

A Comedy of Manners

By Elizabeth van Oorschot

Dramatis Personae

CATHERINE MARKSBURY

ERNEST, *a butler*

ARABELLA HENNISON

LORD MARKSBURY

MILTON, *a butler*

A Victorian study. Catherine is writing at a desk.

CATHERINE: *(narrating as she writes)* My dearest Arabella, it has been now *(pauses to consider the pocket watch on her desk)* 3 hours since I wrote to you last, and already, my heart aches with this eternity. But I mustn't dwell on such misfortune; it does horrors for one's constitution. *(pauses to dab on some powder)* Now, what news is there to relay? Well, in the past *(pauses to consider pocket watch once more)* 3 hours and 2 minutes since I wrote to you last, I have trimmed my nails twice—

(two sharp knocks)

ERNEST: One Mister James Hennison, of the house of Western Leicester, of Shropshire upon Hertfordshire—

CATHERINE: Thank you, Ern—

ERNEST: —heir to the Bradfordsbury estate, and duke of Essex—

CATHERINE: If that's all...

ERNEST: —42nd in line to the throne of Great Britain on his mother's side, 44th in line to the throne of from his father's side, 86th in line to the throne of Germany, 1072nd in line to the of Lithuania—

CATHERINE: *(without looking up)* Thank you, Ernest, I think we get the idea. One moment. *(Enter Arabella. Catherine continues narrating her writing)* Your brother has just now called on me, and, though it pains me to be torn from you this way, I must put this letter aside for the time being. I bid you—

ARABELLA: Catherine.

CATHERINE: *(looking up in confusion)* Arabella? Oh! It's you! *(running over to embrace Catherine)* I've missed you so much. *(brightening)* In fact, I was just writing you a letter! Would you care to read it?

ARABELLA: (*Grimacing*) While I'm overjoyed to see you, it was nothing less than your writings which made me desire such a swift return. Therefore, I shall let you keep your letter to yourself. A marriage needs its mysteries.

CATHERINE: (*confused*) Marriage?

ARABELLA: (*glancing at Ernest, then back to Catherine*) Could we, perhaps, converse in private?

CATHERINE: (*still confused*) In private? (*notices Ernest*) Oh, of course! I do rather forget he's there sometimes. Do forgive me that, Ernest.

ERNEST: I understand entirely, my lady. I'm sure I'd forgotten I was here as well.

CATHERINE: That's very kind. Could you fetch us some biscuits?

ERNEST: Yes, my lady, very good.

CATHERINE: And do take your time. (*condescending*) I don't really need the biscuits.

ERNEST: Very clever, my lady.

(*exit Ernest*)

CATHERINE: Now, Arabella, what is this about marriage? And why did Ernest introduce you as your brother?

ARABELLA: Well, I suppose I'd better start at the beginning. You see, in my haste to return from France my dearest brother and I embarked on a rather ill advised passage across the channel. And when a storm hit, well... you know how it goes. The ship capsized, the rescue boat was for women and children only, there was simply nothing I could do to save him.

CATHERINE: Oh, how dreadfully inconvenient. All that drab mourning attire you'll be expected to wear... I simply couldn't bear it myself.

ARABELLA: Well... (*considering*) You do know I've always quite enjoyed wearing black. And it has presented me with a rather fortuitous opportunity.

CATHERINE: A convenient excuse to avoid Lady Georgia's tea time soirée this year?

ARABELLA: Oh! Well that too. But, no. You see, I am, as of now, perfectly poised to assume my brother's identity. I'll simply pretend it was me who died in that dreadful storm, and, well, it opens my future right up. I'll get the inheritance, the titles, the summer home in the country...

CATHERINE: Oh, how delightful!

ARABELLA: Which brings me to the matter of marriage. With the inheritance and all that, it only makes sense I should propose to you.

CATHERINE: Oh, oh my! I feel rather as though I am supposed to faint at a moment like this.

ARABELLA: You could if you wish, my dear, but marriage is simply the logical course of action. If I have an inheritance of my own, really, it would make no sense to marry a man. It would be like *(pause to consider)* providing one with two dessert spoons for the same course.

CATHERINE: *(considering)* Being in possession of a good fortune, as you are, it is a truth universally acknowledged that you must be in want of a wife. It's just... Well, do you really have to take the name James? It feels so common.

ARABELLA: I have always had a distaste for it myself. Perhaps I could go by his middle name, but that's a detail for later. I've never been quite sure what it was.

CATHERINE: I suppose so. Just as long as it is not something dreadfully common, like... Oliver. I've never liked Oliver.

ARABELLA: Yes, my dear, we'll sort it out. In the meantime, however, I have some business of great importance to attend to. I am not here simply to visit you; I must call on your father and ask him for your hand. To forgo a formality such as that would be a gross violation of the sanctity of marriage.

CATHERINE: Quite right. I'll have you presented to him in the drawing room.

BLACKOUT

MILTON: Lord Marksbury, may I present Mister James Hennison, of the house of Western Leicester, of Shropshire upon Hertfordshire, heir to the Bradfordbury estate, and duke of Essex, 42nd in line to the throne of Great Britain on his mother's side, 44th in line to the throne of Great Britain from his father's side, 86th in line to the throne of Germany, and 1072nd in line to the throne of Lithuania—

LORD MARKSBURY: Thank you, Mil—

MILTON: Champion of his year six croquet tournament, second roster for the Newfordshire polo team, occasional cricket bowler—

LORD MARKSBURY: What's this about, Milton?

MILTON: Well, Mister James Hennison here, of the house of Western Leicester, of Shropshire upon Hertfordshire, heir to—

LORD MARKSBURY: Yes, you've mentioned that part already.

MILTON: Quite, sir.

(Beat)

ARABELLA: I am here, Lord Marksbury, to make an offer of marriage to your daughter.

LORD MARKSBURY: I should hope you haven't made the offer directly to her yet. Really, the contract of marriage must be nailed out between two men, you know, to preserve the sanctity of it. Bringing women into the whole business; it just complicates things.

ARABELLA: I have broached the subject with her; however, I have, of course, come straight *(grimaces)* to you to negotiate it. One couldn't imagine a woman negotiating her own marriage. How absurd.

LORD MARKSBURY: Precisely. But do tell me, how have you come to desire such a marriage with Catherine? A couple should have met at least on one occasion before their betrothal. With a chaperone, to be sure.

ARABELLA: I have met your daughter in passing; she was a good friend of my sister's, Arabella.

LORD MARKSBURY: Of course! I recall that special friendship between your sister and Catherine. Always in and out of each other's places, those two. Arabella would visit our country manor, Catherine would stay with Arabella in the city, you know, that sort of thing. Such a sweet girl, she was. She and Catherine were always knocking boots, you know, after their promenades, tapping off the dirt so the maids wouldn't have so much of a mess to clean up. How is Arabella, by the by?

ARABELLA: Ah. Yes, well, she recently perished on a particularly treacherous crossing of the channel.

LORD MARKSBURY: *(disgusted)* Oh, how awful. My condolences! I'm sure Catherine will be most distressed to hear. To lose one's sister is a tragedy, but to lose one's sister who has been out for so many years? Well it is at least less shameful than a woman of 23 who is, god forbid, unmarried.

ARABELLA: *(strangled laugh)* A sister who is out, Lord Marksbury?

LORD MARKSBURY: Oh, please don't take that the wrong way. It's only that, well, she has been out to society for a few years now, and we do both know how much harder it gets for a woman with each passing season. It would have taken a particular man to marry a woman as, shall I say, strong willed as your Arabella.

ARABELLA: Not to worry; I'm quite sure I understand what you mean. Sometimes there is no man up for the job. Alternate conclusions can, in such cases, be preferable.

LORD MARKSBURY: Exactly! Exactly! I'm sure Arabella is in a better place now, than she would be if, god forbid, she were to continue on to be a spinster.

ARABELLA: I find I must agree with you; she is surely in a better position now. One could almost call the shipwreck a fortuitous accident for her.

LORD MARKSBURY: (*guffawing*) Quite, quite. But enough of that. Shall we return to the topic of marriage? I have no objection to it, but I'm sure there are some details to pound out in private between us men. To assume the business of marriage is conducted between a man and a woman would be an utter absurdity.

ARABELLA: It seems we are already in agreement upon at least one matter.

LORD MARKSBURY: Excellent, excellent. It is so truly refreshing to see a young suitor believing in the traditional values of marriage. It assures me I have nothing to worry about concerning the propriety of this marriage. Our lawyers can sort out the unseemly details of estates and contracts and the like. It seems to me there is nothing left to do but pour a scotch, celebrate, and perhaps discuss some more.

ARABELLA: Might I also deliver the good news to Catherine?

LORD MARKSBURY: Right. I suppose she ought to be informed as well. We can send Milton to deliver the news; I don't see what reason you would have to do so yourself. You'll have plenty of time to get to know her once the two of you are married. Milton, you can inform Catherine of her upcoming nuptials with Mister James.

MILTON: Quite right, my lord. (*bows and exits*)

LORD MARKSBURY: (*pouring two drinks*) Might I propose a toast, my boy. To your union with Catherine: I'm certain it shall prove as gay and prosperous as one could wish.

ARABELLA: Indeed.

BLACKOUT