

**Excerpt from *Dark Matters: Seven Variations on a Theme*  
~*Embarrassment of Riches: A Romance***

Walter Wiggins rocked serenely in his chair, bethinking himself of his great good fortune. Not that he had sought fortune out. The offer for Wallace's plumbing "empire"—ten plumbing establishments, variously situated among half-a-dozen New England towns—came unbidden, and was generous in the extreme. Wallace, ever decisive in his business judgment, had taken but one day's musing to accept, contingent on the approval of his Concord lawyer. There was the obligatory hemming and hawing—all to drive up the firm's fees, Wallace sensed, --but within the spare space of a week, documents were drafted, reviewed, and signed. Wiggins Plumbing Company was swallowed up in the maw of a Boston-based conglomerate. Wallace Wiggins was, now, a rich man—also still a young man, if the gap between fifty and sixty could be accounted young—and a free man, since there was no one and no thing with reasonable claim upon him.

An only child of impecunious parents, orphaned at three, he'd been farmed out to the not-so-tender care of a reluctant aunt, who was only too happy to ship him off to Dartmouth at the earliest possible age. Two years of Dartmouth were more than enough for Wallace. He apprenticed with a plumber in Littleton during the summer before his junior year and never looked back. He sent "regrets" to Dartmouth and "thanks" to his aunt, who was "gratified" to accept his assurance he was now "self-supporting."

Wallace was proud to be independent. He was aided, in his business, by his puritanical predisposition. He worked hard. He saved his money. He avoided debt, women, and whiskey. He was perpetually on call—weekends, nights, holidays, no matter. He never turned away a possible prospect. He was affordable, affable, and available. His business grew. He never thought of selling. He merely thought of "getting on." And somewhere, in the back of his mind, something told him he must never, ever, go so far as even to skirt the fringes of his parents' poverty.

All that—and so soon, while still there was a semblance of youth within him—had come to this: Wallace Wiggins, a self-made man, now a wealthy—a very wealthy—man, a not wholly uneducated man—Wallace Wiggins rocked on the verandah of The Ledges, a posh New Hampshire resort, musing, as was ever his wont, but now musing over an altogether different, an altogether more elusive matter than the mere amassing of money.

As the storm clouds gathered over Europe, as the Second Moroccan Crisis slouched to its conclusion, Wallace, from his protected American perch, contemplated the possibilities before him.