wine coolly. "A woman's prerogative, Sir Anthony."

"A turn about the gallery instead?" he asked eating her with his eyes. She shivered and struggled with herself. It would not be seemly to walk in the gallery with him, or any gentleman. She was tempted, she badly wanted to quarrel with him, and doing it in public wasn't possible.

"You're angry with me, what about?" he said abruptly.

She finished her wine, handed the glass to a hovering waiter, and walked off. He

The Devil's Mistress (an extract)

followed her to the curtained doorway that led to the gallery.

She stepped through and glanced around. There was a couple at the other end of the gallery but they appeared occupied with one another. Sir Anthony took her arm and she allowed him to guide her to a couch situated between two pillars. She sat, and he seated himself beside her. "Tell me what I have done to anger you Miss Torrington."

She twitched the train of her ball gown and glanced at him sideways. He appeared perfectly at ease, his earlier annoyance appeared to have faded, replaced by an air of slight amusement. This made her even angrier. "It has come to my attention Sir Anthony, that certain bets are being laid in the gentleman's clubs."

He raised one dark eyebrow. "What indiscreet person told you that?"

"It is of no importance who told me! Is it true?"

"I can understand your annoyance over the matter Miss Torrington, I fail to understand your anger with me," he responded.

"Because Sir Anthony, *I* understand that you have wagered a large sum on yourself to win!" she snapped.

"Miss Torrington, you have been misled" he replied evenly.

"Then it is not true?" she asked.

"I am a gamester Miss Torrington, but I am not a fool."

She scanned his face for the truth. "What am I to believe Sir Anthony? That I have been the victim of a trouble-making gossip?"

"The betting is true enough, but I have had no part in it."

She flushed with fury and snapped open her fan and applied it vigorously. "Men are despicable!"

He looked down carefully. "No doubt. I might even be included in that number, but in this case, I am innocent of the crime accused."

## The Devil's Mistress (an extract)

She snapped her fan shut and stood up. "Thank you for your honesty. Sir Anthony. I think we should return to the ballroom now. My grandmother will be looking for me."

He rose and took her hand saying, "Momentarily my dear. May I -" she looked up at him as he bent and kissed her hand. It was an old-fashioned courtly gesture, generally reserved these days for older married women, or members of one's family. It was quite improper and rather thrilling of him to kiss her hand and squeeze it gently. A flutter in her stomach sent a bolt of something warm and exciting diving down her belly as he held her eyes with his, and said softly, "Miss Torrington, I have a hard head, but you are strong wine for any man. Intoxicating, even for a jaded palate such as mine. If I should call tomorrow afternoon, will I find you at home?"

She flushed again and this time with another emotion. She felt confused and off balance, less than half an hour ago she had virtually promised Stanton she would accept his suit. Did she mean to do so? She was still unsure. She used to think Stanton dull, but he was a better match on all counts than any other. He wasn't a fortune hunter and he was a thorough gentleman. Sir Anthony on the other hand.... There was no denying this man's attraction. He was handsome and tantalisingly enigmatic, dangerous. Something in his eyes called to her blood and sent a shiver of apprehension down her spine.

She extricated her hand from his and picked up her train turning away. She spoke over her shoulder as she walked towards the doorway, back into the refreshment room. "I hardly know Sir Anthony, my calendar is so full I dare swear I have a dozen engagements for tomorrow afternoon." She swept through the doorway and headed towards the ladies' room at a rapid clip. As she reached the screen, she glanced back over shoulder but he hadn't followed her. With a rapidly beating heart she disappeared behind the screen.

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At precisely 12 noon the following day Stanton presented himself at Belfort House, the town residence of Lord Belfort, Miss Torrington's maternal uncle and her guardian. Viviana Torrington was not only a beautiful young woman she was also an heiress. Being the fortunate possessor of the holy triumvirate of birth, beauty and wealth, she had been the reigning Queen of the Ton since her debut in April of that year. During the seven months since that advent, she had received (it was rumoured) no less than a dozen proposals of marriage. To her grandmother's eternal exasperation and her uncle's bewilderment, she had to date refused every one of them. Several of her suitors had not allowed their initial rebuff to snuff out their hopes and they continued to dance attendance on her. She seemed not to object to this. She divided her favours amongst them and seemingly refused to take any of them seriously.

Stanton himself had not entered the lists seriously until the commencement of the little season in September. Finding himself seated beside the beauty at a dinner one evening he was enchanted by her unusual conversation. Intrigued he pursued the acquaintance and in a very short space of time was forced to the conclusion that he, like every other male in London, had fallen under her spell.

Shown into the parlour, where a fire burned merrily to take the chill off the elegantly furnished apartment, he was not kept waiting long. Belfort a middle-aged, portly gentleman with a round face and thinning hair, closed the door with a careless back hand and crossed the room his right hand held out in welcome.

"Stanton! Well by Jove, what a pleasant occurrence. Can I guess what errand brings you here?"

"You might well, my Lord, it most nearly concerns your niece," said Stanton shaking hands with his host.

## The Devil's Mistress (an extract)

“Well, I am sure I wish you all the best my boy and I would that I could promise you a positive outcome, but I dare not. I've presented a dozen offers to her and she's not accepted any of them. It has me in a puzzle what she wants! Not that I'd have had her accept the first offer she was made, but a dozen?” he shook his head “It's become embarrassing my boy!”

Stanton, who had not been referred to as a boy since he was in short coats, concealed his mild irritation. “Are you trying to tell me my suit will not prosper Lord Belfort?”

“Oh no, not at all! I Certainly hope it does, but I cannot promise you that it will! I shall fetch her and she can tell you herself whether she'll have you or not. I'm sure I can't tell.” He bustled out of the room leaving Stanton to ponder what his fate might be.

Five minutes later the door opened again and Stanton turned from the fire to greet his lady love. She paused inside the door and looked at him speculatively. He noted that she did not appear in the least shy or agitated. But then, if she had received a dozen offers, he supposed she must be accustomed to it. She was tastefully attired in a morning dress of white cambric and a navy spencer.

She came towards him and dropped a neat curtsey. “You are punctual my Lord.”

He took her hand. “That is generally held to be one of my traits yes. How do you do this morning, are you quite recovered from last night's frivolities?”

“Oh yes, it takes more than a ball to knock me up!” she said lightly.

He had retained hold of her hand and she had made no attempt to retrieve it. Emboldened he said, “You know why I am here, my dear, what is it to be? Will you accept my hand and heart or send me away with my tail between my legs?”

“What no romantic gestures? I fancy you are supposed to kneel when making a proposal my Lord.”

“Did your previous suitors kneel?” he asked with a quizzing look. She was playing with him, and while that might annoy him, he wasn't going to show it.

The Devil's Mistress (an extract)

“Oh yes!” she said with a mischievous smile.

“Well, it didn't do them any good did it?” he replied with complete sangfroid.

She sighed and glanced at him under her lashes. “Are you not going to make any attempt to persuade me of the advantages of the match, my Lord?”

“No. If they are not self-evident, I've no intention of making myself sound like a coxcomb enumerating them.”

“Then how do you expect your suit to prosper?” she said her voice unsteady with laughter.

“Have done with your nonsense, Viviana! I love you. Do you love me?” he said bluntly.

“I hardly know my Lord!” she replied. “When you have not so much as kissed me!”

“You are an unprincipled baggage!” he said taking her in his arms.

“Yes, I know!” she said with an encouraging smile. “Quite sunk below reproach! Are you sure you want me for your Countess Denzil?”

His response to this final sally was to kiss her. Thoroughly. Releasing her mouth some little while later he said a trifle unsteadily. “Is that sufficient answer Viviana my darling?”

His eyes rested on her flushed countenance and he had the satisfaction of knowing he had finally pierced her armour. “Good heavens Denzil, yes!” she said as breathless as he. “I had no idea you could be so –“

“Passionate?” he asked his eyes devouring her beauty. “My wife won't want for attention my dear.”

Recovering her poise, a little, she laughed. “I was going to say persuasive. But passionate is a better word. You always behave so properly, I wondered....”

“So, the secret to winning your heart is to stop behaving like a gentleman, is that it?”

## The Devil's Mistress (an extract)

he asked, tightening his hold.

She hesitated and then said, "Not precisely. The truth is, I was used to think you rather dull. I am a sad rattle Denzil. Easily bored and shockingly flirtatious, are you sure you can handle me?"

"Are you still funning love? When will you be serious?" he said caressingly.

She searched his eyes anxiously. "I'm afraid you're too good for me Denzil. I'll lead you a merry dance, you know that don't you?"

"What nonsense you do talk sweetheart!"

She leaned her cheek against his shoulder and said softly, "Oh Denzil I shall try to be good, for you deserve nothing less!"

"My little love." He said foolishly against her hair.

She lifted her face and he kissed her again. Her arms went round his neck and she kissed him back.

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Crawling between the sheets that evening, Miss Torrington reflected on a day that had changed her life irrevocably. She had not known that she would accept Denzil's offer that morning, yet with him before her, and regarding her with his frank eyes and honest avowal of love she had not been able to resist. A sudden hankering for steadiness had seized her and his kiss... She touched her lips and nestled into the pillows with a sensuous wiggle. She had not known he could kiss like that. The kiss had brought her wavering to a standstill.

She had always known she could never marry a man she felt no attraction for. She craved excitement and passion like a flower craved water and sunlight. But she needed soil too, and Denzil would provide that. She knew that it was not uncommon for a lively woman to marry a staid man, Denzil would be her anchor, stop her from becoming completely irresponsible. She had to marry someone and he loved her so.

The Devil's Mistress (an extract)

She rolled onto her stomach and closed her eyes. She would spend Christmas at his country house and they would get to know each other better. They had barely spent any time alone, really alone since they met. She rather thought she might enjoy being gently seduced by Denzil...

*...you are strong wine for any man. Intoxicating...* She opened her eyes and stared at the shadowed wall, feeling a shiver of something between fear and desire in her belly. *Had she chosen the right man?*

She closed her eyes firmly. Of course, she might toy with the idea of marrying the devil, but she was better off with Denzil, much better off.

As she drifted into slumber, she wondered what Sir Anthony had made of her *not* being at home this afternoon and what she would say to him the next time they met.