

*Blackmailer's
Delight*

OR
LOVE UNDER DURESS

DAVID LAWRENCE

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*For my mother,
and for everyone who never had that conversation*

Author's Note

Central to *Blackmailer's Delight* is an episode from 1795 often referred to as 'The Revolt of the Housewives'. As a history buff, I was of course immediately intrigued when I came across a reference to this in my reading.

The origins of the so-called 'revolt' are usually traced to the Enclosure (or Inclosure) Laws of the previous decades. Before enclosure, much of the land owned – either privately or collectively – was considered common land over which the commoner had the right to graze animals, cut turf for fuel, or cultivate. Parliamentary acts to enclose land, done both for sound agricultural reasons as well as for financial benefit to the landowners, greatly reduced the land previously available to the public.

This change was felt particularly by the squatter, the small farmer, and the cottager. More money was now required to purchase fuel and feed, and, more often than not, many simply chose to keep fewer cattle. This reduction in overall economic health affected their ability to either grow or purchase the basic foodstuffs.

The situation reached crisis point in 1795. With an increase in food prices in the early nineties, together with the recent uprising in France, many were feeling a pinch at a time of public empowerment. Beginning in March of this year, the unrest around this issue erupted into a series of local uprisings, from Seaford to Carlisle, during which flour, bread, butter, and meat were seized for redistribution. Most of the food was reported to have been sold at a price those who were suffering could afford, the original owners then compensated from the proceeds.

This episode is known as ‘The Revolt of the Housewives’ due to the large number of women involved in the seizures and redistribution. Why this was is not entirely clear, but they were unusually prominent during this remarkable episode in English history.

Prologue



*M*arch 1795

A revolution in France. Food shortages at home. And now a damned tax on wig powder.

“This world is going to hell,” said Daniel Thornton to his lover, Clarence, one morning over toast and marmalade. “What is the name of that local sect I was telling you of the other morning? The one predicting the end of the world in the year 1800?”

“What?” said the younger man, who had been gazing out the first-floor window of their Westminster townhouse. “Haven’t they all gone to America?”

“It was in the paper last week. I distinctly recall telling you about it.”

“Oh, you know I don’t listen to anything you say at the breakfast table.”

“Don’t you?”

“I’m slow to rise, Danny. Once I am awake, I must plan my day; I cannot attend to your little newspaper articles.”

Daniel observed his companion for a moment – perhaps the longest moment of his life. This was the end, of course. Not of the world, but for them. For six weeks he had been expecting this, cynic that he was. They were both cynics – and, apart from the sex, he supposed Clarence’s pessimism had been his primary attraction. They saw the world identically. They liked to laugh at things like sects predicting the end of the world in five years. Or they had. If Clarence couldn’t be bothered to listen to him at the breakfast table, if they hadn’t even this anymore, after the misery this man was putting him through, there really was nothing for them.

He eyed the orange juice Clarence was sipping lazily. Should he?

They weren’t sleeping together anymore. And this, incredibly, before he had understood why, had actually *bonded* him to this man. Clarence had made no excuses: “It’s the way of all things, isn’t it? We are simply two old men grown comfortable with each other,” though this was absurd as Clarence was just twenty-six. No man likes being rejected in bed, but Clarence had won him by appearing to join him in their common plight – wasn’t it just the way of this miserable world?

“What?” he said, lowering his orange juice to glance over his shoulder. Daniel hadn’t spoken – Clarence must have heard the memory of his words ringing in his companion’s head. Narcissists only listened to hear the echo of their own words. Only observed to see their reflection in your eyes. This was the person Daniel had credited with great candour, so

ready was he to believe they had evolved from mere sexual attraction to true companionship. To love. Aside from an uncle in Grantham, Clarence Hopper was the first man he had truly loved. The first in thirty-four years.

Daniel looked around their breakfasting room, which seemed just now to have been organised for different people entirely. A table far too big for them – a thick block of oak fifty years out of date, shoved too close to a window where there was nothing to look at but a street vendor singing the same old tune. What *was* Clarence looking for down there?

He must be waiting for his latest to arrive. It had been six weeks since he'd discovered Clarence's first indiscretion. Many in their set held that dalliances while in a relationship were not only to be expected, but the privilege of their class. Accordingly, Daniel had tried to accept it – tried, and failed, to have one of his own. He had failed because the pain of Clarence's unfaithfulness was so intense it had bypassed even his wish for revenge. It had gone straight to his heart.

Yet, he hadn't left him. He had lowered his eyes and purchased a ticket to this new production in which Clarence performed with his partners while Daniel observed from a darkened pit. He was soon hearing from their friends of Clarence's sleeping with not only every man he could find, but every woman, every off-duty carriage horse be it tall, dark, and handsome enough. Each fling was another poisoned nick at his heart. Another wound which could not heal before another was inflicted.

Being a particularly tall, well-built man, Daniel Thornton filled a room with his presence. When his mood darkened, even his shadow could cause concern, as happened now as he

rose from the table. Clarence looked up at him, though at a noise from outside his attention returned to the street.

Daniel lifted him by the scruff of his dressing gown. Before the younger man could summon anything but incoherent outrage, the orange juice was plucked from his hand and held over his head.

“Don’t, Danny!”

“Hold still.”

“*Dan—*”

He let one drop, then four, then a thin, even dribble spatter onto Clarence’s lovely morning locks. Not too quickly. Gradually. He maintained the weaker man easily in one hand, indifferent to his blows, cutting off his airway by tightening his lapel when the wretch became too lively. Once the glass had been emptied of every drop, Clarence was permitted to sink to the floor, blue and teary, gasping for breath, shuddering at the sodden mess that was his tangled, matted hair.

“*Bastard!*” he gasped. “You will regret this, Danny!”

“Not as much as I regret waiting to do it. Two months is the limit; I shall take not one day more of your infidelity. I loved you.”

“*You don’t know what love is!* That was the worst decision you’ve ever made, Daniel Thornton! You mark my words; you shall have *nothing* but misery the rest of your days!”

Daniel walked out of the room. The rest of his days? To hell with doomsayers and doomsdayers alike. The world was not ending. Not in the year 1800. Not today.

He packed a few things, then he and Collins, his valet, took lodgings in Mill Street. The place was somewhat modest – just three rooms, no meals provided. But they were the best

he could afford, Daniel being one of those men who, unlike Clarence, remained independent only by adhering closely to a budget. Leaving his wealthier lover was a blow not just to his heart, but to his pocketbook.

By the following morning he had experienced many of the emotions one might expect to feel – displacement, shame at letting his temper get the better of him. A fresh, bracing freedom. Moments of terrible regret. And something he was finding difficult to categorise.

“You wish to be a better person, sir?” said Collins, with an arch look.

“Christ, not if you say it like that. But I do wish... to be open to the goodness in the world. Do you know what I mean? To allow that there *is* goodness. I’m not saying it very well. You see, I don’t wonder that the relationship with Clarence turned out as it did, because, in a way, that was what I was looking for.”

“You moved to London to discover the evil in the world?”

Daniel considered. Coming to the metropolis was not so much a decision after his aimless years at Cambridge, but rather a horror of returning to the confines of his native Aylesbury. “I was a sexually frustrated man of two and twenty when I moved. I came looking for—”

“Yes, sir. London gave you the anonymity to pursue your... interests.”

“And don’t call Clarence evil. I was no different from him at that age. Surely.”

Ignoring this prompt to be contradicted, Collins went about his business for a time. The man had been his valet for twelve years, Daniel’s entire residency in the metropolis. He

understood he was at liberty to speak, and to remain silent, as he chose. Under the rolls of his Sunday buckle wig, his valet was a balding, well-put-together man of about fifty, a father figure in many ways, Daniel's own parents having passed years before. Albert Collins was also a friend – perhaps his only true friend. He had been raised to disapprove of Catamites, but as he was also a social snob, Albert accepted the sight of Daniel in bed with a man as a privilege of his class.

At last, he offered, “When you were that age, sir, you weren't claiming to be in a relationship with any of your gentlemen friends.”

“*Precisely*,” said Daniel, perhaps too eagerly. “Precisely that. I never was the kind, was I?”

“No, you were not. And though I shall never understand your interests entirely, I must have thought far worse of you had they included sporting freely with young ladies. As Clarence has done.”

“He is terrible.”

“Young ladies have their reputations to maintain. There was just the one, that I know of. One too many if you ask me. Then, of course, there was that matter of her carriage horse.”

“I *never* believed that. Outrageous. Even I cannot... it is outrageous.” Daniel fell silent; this did savour of protesting too much. He looked desperately at his valet.

Collins remained silent a moment, then he said, “That Clarence is sufficiently hated to have the accusation made is my point. It says something about him, in its way.”

Daniel merely nodded – because it said something about him, too, for having remained with him so long. At last, he said, “I suppose I'm realising I am not the world-weary cynic

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I liked to believe I was. There is safety in cynicism. Something in Clarence, or in myself with the passage of years, has shown me that it is simply a wall to hide behind. Without intending to, I let that wall down. I don't know what I wish for in its place, but for all the pain of having gone without, I do not wish for that wall again.”

Albert grew uncomfortable at too much talk of emotions. The man was, after all, his valet. *Personal advisor* was not in his job description, and Daniel always felt some guilt after bending his ear. They spoke instead of taking an apartment in Soho, of fetching things from the townhouse. Daniel believed he should return today to end things with Clarence on a more civil note; Collins believed the man would have already fled to his parents in Charing Cross, which was his habit whenever anything went wrong.

Then, a knock sounded at the door – a runner bringing a message sent first to the townhouse. Daniel took the note, observing from the direction it was from his uncle's estate in Grantham, Bainbridge Park. Upon opening it his brow darkened – this was a message written on *behalf* of his Uncle Erasmus.

A message to take him from thoughts of Clarence and their Westminster home.

A message to take him out of London altogether.