



The Rake

Excerpt

Reginald Davenport returns to the childhood home that is now his:

The rolling pastures and woodlands of Dorset were hauntingly familiar, though Reggie had not seen them since he was eight years old. He remembered the bleak heath of the high downs, too. In contrast to that starkness, Strickland included some of the richest agricultural land in Britain.

After deciding to leave London, he had packed and left while Julian Markham was still asking puzzled questions from the sofa. Mac would follow later with the curricule and enough clothes for an indefinite stay. Reggie preferred to ride, and to ride alone. He slept at Winchester. By early the next afternoon, he was approaching Strickland, his once and future home.

Though he had ridden hard most of the distance, he slowed his horse to a walk on

the long drive that led to the house. The road was lined with three hundred sixty-six beech trees, one for every day of the year, including the extra needed for leap year. At one point there was a gap in the row. He saw blackened fragments of a lightning-struck stump, and next to it a brave young sapling grew.

He studied the sapling, wondering who had cared enough for tradition to plant that tree. The exemplary Mr. Weston, perhaps? More likely one of the local people. The Davenports had come and gone, but the tenants who had worked this land for generations remained.

The drive curved at the end and the house came into view all at once, without warning. He reined in involuntarily, his eyes hungrily scanning the facade. Strickland was a manor house, midway in size between the humble cottage and the great lordly mansions. Built of the mellow Ham Hill stone that was quarried locally, it was similar to a thousand other seats of the English squirearchy.

When he was a child, the summit of his ambition had been to become master of Strickland. He'd always known that as the eldest son he would someday inherit, and his goal had been to make himself worthy of wearing his father's mantle. He, too, would care for the land, would know every tenant's name, and have a sweet for every child he met during the day. He, too, would be a man greeted everywhere with respect, not fear. And, like his father, he would have a wife who glowed when her husband entered the room.

Then, in a few short, horrifying days, everything had changed. When his uncle's secretary had come to take the orphan to Wargrave Park, Reggie had gone without question, dazed but obedient to adult authority. He'd yearned for the day when he could

finally return to Strickland, until his uncle had told him in harsh, unfeeling words that the estate was not his, nor ever would be.

After that, he had no longer thought of Strickland as his home. He tried not to think of Strickland at all. During the years when he'd believed he would become the next Earl of Wargrave, he had known that his boyhood home would be a minor part of his inheritance, but he never intended to live there again.

Now, in the end as in the beginning, there was only Strickland. His great expectations had vanished, and he was merely a man of good family and bad reputation, no longer young.

But now, for the first time in his life, he was a landowner, and in England land was the source of power and consequence. If he ever hoped to find a meaning for his existence, it must be found here. If only he weren't so weary....

His mouth tightened into a hard line when he realized that his thoughts were dangerously close to self-pity. Urging his horse forward again, he tried to recall what he knew about his mother's family. Her maiden name had been Stanton, but apart from that and his personal memories of her, he could recall nothing.

Strange how children accept their surroundings without question. He had never guessed that the estate belonged to his mother. Her family must have been solid, prosperous country squires, but after the aristocratic Davenports had taken charge of him, he had buried all memory of the Stantons.

Strickland had been built in Tudor times, a sprawling two-story house with gables, mullioned bay windows, and bold octagonal chimneys. It faced south so that the sun fell across it all day long, while the back commanded a view of gardens, lake, and

rolling countryside.

The fact that the house was typical didn't mean that it was not beautiful.

The really shocking realization was how little had changed. The grounds were well kept, the house in good repair. Only a faint air of emptiness said that his parents or young brother and sister would not walk through the door and down the front steps.

He shivered, his hand tightening so hard that his horse whickered and tossed its head. Forcing himself to relax, he dismounted and tethered the stallion at the bottom of the stairs. He went up lightly, two steps at a time, driven by an uneasy mixture of anticipation and apprehension.

His hand paused for a moment over the heavy knocker, a brass ring in the mouth of a lion. He had admired it greatly as a child, longing for the day when he would be tall enough to reach it. He buried the memory and rapped sharply. When there was no quick response, he experimentally turned the knob. After all, he owned the place, didn't he? He would begin as he intended to go on, and that was as master of Strickland.

The knob turned under his hand and the massive door swung inward, admitting him to a large entry hall with carved oak wainscoting. He passed through to the main drawing room, then stopped, the hair on the back of his neck prickling. He had anticipated many things, but not that there would be virtually no changes at all.

Everything was neat, with only a slight suggestion of mustiness. The colors, the hangings, the furniture dimly visible under holland covers—all were unchanged. Faded certainly, and shabbier, but the very same pieces that had defined his world when he was a boy. Ghost memories of his parents sat at the blind-fretted mahogany card table, laughing over a game.

He turned sharply away, stalking across the room to the passage beyond. Wasn't anyone here? There had better be, or someone had better have a damned good explanation for why the front door was open.

He circled around to the right, toward the morning room. There he found a plump woman removing covers from the furniture.

She looked up in surprise as he entered, wiping her hands quickly on her apron and bobbing a curtsy. "Mr. Davenport! You gave me a start. You made good time. We only just heard the news, and there hasn't been time to set everything to rights."

Reggie wondered how she knew he was coming, then decided it was logical for a new owner to inspect his property. "You have the advantage of me. You are...?"

She was in her forties, a rosy-cheeked country woman who was polite but hardly obsequious. "I'm Mrs. Herald. You wouldn't remember, but I was a housemaid here when you were a lad. I was May Barlow then." Looking him up and down, she added with approval, "You've grown tall, like your father."

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "One of the tenant farms was worked by a Herald."

"Aye, I married Robbie Herald. We're at Hill Farm."

"The house is in excellent condition." Reggie spoke absently as his eyes scanned the morning room. The proportions were pleasant, and there were large mullioned windows on two walls. His mother had always particularly liked it here.

"Aye. It was leased to a retired naval captain for a good few years. He maintained the place well enough, but never bothered making changes. It's been vacant since about the time the old earl died. I've kept an eye on things, watching for leaks and

dry rot so the estate carpenters could make repairs as it was needful."

"You've done a good job." Over the years, Reggie had learned the value of an appreciative word, and Mrs. Herald beamed at the compliment.

"I'm glad you think so, sir. We've done our best." She hesitated a moment, then blurted out, "We're all ever so glad to have a Stanton here again. It's not right, the way Wargrave ignored this place for so many years. The old earl never once set foot here, just took money out and put naught back in."

She blushed then, remembering that the old earl had been her new master's uncle and guardian, but Reggie only said mildly, "I'm a Davenport, not a Stanton."

"Your mother was a Stanton, that's what counts in Dorset," she said with a firm nod. "There have always been Stantons at Strickland."

Her words reminded Reggie of the way a judge pronounced a sentence. After a moment's reflection, he asked, "You'll think this a foolish question, but do I have any Stanton relations?"

"The closest would be Mr. Jeremy Stanton at Fenton Hall. He was your mother's cousin, and he and your father were good friends. He's getting along in years now, but a fine gentleman." Mrs. Herald shook her head with regret. "Your mother, Miss Anne, was an only child. Pity that her branch of the family had dwindled down to just her. If there had been any nearer relations, they never would have let the earl take you away after..." She stopped, then decided not to continue that sentence. Firmly she finished with, "The Stantons always took care of their own."

Perhaps that's why they died out, Reggie thought cynically, but he kept the words unsaid in the face of Mrs. Herald's vicarious family pride. Aloud he said, "My man will

be along tomorrow with my baggage, but I came by myself.”

“Shall I be putting your things in the master bedchamber?”

A vivid image of the room flashed in front of Reggie. His parents had unfashionably shared it, sleeping together in the carved oak four-poster. It seemed wrong to sleep in their bed. “No, I’ll take the room above this one. The blue room it was called, I think.”

“Very well, sir. Would you like something to eat? The house is all at sixes and sevens, but my sister-in-law Molly Barlow is down in the kitchen, cleaning and stocking the pantry. She could do a cold collation quick enough.”

“Later, perhaps. Now I’d rather see Mr. Weston. Do you know if he’s in the estate office, or is he out on the property somewhere?”

Mrs. Herald paused, her normal garrulity temporarily deserting her. “It’s hard to say, sir. The steward is very active. Could be `most anywhere.”

“I’m told Weston is very good.”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Davenport. There isn’t a better steward anywhere,” she said with an odd, guilty expression.

Reggie eyed her curiously, wondering why mentioning Weston had such an effect. Maybe the housekeeper was having an affair with the steward? Or didn’t country folk have such vices? If they didn’t, Dorset would prove dull indeed.

He left the morning room. As he made his way through the house, he caught sight of two girls polishing wood and scrubbing floors. They stared with open curiosity, giggling bashfully and bobbing their heads when he nodded at them. An odd feeling, being lord of the manor.

The side door led to a wide cobbled yard surrounded by buildings of the same golden-gray stone as the manor house. It was all so familiar. He glanced up, and remembered the day he'd climbed the ladder left by a man repairing the roof. He'd skittered happily around on the slates, having a wonderful time, until his mother appeared and ordered him to come down right now. Having no conception of what a fall to the cobbles would do to his life expectancy, he had been surprised by her alarm, but he'd come down readily enough.

He had been obedient in those days. That was one of many things that had changed when he left Strickland.

His steps led him unerringly to the estate office on the opposite side of the yard. The door opened silently under his hand, and he stepped inside the office. The room seemed dim after the bright afternoon sun. Behind the desk, a man stood in front of a rack of books, searching for a particular volume. The fellow didn't hear the door open, so Reggie had time to study him. A lean build and very erect posture, garbed in comfortable country garments—a brown coat, tan breeches, and well-worn boots.

Reggie's eyes adjusted to the light, and he realized with a shock that he was observing not a man, but a woman dressed in male clothing. His gaze ran appreciatively down her long, shapely legs even as he wondered who the devil she was. Another of the numerous Heralds, perhaps? Hard to imagine one of that conservative clan dressed so outrageously.

He cleared his throat and asked, "Do you know where Mr. Weston is?"

She jumped like a startled hare, then whirled to face him. The woman was the tallest he'd ever seen, with wide eyes and strong, regular features. A wealth of rich

brown hair was coiled into a severe coronet which glowed in the afternoon sun and gave her a regal air that even surprise could not eliminate.

Now that he could see her clearly, he couldn't imagine how he'd mistaken her for a man. Despite her rigorously masculine clothes, she was quite splendidly curved in all the right places. In fact, the male garb made her look downright provocative.

His interest quickened. Perhaps Dorset would prove more interesting than he had anticipated. The woman appeared to be in her mid-twenties and was obviously no shy virgin. In fact, her expression was forceful to a point just short of belligerence. On the other hand, she gave every evidence of being mute.

Amused by her glare, he repeated, "Do you have any idea where the steward, Mr. Weston, is?"

There was a moment of absolute silence. Then she drew a deep breath, which did fascinating things to her linen shirt, and said militantly, "*I'm* Weston."

Alys Weston, steward of Strickland, is returning to the house after a night where Reggie behaved very badly:

She stayed out past dinner time, preferring her own company. By the time she returned, dusty and weary, shadows were lengthening. She walked into the house to find a delegation waiting. Merry was there, her sapphire eyes showing the strain of parting from Julian; William, unnaturally abashed; and Mac Cooper, looking inscrutable. Only Peter, who was on a holiday with a schoolfriend's family, was missing.

Alys glanced at the concerned faces. "Is something wrong?"

“Not a disaster, exactly,” Merry assured her, “but we're worried about Reggie.”

“Has he run off again? He makes something of a habit of that,” Alys said with studied neutrality.

Cooper spoke up. "No, he's been in the library all day, since an accident with that black devil's horse of his."

Beginning to be alarmed, Alys listened to William explain how Reggie had turned rescuer again, then had nearly succumbed to an urge to wring William's neck. Alys could understand that impulse, since she had occasionally shared it, but she frowned as the boy described how Reggie has smashed his fist into the wall over and over. Was the man going mad? Perhaps he had been drinking steadily all night and all day.

She glanced at Cooper. "If you're all so concerned, why doesn't someone just go into the library?"

The valet replied, "I was about to, but then you came in. Might be better if you checked on him, Lady Alys." His aitches were firmly in place.

“Why me?” she asked in exasperation, but Cooper returned her gaze with an opaque expression. Warily she accepted that since she had been running everything and everyone at Strickland for years, she must be the one to insure that the owner was alive, and as well as could be expected.

Ironic though the thought was, it produced a small stab of anxiety. Surely he would not have done anything foolish? She asked, “Has he eaten anything today?”

Cooper and Merry looked at each other. "Not that I know of," the valet said.

“Have the cook get a tray together with enough food for two people, and a large pot of hot tea,” she ordered. “I'll go wash up, then take it in to him.”

She didn't take the time to bathe and change, but she washed her hands and face and let her hair down, since the long hours in tight braids had given her a headache. After tying her hair back with a ribbon, she went downstairs. She chased the concerned watchers away, saying the man would never come out if he had an audience.

Then she took the prepared tray and entered the library. Reggie was a lean, silent shape slouched in his favorite chair, half turned away from her. The room too shadowed to see his face, but his clothing was neat. With luck, he had not availed himself of the liquor cabinet. She set the tray on a table to the left of the door and said quietly. "Are you still among the living?"

His head turned in her direction. After a lengthy silence, he said in a slow, rusty voice, "I've read of penguins that jump around on an ice floe, trying to decide if there are sharks in the water. Eventually they push one of their number into the sea. If the sacrifice isn't eaten, they all dive in. You, I assume, are the sacrificial penguin."

She had to smile. Obviously there was some life in the old boy left. "I've have been called many things in my life, but never a sacrificial penguin. How did you know there was a committee outside trying to decide what to do about you?"

"Occasionally the door would open, very quietly, then close again."

"After they had determined that the shark was still lurking here." Without asking if he wanted any, she poured two cups of tea, with heavy dollops of milk and sugar in Reggie's cup, then went and put it in his hand. Close up, he looked dreadful, with haunted eyes and a gray tinge to his dark skin. As he stared at the dainty cup, she said helpfully, "It's called tea. People drink it. It's the British cure for whatever ails you."

He smiled faintly, then raised the cup and took a deep swallow. "In that case,

you had better order a larger pot.”

She winced at the sight of his lacerated knuckles. He must have smashed his fist into something very hard. The wall, at a guess. Later those wounds must be tended.

But for now, the physical was less important than the mental. She set the tray next to him and took the opposite chair, then proceeded to select a substantial supper for herself. “Rumor has it that you haven't eaten in twenty-four hours. Food might help. I'm told the roast chicken and the pickled mushrooms are particularly good tonight.”

Slowly he filled a plate and began to eat while Alys periodically topped up the tea cups. She was just finishing a portion of Ripon pudding when Reggie said abruptly, “How much do I have to apologize for?”

Alys swallowed her pudding. “You don't remember what happened last night?”

“No, but Mac implied rather strongly that I have a lot to answer for where you are concerned.”

Alys sipped her tea and considered. Her lingering anger had largely dissipated at the sight of Reggie's haggard face. Clearly he had gone through hell—and she sensed that he had also crossed some kind of significant mental frontier. “You were drunk and amorous,” she said at last, deciding on honesty tempered with discretion.

“*In vino veritas*,” he muttered. “That's what I was afraid of. Did...did I hurt you?”

“It was a near run thing for a moment,” she admitted. “You refused to take no for an answer and cornered me, so I threw a few books at you.”

“Bloody hell.” His face sank behind one hand. “Thank God you are a most redoubtable female—I have enough to feel guilty about.” He sighed heavily. “I seem to spend a lot of my time apologizing to you, Allie. For what it's worth, I regret most

deeply what happened.”

"I think we're about even," she said pensively. "The volume of French plays that I threw into your stomach didn't do you much good."

He raised his head at that, and in the dusk she could see a faint smile. "Too many French plays could give anyone a bellyache."

She was glad to hear more life in his voice. Reggie without a sense of humor was a terrifying thought.

He lifted a pamphlet that lay on the table on his other side. "Did you find this and leave it out for me as a not-so-subtle hint?"

Peering through the dusk, she could just make out the words "The Effects of Ardent Spirits Upon Man." It looked familiar. She frowned a moment. "I think it tumbled off a shelf when I was grabbing books to throw at you. Mac Cooper probably found it when he was cleaning up. It does seem to the point."

"Doesn't it, just." He laid the pamphlet down again. "It was written by an American physician. He talks about drunkenness as if it's a disease."

An interesting thought. Alys made a mental note to read the pamphlet later.

"As you must have noticed, I had stopped drinking for several weeks. I thought that would be all I need to reestablish my control." He sighed again. "Last night made it clear that approach won't work. I've reached the conclusion that I must stop entirely."

"I don't suppose that will be easy." She knew her words were inadequate, but was unsure what else to say.

"No, I don't expect it will. However, I see no alternative." From the levelness of Reggie's voice, he could be commenting on the weather rather than announcing what

must have been a fiercely difficult decision.

“If there is anything I can do to help...” she offered tentatively.

“Thank you,” he said in a very low voice. “I don't think this is the sort of thing anyone else can help with, but I do appreciate the offer.”

On impulse, Alys got to her feet. “Come outside for some fresh air. It's a lovely evening.” And being holed up like a badger in its sett couldn't be helping his state of mind.

After a pause, he said, “Very well.”

She led the way out the French doors into the fresh summer evening. The lawn had just been cut, and the sweet green scent enticed the nostrils.

To the west a spectacular sunset flared, with towers of clouds gilded in gold and orange and indigo. It was lighter outside than in the library, and she could see Reggie's face clearly. His expression was stark and he moved slowly, without his usual lithe grace, but he looked composed.

They strolled down to the lake, by unspoken consent settling on one of the benches and watching the colors fade from the sky overhead. Neither talked, but Alys thought her presence was affording Reggie some silent comfort. She hoped so.

When only a golden rim on the horizon remained of the sunset, Reggie said, “It's getting late and you've had a very long day. I should let you get some rest.”

“It's good to take time to be silent now and then. I don't do so often enough.”

Alys rose. “I want to show you something else on the way back. One of life's very small wonders.”

He followed her passively to the wool-room. It was a large, clean chamber in

one of the more distant barns, and tonight it was nearly full of fresh-cut fleeces. Alys opened the door and picked up one of the rolled fleeces to show Reggie.

There was just enough light left to see a faint mist, like the bloom on a fruit, clouding the ivory white wool. "See? The fleeces are still warm and alive. As the sun goes down, they cool."

He took the fleece from her, squeezing its springy bulk in his hands. "Interesting. Who would have guessed that fleeces have their own local dew?"

"That's not all. Listen."

They became very still. Inside the wool-room was a gentle stirring, almost like breathing. At Reggie's questioning glance, Alys said, a little shy at what a simple thing it was, "The fleeces will rustle softly like that all night long. The fibers are interlocked and tense, and they shift to get comfortable, like people."

He smiled, the most relaxed he had been tonight. "Life really is full of small wonders. Thank you for showing me this one."

His somber gaze held hers, and she thought his words were for more than just the rustling fleeces. It was one of those moments of inexplicable intimacy that sometimes connected them. In that instant she determined not to move her charges away from Strickland. At least, not if he stayed sober. He was going to need people who cared about him nearby.