



One

Baroness Hartwood, a widow of two years standing, looked across at the gentleman seated beside her on the settee in her drawing room and asked: 'Albert, you have given your nephew a hint not to stare at April, have you not?'

'I've had no opportunity to do so as yet,' replied The Right Honourable the Viscount Paisley, a genial man on the shady side of fifty and with a decided trend towards corpulence. 'Hugh wouldn't do so, in any case. He's never been one to be enslaved by a pretty face – quite the opposite actually!'

Lady Hartwood's large blue eyes regarded him with a good deal of uncertainty.

'No doubt you know best, dearest. . . only, it *would* be unfortunate if he were to do so. You know how April dislikes to be stared at. And not for the world would I want to see my daughter give a relative of yours a sharp set-down, as I fear she is entirely capable of doing!' she admitted, wringing her hands.

Lord Paisley, who considered himself fortunate to have secured her ladyship's acceptance to enter the married state a second time, took hold of her dainty fingers in a comforting grip.

'Don't let it worry you, my love. I'd like to see April – or anyone else, for that matter – give Hugh a set-down. The shoe is firmly on the other foot,' he chuckled.

Lady Hartwood was a little daunted by this not entirely favourable description of Mr Hugh Royce. From all she had previously heard of him, he was a well-liked man of good character and with an outlandish fortune to his name, and he was one day to inherit the Marquisate of Talbott from a great-uncle who still clung tenaciously to life.

'Is he not an amiable person?' she asked anxiously.

'Oh, he's perfectly amiable when it suits him! But he's not one to suffer fools or sycophants gladly. And why should he? He's had enough to try his patience these last few years. Ever since he inherited that obscene fortune from his miser of a father, everyone remotely related to him has been coming out of the woodwork to claim kinship and milk his generosity.'

'Oh dear, that *would* try one's amiability, to be sure.'

'Not to mention all the matchmaking mothers who make a beeline for him whenever he strays into their vicinity. I'm half inclined to think he only offered for the Starling girl to take himself off the marriage-mart. That's certainly the only explanation I can think of as to why he's decided to leg-shackle himself to such a strait-laced prude. Had she been born a man, she'd have made an excellent vicar! All propriety and sobriety.'

'There is still time for them to realise their mistake,' said Lady Hartwood with her customary optimism. 'It is clear they are sadly ill-matched. . . not that I know the circumstances *personally*, of course,' she hastened to add. 'I have simply gathered as much from all you have said on the matter.'

'Well, it's true,' he sighed. 'I can't say I like to see Hugh throwing himself away on her, but it's none of my business. At least she won't inflict any dramatics on him, the way my sister used to do on his father! Not wishing to speak ill of the dead but there's no denying Georgina was a terrible wife and mother. . . not much of a sister either, if I'm being honest.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, dearest,' said Lady Hartwood, giving his hand a squeeze.

'Oh, I didn't mind overly much! I was never close to either of my sisters. But Hugh. . . well, I wish I could have done more for the boy. He wasn't raised in a happy household.' Shaking off his brooding expression, he smiled and said philosophically: 'I suppose one can't blame him for preferring an insipid wife to one overflowing with sensibility and loose morals.'

Excerpt: Aphrodite – a humorous Regency novel by D.G. Rampton

Having her own particular interest in this subject, Lady Hartwood asked: ‘Are you *certain* there is no love between Miss Starling and your nephew? One would not wish them to suffer if their engagement should – for some reason – come to an end.’

‘Hugh keeps his cards close to his chest but, to my mind, a man in love doesn’t treat his fiancée with the type of cordiality he reserves for his relations.’

Lady Hartwood digested this information with satisfaction.

‘In any case, dearest,’ she remarked after a few moments, ‘we must do all we can to make a good impression on Mr Royce this evening.’

Correctly interpreting this gentle reminder, his lordship said reassuringly: ‘I’ll arrive early tonight, my love, and the moment Hugh enters the house I’ll drop a word in his ear not to stare at April.’

Lady Hartwood smiled. It was a lovely, warm smile that infused her whole complexion and gave her the appearance of a woman much younger than her true age of seven and forty.

She had never been a beauty of the first order but her sweet countenance, girlish figure and impeccable sense of style had always commanded a high degree of admiration. She had married young and had quickly produced a daughter, her only child, some twenty-eight years ago, and for a good number of those years had become used to people mistaking her for her daughter’s sister.

This compliment was always graciously accepted by her. She might not be an overly vain woman but she did possess a healthy degree of pride in her appearance, and, together with her lady’s maid, worked tirelessly to always appear at her best.

As Lord Paisley held her hand and looked adoringly into her eyes, she felt herself to be the most fortunate of women to have secured the affections of a man who was so obliging as to always hold her comfort as his chief concern; a felicity she had not experienced in her first marriage.

‘Thank you, dearest,’ she said. ‘I don’t know why I should be so nervous about meeting your nephew, but so it is! I suppose I don’t wish him to find anything to censure in myself or April.’

‘Hugh’s in no position to judge you,’ said Lord Paisley firmly. ‘And I’d think it a great impertinence if he did so! But I’m certain the thought would never even enter his head. He might be of the highest ton but he isn’t top-lofty.’ He paused briefly, before continuing: ‘That said, you may as well know, my love, he’s not one to recommend himself to the ladies. Doesn’t have the address for it – never did! But although he looks boorish, and may act it on occasion, he’s a capital fellow when one gets to know him.’

A little unsettled by this confidence, Lady Hartwood professed that she was thankful he would be at her side to welcome his nephew that evening.

However, despite Lord Paisley’s best intentions, she was not to have this comfort.

Mr Royce was shown into her drawing room and announced by her aged butler one hour earlier than he was expected.

As the visitor stood on the threshold and took in the startled expression of the youthful-looking lady who inhabited the room, he realised there had been some mistake.

‘Forgive me for intruding,’ he said with a bow. ‘I believe your mother is expecting me?’

Lady Hartwood could only blink in astonishment at the uncommonly large male who filled her doorway.

Hugh cast a look of enquiry at the butler, but the old man simply shrugged and, eager to be off to rest his aching joints, retreated from the room and closed the door behind him.

‘Oh my!’ her ladyship exclaimed softly and let out a nervous laugh.

She put aside the novel she had been enjoying, while waiting for her betrothed to make an appearance, and rose to her feet.

‘Welcome, Mr Royce... please, *do* come in. I... I apologise if I appear a little surprised, only, you see, your uncle informed me that you could come no earlier than eight o’clock, owing to a previous engagement.’

Hugh’s harsh features relaxed into a smile.

‘I *did* have a prior engagement, but I told him I would make certain to leave early and join you all at seven. It appears he didn’t absorb the information.’

‘I daresay he did not!’ she laughed, more naturally this time. ‘I have come to realise Albert does not care overly much for details.’

‘Please accept my apologies. You must be wishing me to Jericho! I’ll take myself off and return at eight. There’s nothing more calculated to put me in your mother’s black books than to arrive an hour early for dinner.’

‘Oh, there is not the least need for you to be concerned! I thank you for the compliment of mistaking me for my daughter but *I am Lady Hartwood.*’ She extended a hand to him. ‘How do you do?’

A flicker of surprise registered in Hugh’s eyes.

‘My uncle is most fortunate.’ Executing a bow over her hand, he added with a grin: ‘I now understand why he developed a sudden sense of familial duty and extended his stay with my Aunt Mathilda in Cornwall. As a rule they fight like cat and dog so their visits to each other are usually brief and far-in-between.’

‘Yes, Mathilda is an acquaintance of mine and has often referred to her quarrelsome scoundrel of a brother,’ she said, smiling. ‘But now of course I know she must have been funning. Albert is nothing of the sort! Please.’ She indicated for him to be seated and sat down herself. ‘They do nip at each other but nothing to signify.’

‘You must be able to bring out their best behaviour, ma’am. I hope my uncle recognises his good fortune in having captured your affections.’

Lady Hartwood blushed and deflected his praise with a few incoherent murmurs.

She was rapidly amending her first impression of her guest. Initially, all she had been able to take in was the image of a tall and powerful brute of a man, negligently dressed in the clothes of a gentleman. It must have been the shock of having him arrive unexpectedly that had given her such a fanciful notion, she decided, for after spending a few minutes in his company it was clear that he was really rather good-natured.

It was a shame there was no hint of this in his outward appearance as people were bound to judge him unfairly. His swarthy countenance held little beauty and his size could not help but overwhelm. However, she of all people knew the pitfalls of judging on looks alone. Her late husband had been blessed with extraordinary beauty on the outside and little to speak of on the inside, and she had quickly learnt that one could not depend on a handsome countenance for one’s happiness.

Hugh’s acquaintances would have been surprised to hear the word *good-natured* used to describe him, or to see him exert himself in that direction. But it had not taken him long to realise that he was in the presence of a pure soul, and he had set out to banish the doe-like alarm in his hostess’ eyes.

He was succeeding in his task to such a degree that when he asked whether she had made the acquaintance of her future father-in-law, Lady Hartwood found herself confiding in him.

‘I have not as yet been introduced to the Earl of Wulffington,’ she said a little despondently. ‘He never responded to Albert’s letter informing him of our betrothal, and... and I cannot help but feel that he does not wish to recognise me.’

‘I wouldn’t let that concern you, ma’am. As head of the family the old rascal takes it upon himself to rage and disapprove of us all. It’s a habit with him by now and he enjoys the sport of it so much it would be cruel to expect him to give it up. Personally, I hold him in great affection and do all I can to set up his back.’

Lady Hartwood could not help laughing, but shook her head.

‘I cannot believe that course of action is open to *me.*’

All at once, the drawing room door burst open and Miss April Hartwood hurried into the room in a state of considerable disarray.

Her dark hair was partly down over her face, a dozen hairpins were jutting out of her mouth, and both her hands were busy removing the remaining pins from her coiffure.

‘Quick, Mama, you must help me before Rachel sees us!’ she said on a laugh, forcing the words out through the pins.

She looked surreptitiously behind her and pushed the door shut with her foot.

‘Her attempts at dressing my hair are abysmal,’ she continued, ‘but the poor girl is taking such pains over her new duties I don’t have the heart to criticise her.’

As she spoke she ran her fingers through her hair to remove the last of the pins, then tossed back the whole glorious mass until it settled about her head like a dusky halo.

Her gaze landed on their guest...and she froze.

The smile that had been playing about Hugh's lips at the entrance of an unguarded and tousled young lady slowly faded.

Good God, he thought to himself.

He had never before encountered such a face; it really was quite extraordinary.

Her eyes alone would have earned her a place amongst the chief beauties of the day. Their colour was an astonishing cerulean blue with a pale green, almost yellow, centre. And they were large and so wide-set that they gave her an exotic, other-worldly appearance.

Her eyes, however, were not the end of it. The good-fairies that had been present at her birth had been most generous: a heart-shaped face, flawless complexion, soaring eyebrows and plump lips. He had the fanciful notion that each item had been drawn by the hand of a master for not one could be improved upon.

Had he been of a disposition to fall in love with such a blatant show of beauty he would have felt uneasy about the prospect of welcoming her into his family.

He could only be thankful that his disposition was otherwise.

Surveying her with critical interest, he hoped she would not prove to be too vain and wearisome, as past experience had taught him to expect from women of her breed.

Rising politely to his feet, he looked over at his hostess and waited for the necessary introductions.

'April-love, let me present you to Mr Royce. . . Albert's nephew, of course,' said Lady Hartwood agitatedly. 'Mr Royce, my daughter, Miss Hartwood. . . I must beg your pardon, sir, you have had a most abysmal welcome so far!'

'Not at all,' he returned. 'I can see I have put you out. Besides, we should lay the blame where it is deserved: at my uncle's door.'

Turning back to Miss Hartwood, he was amused to find her still staring at him.

It was rare for a gently bred young lady to regard him so openly. His looks alone were usually enough to subdue them into a submissiveness he found irritating. Yet Miss Hartwood was not only blatantly surveying him, there was also an admiring quality in her gaze.

He would have had to be insensate not to respond to it on some level.

He smiled.

It slowly dawned on April that she was gawking at their guest in a truly improper manner.

And, what was worse, she was doing so with a dozen hairpins sticking out of her mouth. She quickly whipped them out and hid them in her hand.

'I apologise for intruding before I was expected, Miss Hartwood,' Hugh addressed her in an easy manner.

This won him a look of approval from Lady Hartwood, who was relieved to see he appeared perfectly capable of retaining his wits when faced with her daughter's beauty.

'We are delighted to welcome you,' replied April, making an effort to smile. 'You are almost family, Mr Royce, and one does not stand on ceremony with family.'

She stepped forward and held out her hand. . . then quickly withdrew it. The hairpins landed softly on the rug by her feet and the hand was once more extended out to him.

Hugh gave no indication of having noticed the small interruption and clasped her hand in his own large one.

A sudden jolt of sensation surged through them both, and each caught the look of surprise in the other's eyes.

'Call me Hugh.'

'Thank you. . . and you too.'

Amusement crinkled his eyes.

'I don't believe it would be proper for me to call you *Hugh*, Miss Hartwood.'

'Oh, I. . . I did not mean. . . ' She paused, frustrated by her own gaucheness. 'I would be pleased if you would call me April.'

'April.' He turned the name over on his tongue, not quite ready to let it go.

'Odd, is it not? To be named after a month? I suppose I should be thankful Mama did not take a fancy to December!'

'I like it. It suits you.'

April smiled.

And this time it was not her society smile that made an appearance but an entirely natural, spontaneous one that only those close to her knew well.

Hugh was unaccountably shaken to see the fierceness of her beauty was softened by the charm of that smile, and one endearingly crooked front tooth. It transformed her from a lofty goddess of perfection, into a warm and altogether too-enticing creature.

It was in that moment that he sensed danger.

Lady Hartwood watched their exchange with great interest and thought to herself that her betrothed had seriously misled her when he had said his nephew did not possess the type of address that recommended him to the female sex. Evidently, Albert knew nothing about the female sex!

She had never before seen her daughter so affected by a man, and it was all she could do to suppress a smile. Clearing her throat delicately, she broke the silence that had engulfed the room.

‘It is a shame your fiancée could not join us this evening, Mr Royce,’ she remarked. ‘I hope we will have an opportunity to become acquainted with her shortly?’

April snatched her hand out of Hugh’s grip (where it had inexplicably remained all this time).

‘I shall be certain to introduce Miss Starling to you at the earliest opportunity,’ replied Hugh, regaining his smile.

The butler’s heavy, shuffling gait was heard out in the corridor and, in the next instant, he entered the room and announced Lord Paisley.

‘What the devil are you doing here?’ boomed his lordship on catching sight of his nephew. ‘Don’t you know not to intrude on your hostess before the agreed time?’

‘Dearest, I forbid you to scold Mr Royce,’ said Lady Hartwood. ‘It was your own fault he thought he was expected at seven.’

‘I don’t know why the deuced fellow thought *that*! But if you forbid me to scold, my love, I shall oblige you,’ he replied, raising her hand to his lips.

He immediately perceived some tension in her and looked up to scan the other occupants of the room.

His nephew returned his scrutiny with unruffled composure. However, April was looking flushed and ill-at-ease and he wondered as to the cause. He would have understood a show of displeasure from her, if Hugh had been so mutton-headed as to forget his manners over her pretty face, but that did not appear to be the case.

‘Good evening, my dear,’ he addressed her in his paternal way. ‘Have you done something new with your hair? I can’t profess to be a connoisseur of such things but it looks different to me. Most fetching, in fact.’

April laughed and walked over to plant a fond kiss on his cheek.

‘Albert, how can you give me such an absurd compliment? I must look a fright! Mama, gentlemen, please excuse me while I make myself presentable.’

Once she had left the room, Lord Paisley looked across at his nephew.

‘If you’ve done something to upset her, Hugh, I’ll have your hide for it!’

‘Really, Albert, he has done no such thing!’ insisted Lady Hartwood. ‘April simply needed my assistance with her coiffeur and was a little disconcerted when she realised Mr Royce was also in the room.’

Hugh returned his uncle’s critical look with a wry smile and did not defend himself. He was hard-pressed to understand, let alone explain, what had just occurred between April and himself.

The girl was ravishing without question, but he had never been even mildly interested in the society beauties that had been thrust his way over the years. And although his fiancée was considered to be a pretty young woman, he had chosen her for her sweet disposition and strict morality, rather than any superficial physical attributes.

If anything, April’s looks did her a disservice in his eyes. . . so he was damned if he knew why he felt as if fate had just thrown a punch at him.



Excerpt: Aphrodite – a humorous Regency novel by D.G. Rampton

April entered her bedchamber and immediately made her way to her mirror. It confirmed what she already suspected: her cheeks were flushed and her hair was in a state of tousled abandon. She looked positively wild.

She groaned and, walking over to her dressing table, began to quickly pin up her hair into some semblance of order.

What in heaven's name was wrong with her, she wondered. One would have thought that she of all people would know better than to be dazzled by physical appearance!

What did it matter that the man had such a handsome countenance? Or an engaging sparkle in his eyes, for that matter? Or that he was modeled along Olympian lines and looked as if he could lift her above his head with the greatest of ease? What an utterly stupid attribute to possess, after all! It served no practical purpose whatsoever to be able to lift a woman above your head!

The image that this absurd scenario conjured up drew a smile from her.

'You are a silly creature,' she told her reflection. 'He may be the incarnate of some girlish ideal but that does not excuse your conduct. You are eight and twenty and not some schoolroom miss addicted to novels. And if that salutary note is not enough to subdue you, then the fact that he is an engaged man must do so!'

After talking to herself in this bracing manner for a few minutes and resolving to treat Hugh as if he were a cousin she had known from birth, she smoothed out her skirts, unconsciously wetted her lips, and returned downstairs.



Two

One brief glance at Hugh as she entered the room was enough to convince April that the intensity of her reaction to him was not dulled by being relived a second time.

Pushing this appalling realisation out of her mind, she went to sit beside Lord Paisley and drew him into conversation, leaving her mother to entertain their other guest without her assistance.

Lady Hartwood was in the midst of sharing with Hugh her conviction that poor Queen Caroline's recent death was no doubt precipitated by the mortification of her husband refusing her admittance into Westminster Abbey for his coronation, when a casual glance at her daughter startled her sufficiently to make her lose her train of thought.

April's hair had been pinned up high on her head into something that could only be described as resembling a bird's nest; one that looked to be in imminent danger of toppling over.

Lady Hartwood attempted to catch her daughter's eye and bring this problem to her attention, but her subtlety went unheeded. And as Hugh was patiently waiting for her to continue her story, she had to abandon her attempts and console herself with the reflection that the gentlemen at least did not appear to notice anything amiss.

And in this she was correct. Lord Paisley was not one to disassemble the overall effect of a lady's appearance, while his nephew barely glanced in April's direction.

When dinner was announced, some minutes later, Hugh was the first to stand and offer his arm to Lady Hartwood.

His uncle, however, had other ideas and shooed him away without any compunction, claiming a greater priority. Then, taking his betrothed's hand into the crook of his arm, led her out of the room.

Unable to do anything else, Hugh offered April the same courtesy he had extended to her mother, but in a manner so curt and reserved that her sense of humour rather perversely reared its head.

'You quite terrify me with such formal manners!' she remarked. 'There's not the least need for you to offer me your arm, Cousin Hugh. We agreed to not stand on ceremony with each other, did we not?'

'So we did. . . *Cousin* April,' he replied, smiling at her usage of such a familial term.

April's amusement faltered. She felt perfectly capable of handling the aloof version of the man before her, but when he smiled at her she had the strangest sensation that her legs could no longer adequately support her weight.

Hugh, in turn, had just discovered that he had been unfair to label April's lips as merely plump. At this close distance he could see the exquisite undulating curve of the top lip and the opulent swell of the bottom one. Their crimson colour gave her the appearance of having just eaten cherries and he felt a sudden urge to kiss away the cherry stain.

He looked away, frowning.

Freed from his gaze, April headed for the door and, as they passed out of the room, tried to think of a subject with which to begin a conversation.

Finally, and rather desperately, she blurted out: 'Albert told us you were in the war!'

Hugh looked down at her with faint surprise and she winced inwardly.

'I hope you don't mind that he discussed the matter with us?' she said, forcing herself to continue more naturally. 'He is very proud of you. I understand your career was most distinguished.'

'That is taking it to a grander level than it deserves.'

'You were at Waterloo, were you not? And were awarded a medal of some sort – I'm sorry, I forget the name?'

‘It’s of no consequence,’ he replied in a detached way. ‘I was merely following orders and keeping myself alive long enough to fulfil those orders. And as all this occurred over five years ago – when I was still too foolish to know any better – any expectations of heroism from me are bound to be disappointed.’

‘Surely you are being too harsh on yourself?’

‘Not at all. Watching your friends die while you survive has a way of focusing the mind on what is important and what is not. And the battle-crazed exploits of my youth don’t deserve admiration.’

April risked a sideward glance at him.

She did not know what she was trying to uncover in his uncompromising profile and suddenly felt as if she was encroaching on his privacy and looked away. She could understand why he did not want to benefit from a war that had brought so much loss to so many.

Judging that her sympathy would only be rebuffed if she tried to articulate it, she decided instead to lighten the mood.

‘Well, no one could accuse you of pumping up your own achievements, but you need not fear allowing me to judge for myself. I will not be inclined to think your actions deserving of praise beyond their true merit, and if I find them unworthy I shall be certain to tell you so!’

‘Now you alarm me.’

He stepped to the side to allow her to pass into the dining room before him.

‘There is not the least need for alarm,’ she laughed over her shoulder. ‘I always play fair.’

A smile was won from him.

Following her to the table, he waved aside the footman who was waiting to pull out her chair and performed the task himself. April was uncertain what to make of this gallantry, for he appeared to offer it absentmindedly and did not even glance at her when she thanked him.

Taking his seat beside her, Hugh kept his attention fixed on Lady Hartwood and his uncle across the dinner table. Lord Paisley was in the act of kissing her ladyship’s hand and looking upon her with great tenderness, and it struck Hugh that he had never before seen his uncle, a confirmed bachelor until now, so besotted.

‘Have you decided on a date for the wedding ceremony?’ he asked them.

‘No, not as yet,’ replied Lord Paisley. ‘I would marry Eleanor tomorrow if she would let me but she favours a long engagement – don’t you, my love? But perhaps early in the new year?’

He regarded her so eagerly as he said this that Lady Hartwood felt obliged to nod.

‘Yes... I... I hope so, dearest,’ she answered with a noticeable lack of conviction.

Reaching for the glass of wine her butler had just poured for her, she raised it to her lips and turned her large, expressive eyes to her daughter, pleading for support.

April offered her a reassuring smile and said: ‘My mother is yet to meet your family and friends, Albert, and she feels that a long engagement would be best as it would allow them time to become acquainted with her.’

‘Yes, that is what I feel!’ agreed Lady Hartwood.

‘I don’t care in the slightest what my family or friends think of you!’ insisted Lord Paisley. ‘Not that anyone could think of you as anything less than perfection, my love. Nevertheless, if it is your wish, I’m content to wait and allow you time to adjust to the notion of becoming my wife.’

‘Oh, *Albert*,’ sighed Lady Hartwood, much moved. ‘I don’t need time to adjust to the notion of becoming your wife. I would happily marry you tomorrow!’

‘Then why don’t we do just that? Maybe not tomorrow, but I could get my hands on a special license by the end of the week.’

Her ladyship, recollecting the obstacles to be overcome, was at a loss for words.

‘Yes... um... we could, of course, dearest... but... that would surely be improper... and people would say it was all rushed for some horrid reason... and... and...’ She turned to April for assistance once more.

But this time her daughter withheld her support. She would be only too happy to see Albert overcome her mother’s scruples, which to her mind were quite absurd.

‘But, my love,’ said Lord Paisley, ‘if two people of our mature years want to marry, surely what other’s think can be of little consequence?’

Lady Hartwood nodded mutely, feeling cornered.

It was impossible for her to confess the real reason for her procrastination... her mother.

A mother who was in fact *not* deceased, as she had led her betrothed to believe, and who was withholding her permission for her daughter to marry until such a time as April found a husband.

Lady Hartwood shuddered as she remembered the awful scene that had followed her mother's announcement of this condition. April had argued with her grandmother in a manner that had quite upset her ladyship's nerves; and when that line of attack had failed to produce results, she had turned her attention on an easier target and had begged her mother to marry Albert *immediately*, parental consent be damned.

Lady Hartwood, however, had lived her whole life under the heavy-handed influence of her formidable parent and found it impossible to disobey her; and particularly since that parent was always willing to help her out of the monetary embarrassments she found herself in all too frequently.

But most importantly of all, Lady Hartwood would not go against her mother's wishes because, on this occasion, she was in complete agreement with them. It was time for April to marry.

To her mind, the only opportunity a woman had of finding happiness was to start a family. And if a little good-intentioned blackmail was needed to secure this opportunity for April, then she saw it as her duty to reconcile herself to this necessary evil.

With the weight of her companions' gazes bearing down on her, she twisted the napkin in her lap with nervous hands, until she could bear it no longer and burst out: 'I have vowed to not remarry until my daughter is wed!'

A stunned silence followed this pronouncement.

Three pairs of eyes turned to look at April; one pair begging for forgiveness.

April was not easily brought to blush but for the second time that evening a warm glow infused her complexion.

'I am sorry, Albert,' she said with commendable composure. 'I have repeatedly attempted to convince my mother that I am content with my spinsterhood, but she won't be satisfied until I am ensconced in the married state. . . and I have finally been brought around to her way of thinking.'

'I did not know you'd met a young man, my dear?' said Lord Paisley, looking bewildered.

'Oh, I haven't!' she replied, eyes twinkling at the absurdity of it. 'But you will be happy to know that I am on the lookout for him and am not in the least fussy. Anyone will do really, as long as they are unmarried and male.'

'April-love, must you?' Lady Hartwood admonished weakly. 'Hugh does not yet understand the levity of your character and may mistake your jokes for the truth.'

'Well, he would be a simpleton to do so, and I don't think he is that - are you, Cousin Hugh?'

'Not to my knowledge,' he replied equably.

'No, I have decided that you are not. In fact, I suspect you of being a good judge of character. You may even be useful in my search for a husband.'

'I admit to knowing several unmarried males. Are there any further criteria you require in a partner for life?'

She felt a twinge of vexation that she could not tell if he was teasing or mocking her. She speared some asparagus with her fork and took a bite, appearing to consider his question.

'I would prefer if he were not a hunchback,' she mused. 'One has to consider the children, after all. And it would be nice if he had all his own teeth, although that is not a necessity. Even intelligence is negotiable. I have often observed that the most intelligent of men tend to be the most conceited and critical.'

'Must he be able to incite affection and esteem, or are they also negotiable?' asked Hugh as he studied her, giving nothing away.

She grew uncomfortably warm under his look, and was then angry with herself for caring what he thought of her. It was none of his business if she had decided to contract a marriage of convenience.

Not that she had decided anything of the sort. She was simply *pretending* to acquiesce to her grandmother's wishes.

'And what of fortune?' continued Hugh. 'A consideration, surely?'

April no longer doubted that he was mocking her, and her smile glinted dangerously.

'Why, of course!' she replied with a toss of her head that caused the unstable mass of hair on top to wobble precariously. 'I can think of nothing I want more than to marry a fortune.'

Lady Hartwood stared at her with dismay and felt driven to exclaim: 'I beg you stop your teasing, love! What must our guest think of you?'

'He is free to think whatever he wishes,' responded her daughter, a martial light in her eyes.

'Eleanor, you can't be serious in wanting to wait until April is married?' Lord Paisley spoke up, steering the conversation back to its original purpose.

'But I *am* serious, dearest,' said Lady Hartwood, relieved that a part-truth had escaped her lips rather than an outright lie, for she could now defend it with conviction. 'I cannot reconcile it with my conscience to be blissfully happy as your wife when my child will be all alone in the world.'

'But, my love, she will not be alone! April, I thought I did not need to say, you are very welcome to live with your mother and I? In fact, I depend on you to do so! I have become attached to your company and would miss you greatly if you did not.'

'Albert, I thank you with all my heart,' she replied through the lump in her throat. 'I would love it above all things to call you Father. You have been kinder and more caring towards me than my own ever was. And you have my promise that I will invade your house for months at a time without the least invitation! But I cannot and will not become your dependent – I hope you can understand?'

'Well, I shan't press you now, my dear,' said Lord Paisley gruffly. 'We will speak of this again another time.'

With his companions temporarily overcome with emotion, it was left to Hugh to revive the conversation.

'Have you visited London before, Lady Hartwood, or is this your first trip to the capital?'

'Oh, yes, we have visited before,' she replied, offering him a grateful look. 'But only twice. And we did not go into Society. . . my late husband was not fond of public life.'

'Mama, you wrong him,' said April. 'He simply refused to go to the expense of hiring a house for the Season. The most we could hope for was one or two weeks in a *respectable* hotel. Nothing modish or indecently priced, you understand. . . certainly no Grillon's or the Pulteney.'

'I take it you didn't agree with his economy?' asked Hugh.

A footman was serving between them in that moment and she found it perfectly natural to avoid meeting his gaze.

'How could I? What young girl wants to consider economy when her life's ambition is centred around going to balls and parties? Poor Papa! To have sired such a frivolous daughter. But I have since come to understand his penny-pinching. The estate could not have supported such an expense.'

'You were never frivolous, love, and I defy anyone to say so!' said Lady Hartwood loyally. 'I will always be grateful to your father for having the good sense to leave the management of the St Mawes Estate to you. If you hadn't taken over the reins when you did, the creditors would have left us penniless.'

'Ah, but that was pure necessity,' replied April. 'It does not negate the frivolity of my nature.'

'But it does show you capable of overcoming it,' Hugh put in.

She looked across at him with surprise, and the sharp movement caused her already lopsided mass of hair to slip further down her head, until it sat at a peculiar angle over her right ear.

April registered none of this as she returned Hugh's gaze. She was still smarting from his earlier remarks and was unwilling to accept approval from him. However, his dark eyes were cool and reserved, certainly not approving.

'At all events, Mama,' she continued, looking away, 'you would not have been left without an income.'

'Oh, yes – something about contracts protecting part of my dowry? My mother's doing, of course! She has always been. . . ' Lady Hartwood hesitated, looking self-conscious, ' . . . she *was* always so clever with money. And I have found it such a comfort to know that, had we lost the St Mawes Estate, we could have lived on the proceeds of my dowry quite happily in a quaint little cottage somewhere.'

April had to stifle a laugh at the absurdity of her mother living in a cottage.

Having acquired the habit of commanding the luxuries of life from infancy, Lady Hartwood was incapable of economising. As the much-loved natural daughter and only child of an earl who had never married, Lady Hartwood had resided in his wealthy household along with her mother. And when her parents had arranged an advantageous marriage for her with a distant relative of her father's, she had swapped the luxuries of an earldom in Dorset for those of an affluent barony in Cornwall.

It was therefore unsurprising that when a run of disastrous investments decimated her husband's fortune, it was rather late in the day for Lady Hartwood to master the principles of economy.

Excerpt: Aphrodite – a humorous Regency novel by D.G. Rampton

Her expensive habits had been the cause of much aggravation in her married life. Her husband had not been a man who excited – or had much use for – such tender concepts as love and affection, and whatever attraction had driven him to marry, it had not lasted long enough to oil the cogs of married life.

From an early age April had learnt to manage her father's hard character and had enjoyed his respect, if not his affection, but Lady Hartwood was made from a gentler mould and had suffered greatly. April had always resented her father's uncompromising manner towards her mother and had tried her best to shield her from it, but when he had fallen ill and she had assumed the running of the estate, she had discovered the extent of her mother's debts and had had to own that (in this at least) his provocation had been great.

'Speaking of contracts,' Lord Paisley addressed April, breaking in on her thoughts. 'Did my secretary visit you today with the rental documents for this house?'

'He did, poor man,' she replied, smiling. 'I kept him here for over two hours and had him explaining every clause in painstaking detail. He was terribly kind and patient. Thank you for sending him to me.'

'No, no, you need not thank me. I only wish you had allowed me to settle it all for you.'

'Had I allowed you to bamboozle me into such a thing you would have found a way to saddle yourself with the rental costs. And I, for one, can see no reason why I should burden you with my expenses. And, besides, you have already done me a great service by engaging all the necessary staff before our arrival and sparing me the pain of interviewing the applicants.'

'Do you like the house?' Hugh asked.

'It is difficult not to! I had not thought my resources could stretch to such a grand property as this, and, from what I have learnt, in one of the best addresses to be had in town. I don't know how you managed to find it for us, Albert?'

Lord Paisley smiled conspiratorially at his nephew.

'Well, if you must know, my dear, I'm on friendly terms with the landlord.'

April turned startled eyes to Hugh and said in a manner that sounded suspiciously like an accusation: 'This is *your* house?'



Three

Hugh took a leisurely drink of his wine, his gaze remaining on her over the rim of his glass.

‘My house is in St James’s Square,’ he said. ‘This particular property is an investment, one of several I own in London.’

April pursed her lips in annoyance. It was intolerable to be indebted to someone whom she suspected disapproved of her.

‘And may I know what rent you customarily charge?’ she asked.

‘I never recall such inconsequential information.’

‘Then perhaps I should apply to your man-of-business for an answer?’

‘If you wish. Although, he has an erratic memory and is unlikely to remember.’

‘It is a wonder then that he is still in your employ! I would have thought a poor memory would be something of a handicap in a man-of-business?’

‘It is. Thankfully, he does not have a poor memory. He is perfectly capable of retaining information I wish him to remember.’

His inference was perfectly clear, but for some reason she was amused rather than offended and had to press her lips together to contain her smile.

After a moment of inner struggle, she managed to muster her displeasure once more.

‘I had a feeling the rental price was ridiculously low. Albert, why did you not tell me? I . . . we refuse to become a charity case.’

‘There’s no need to reproach my uncle,’ said Hugh. ‘The house can command a high price during the Season, but we are now almost in November and it is worth a great deal less than in, say, March or April.’

This consideration had not occurred to her, and she was bound to admit it had merit.

‘But if you feel you are not paying enough for the property,’ he went on, ‘I’ll speak to my man-of-business and find out why he did not think to exploit your generous expectations.’

Lady Hartwood had been listening to their exchange with growing apprehension and at this last comment, which she feared was bound to antagonise her daughter, she mumbled ‘Oh dear’ and reached for her wine glass.

Her fears were misplaced, however, for April’s displeasure had evaporated.

‘You would charge me more?’ she asked, no longer able to contain her smile.

‘If you are determined to be fleeced, why not?’ replied Hugh, smiling in turn.

Her laugh rang out and she shook her head at him.

‘You have overplayed your hand. You should have ended with that perfectly plausible explanation that rents are higher during the Season.’

‘Perhaps. I appear to have underestimated my opponent.’

‘I owe you an apology,’ she said ruefully, her gaze taking in both Hugh and Lord Paisley. ‘I did not mean to sound churlish and ungrateful, only it was a shock to discover I had cause to be so *very* grateful. I don’t like to be beholden.’

‘So I gather,’ Hugh observed. ‘From my perspective, I don’t particularly wish to be known for turning a profit at the expense of members of my own family. My first inclination was to offer the property to you free of charge, but it was made clear to me that you wouldn’t countenance such an arrangement.’

‘No, certainly not! You would have lost income.’

‘If that is your only concern then allow me put your mind at ease. The house is rarely let during this time of year and had in fact been sitting empty for several months prior to your arrival.’

April attempted to read the truth in his eyes.

Hugh saw her hesitation and, sensing victory, turned to her ladyship to press his advantage.

‘Lady Hartwood, I hope you’ll forgive me for not bringing you an engagement gift tonight. I first wanted to make your acquaintance before deciding on something that would be to your liking, and now I believe I know what that might be. With your permission, I would like to tear up the rental contract and offer this house to you without charge for as long as you may require it.’

Lady Hartwood did not share April’s scruples when it came to extravagant gifts (especially from one’s family!) and promptly and graciously accepted Hugh’s offer, before her daughter could complicate what seemed to her to be a perfectly proper arrangement.

‘You have left me with little to say on the matter,’ April told Hugh, her eyes conveying a mixture of emotions, of which gratitude was only part. ‘But – and I am certain my mother will agree with me – we can only accept your kindness until March, at which point, by your own admission, you would be able to achieve the full rental on the house.’

Lady Hartwood felt obliged to concur; Lord Paisley, desirous of a wife before March, was perfectly content with this arrangement; and Hugh gave the appearance of accepting her condition without ever actually saying so.

The rest of their meal passed without any further incident to mar the harmony that had been achieved, and after dinner Hugh unbent sufficiently to entertain them with a few of the more comical mishaps that had befallen him while serving under the Duke of Wellington.

This put April so in charity with him that by the time he and his uncle said their goodbyes at the end of the evening, she was wishing he would do something to alienate her growing regard for him.



It was almost midnight when Lady Hartwood knocked on the door of her daughter’s room and entered. As she had expected, April was soaking in a copper bath that had been set up in front of the fireplace; a nightly ritual she had loved since she was a little girl, and one she needed as much for its mental soothing as for the more practical purpose of removing the dirt of the day.

April was staring absentmindedly into the flames of the fire but at Lady Hartwood’s entrance she turned her head and smiled.

She took in her mother’s freshly-washed complexion, her long silver and gold hair, which had been brushed until it shone, and the white silk robe trimmed with lace around her slender figure. No one could possibly have a mother as lovely as her mother, she thought to herself.

‘What a fetching negligee! Is it new?’ she asked.

‘I thought that perhaps I should begin to prepare my wedding trousseau,’ said Lady Hartwood, through habit looking self-conscious and feeling a need to defend herself. ‘And it *is* quite lovely, isn’t it? Although, at first, it was so extravagantly priced – *fifteen* pounds, if you can believe! – that I was determined not to allow myself to be swayed. You would have been proud of me, love. But then, imagine my surprise when the shop assistant informed me that since I was buying several other items, I could have it for only *ten* pounds. Such a bargain! It would have been a shame to refuse. And I do think it suits me,’ she finished, endowing this statement with an enquiring quality.

April laughed lightly and said: ‘It looks ravishing on you, Mama! Albert will definitely approve of this particular bargain.’

It would have been useless to attempt to explain to her mother that ten pounds was an extortionate price to pay. Or that, however unfair she thought it, her present income could not stretch to accommodate her shopping habit. April had tried many times to explain this unpalatable reality to her, but Lady Hartwood possessed a flexible reasoning and could twist hard facts into unrecognisable alternatives.

April could only be deeply thankful that, after an embarrassingly frank conversation, Lord Paisley had confirmed his fortune was large enough to cover the difference between her mother’s income and her expenditure. If he had not come along when he had, April suspected she would have had to contract a highly mercenary marriage to keep her mother out of a debtor’s prison.

Pleased to know that her purchase had her daughter's approval, Lady Hartwood sat herself in a wing chair beside the fire, rearranged the silk robe around her legs and turned her mind to the reason for her visit.

Before she could speak, April said playfully: 'You know, Mama, I have a bone to pick with you! How could you have allowed me to sit through the whole of this evening with my hair in a fine mess and hanging over my ear? I was never more mortified than when I saw my reflection a few minutes ago!'

'Oh, but I *did* try to bring it to your attention! And when you failed to perceive my signals I thought it best not to make a fuss in front of the gentlemen. They did not appear to notice, in any case – you know how men are! They probably thought it was a new hair style.'

'*Cheveux de bird nest* perhaps?' April giggled and sunk lower into her bath.

'Speaking of Hugh...' said her ladyship with studied casualness.

'We were not speaking of Hugh,' April pointed out, instantly on her guard.

'Well, we *referred* to him, and it brings to mind that I wanted to tell you how delighted I was to make his acquaintance. He was not at all what I expected. I had of course heard high praise of him from your... from *various quarters*. But I was pleasantly surprised to find that he has a great deal of kindness in him... some might even say *charm*. What was your impression, love?'

'He certainly has engaging manners when it comes to *you*,' April said teasingly. 'But it's impossible to know if he is truly amiable or putting on a performance for his uncle's benefit – one can see that he holds him in great affection. Personally, I thought I could detect a certain cynicism in his conversation, especially over dinner, that was not to my taste.'

Having given her mother this little criticism to absorb with the aim of throwing her off the scent, she then felt able to state the obvious.

'But one cannot deny he has a compelling air about him, and is exceedingly handsome besides! I found it impossible not to stare when I first laid eyes on him.'

Lady Hartwood regarded her with a good deal of surprise.

'Would you call him handsome? He is well-looking enough for a man, but it's his kind nature and...'

'Well-looking enough? Oh come, Mama! Don't dissemble. He is a veritable Adonis!'

Lady Hartwood was rendered momentarily speechless.

To think she would see the day her daughter finally lost her head over a man!

'Love, you are blinded!' she laughed. 'But I don't mean to try and change your mind. Hugh would make the perfect husband for... someone.'

'Whatever can you mean? Of course I did not mean I had developed a *tendre* for him...after only a handful of hours?'

'Hours, weeks, months – what does it matter?'

'It matters a great deal, one would suppose. The difference between a fool and a person of sense. But that's beside the point. I can assure you, I have no feelings of *that* kind towards Mr Royce... and he certainly has none for me! At dinner his disapproval was perfectly clear.'

'I think *disapproval* is too strong a word, love. If you *would* say such outrageous things – as you know very well you did! – in the company of someone who does not yet understand your character, then you cannot be surprised if he reached certain conclusions. In my opinion, he acted with wonderful restraint. And did you notice how little your looks meant to him? Not for one moment did he regard you with unbecoming warmth or fascination. That must have pleased you, surely?'

As Hugh's polite and indifferent manner towards her had pleased her very little, and as her own reaction to this fact annoyed her considerably, she was hard-pressed to know how to reply.

Lady Hartwood perceived April's confusion and smiled to herself. She had been a little worried that she was being too precipitate in planting a seed in her daughter's mind, but overall she was pleased with how matters were progressing.

'He is engaged,' April muttered.

'Yes, he is... at present.' Feeling she had said quite enough for one evening, Lady Hartwood yawned delicately behind her hand and rose to her feet. 'Oh my, how tired I am! I really must go to bed. Albert is to take me to Kew Gardens tomorrow and he has a thoroughly *exhausting* walk planned for us. Sleep well, love.'

She placed a kiss on her daughter's forehead and walked out of the room, leaving April to stare after her, a look of consternation on her face.

Excerpt: Aphrodite – a humorous Regency novel by D.G. Rampton

How was one expected to sleep well after such a conversation!