



*The
New Girl
at Uskweirs
Manor*

by Miriam Roborn

The New Girl at Uskweirs Manor

a pastoral romance by Miriam Robern

DISCLOSURES

Monmouthshire, April 1813

"I don't think this is the way to your room, my dear," Theresa chuckled as Amelia dragged her across Uskweirs' least scenic pasture.

"Didn't I mention? The Randalls keep me in an old outbuilding," Amelia giggled. "it's very well-appointed for a barn." Her humour had a frantic edge to it, Amelia could tell, but she wasn't sure if Theresa could. Did she know her that well yet? Already? They had only had three days at the Malvern party, but they had spent the better part of all of them together.

They had toured the grounds multiple times. They had supped together in the dining room. They had read to each other in the library (even though the collection there was not nearly as good as what Ashbourne kept at Uskweirs). They met in the morning room to break their fast together. They danced more than once in the ballroom, claiming in bald-faced denial of the truth that there were not enough men to dance with. They had done everything that one could do in almost all the rooms at Malvern House except for one.

Each night, Amelia had stopped Theresa at the threshold of her bedroom, demanded a goodnight kiss, and then gently shut the door between them.

Chesterley thought that Amelia was playing coy, drawing out

the pursuit, making her earn access to Amelia's bedchamber. She thought it was a game. She was only partly right.

Amelia *was* drawing out the romance: savouring every moment, living for the way Theresa so often looked at her with undisguised desire. Her lover had suggested more intimate activities more than once, and Amelia thrilled to hear each salacious suggestion. Perhaps she loved to hear them all the more because she knew that the moment she eagerly acquiesced, everything would change.

Theresa Chesterley thought Amelia was a woman—and here Amelia struggled to remind herself that, in this, she was correct. The problem was that Theresa thought Amelia had the kind of body one might expect a woman to have. What most would expect.

What Amelia expected was to disappoint her lover. And then it would be all over.

"But you don't know," Elizabeth counselled her by candlelight. Theresa had been forbidden from her bed but Lizzie sprawled across it each night to gossip and compare notes. "Maybe she will surprise you." Her eyes flashed. "You should tell her! Then you could fuck!"

"Have you told Francis yet?" was Amelia's repeated rejoinder, which always produced the same, deflated answer.

"Nooooo." Lizzie liked to pull all of Amelia's pillows into her lap and try to hide behind them. "I'm not sure he's ready yet. I don't know if he loves me."

"He adores you," Amelia assured her. "It's as plain as the

nose on his face."

"It's such a cute nose, too," Elizabeth would sigh, and then she'd itemize all his features and expressions again.

But Lizzie was playing for marriage, which was a different game than Amelia's. It did not seem fair to string Theresa along when nothing so momentous as wedding bells were on the line. She wasn't asking for devotion spanning the rest of their lives—but that seemed like cold comfort at best. And perhaps Theresa Chesterley would surprise Amelia; she certainly had before. But more likely, Amelia could release the poor woman from a love affair that had been doomed from the start.

She could not in good conscience continue to make love to Theresa Chesterley without telling her.

She resolved to tell her everything. Just not at Malvern House, surrounded by strangers.

So as the party wobbled to its close and Theresa Chesterley prepared to board her coach to "go show her face" in London, Amelia embraced her lover chastely and pressed her lips to her cheekbone. "Come visit me, as soon as you can," she whispered, giddy and breathless, "I'd like to show you my bedroom."

Theresa's arms suddenly latched around her middle, squeezing her close. As they parted, Amelia decided she rather liked the stunned, eager look on Theresa's face. She committed it to memory, cherishing the image across the two long weeks it took for Chesterley to travel to London, see to her affairs, and then cross all of England again to join her at Uskweirs.

On arrival, though, Theresa had probably expected to be

dragged up the stairs instead of through the fields.

The hollow was down at the far end of one of the horse pastures, surrounded by sessile oaks which reached out their twisting, spindly limbs like confused ghosts. The tiny, vibrant green buds on the branches did little to cheer up the view. The wind always missed the hollow, which made it dank and unpleasant, especially in the summer. It was Amelia's least-favourite part of the manor grounds.

She had brought Theresa to Uskweirs' ugliest corner so that, if everything went terribly awry, she wouldn't ruin one of the many places she rather liked here. It was also hard to see unless you were on top of it, so she wouldn't be reminded, when she went for a walk, of that time when she destroyed her own happiness by running off Theresa Chesterley.

She pulled her lover down into the shallow depression until they were surrounded by gnarled branches, then loosed Theresa's hand and sat herself down on a convenient log. When Theresa sat down beside her, Amelia took a deep breath, laced her fingers together in her lap, and turned to face her.

"I have a secret in my past," she said, shaky even though she'd rehearsed the words a dozen times. "And I want to share it with you, because I want to share everything about me with you."

The barest pinch of Theresa's eyebrows betrayed her worry, and then she scooted closer to place a hand on Amelia's knee. "I appreciate your desire to share, my dear. And I'll listen. Gratefully. But you don't have to share every secret with me. Especially if it's painful."

“This wasn’t—” Amelia started, and then stalled. “Well. No, it was painful. I didn’t notice, then, but later I understood what had happened, and. Sorry, I’m getting off track. It was painful. It is less so, now. But if we are to continue along the path we have set out on, it will be necessary to share. All of which doesn’t make much sense, I’m sure.”

Theresa squeezed her knee. “It doesn’t have to make sense. If you think it’s necessary, it is. And I will listen gratefully, like I said.” She tipped her head to catch Amelia’s eye and smiled into her face encouragingly.

“If I tell you, you might... think less of me,” Amelia all but whispered. “And you have a right to it, if you— if I— well. If I shock you.”

“Amelia, that’s not going to—”

She grabbed Theresa’s hand in both of hers, held it, squeezed it. “I need you to promise. To swear. Even if you never want to see me again, you won’t betray this confidence.”

Theresa looked about to object again, but then nodded slowly. “Of course. I so swear. Your secrets are safe with me, my dear. And they always will be.”

“Okay,” Amelia said, taking another deep breath to steady herself. “So. I am a woman.” But then she paused too long in continuing.

Her lover stifled a chuckle. “Well yes. Obviously.”

“But that’s just the thing,” Amelia cried, struggling to hold on to whatever scraps of poise she’d just had. “It wasn’t obvious.

Not at first.” An unplanned pleading note had crept into her voice, and she realized that she had been thrown off her rehearsed script. She struggled to remember what she was supposed to say next, worried that the rising tide of her fear would shortly force her to blurt it all out, crude and artless, before she was—worse—cowed into silence. “When I was born, my family thought I was a baby boy.”

Theresa lifted an incredulous eyebrow.

Amelia pressed on, back on script. “They raised me as a boy, they sent me to school and to university as a young man. But that was never correct. That wasn’t me. Do you remember when we first met?”

Theresa nodded. “In Lizzie’s room. You were getting your hair styled.”

Amelia shook her head. “That wasn’t our first meeting. The night before. I tried to tell you my name was Frobisher. You...” Despite her nerves, Amelia smirked. “You pulled a knife on me, and marched me straight to Ashbourne.”

“That was you?” Her lover’s hand slid out of Amelia’s.

Here it was, she thought, and felt the tears leap to the corners of her eyes. Suddenly she wanted it all out of her, before she was blubbering so hard she couldn’t speak. “I am a woman, I swear to you, to the depths of my soul I am a woman, but not... not as most expect. If we deepen our intimacy, if I... if I disrobe in front of you, you would not.” She couldn’t help it. She sobbed. “You would not find what you are expecting.”

Theresa slid off the log to crouch in front of her and quietly

regathered the girl's hands into her own. "My dear Amelia," she murmured, giving her a gentle squeeze. She spoke slowly, carefully. "Thank you for trusting me with your secret. I will never tell a soul."

More sobs spilled out of the girl. Chesterley wasn't going to tell a soul, which was the condition she'd sworn to if she couldn't bring herself to stay with Amelia, which meant she was leaving, this was her saying goodbye, she was abandoning her. Amelia had said something out loud, but she had no idea how much of her train of thought had escaped her lips or how much had been comprehensible among the sobs and the—oh god—the snot, there was snot dripping down her lip. She couldn't even wipe her face because Theresa kept hold of her hands.

"You aren't listening," Theresa sighed, half exasperated and half amused. Had she said something before that? She jiggled Amelia's hands back and forth as if that might jostle her out of the rut of her thinking. Finally she pulled her close, wrapping her arms around the girl, holding her tight. "I'm not going anywhere, Amelia. I'm not abandoning you over something so silly as that."

"You're not?"

"I thought you were going to tell me you'd been ravished by some villain," Theresa sighed. Then she let go and gave her a long look that was supposed to be reassuring but developed a slight edge of appraisal. "But you're like Mademoiselle d'Eon?"

Amelia managed to nod in the affirmative. She had her hands back, and she tried to furtively wipe off her upper lip.

"Very well then," Theresa said, and reached for Amelia's

waist with a smile.

But Amelia pulled back, incredulous. "Very well? That's it?"

The woman retreated, giving Amelia a little space, and shrugged. "You're a woman who lived as a man but now you're living as yourself." A smirk tugged at the corner of her lip. "I've been attending Uskweirs parties for years, Amelia. This is not a new concept to me. There's more to womanhood than anatomy, and it seems to me all the rest of it is the greater part, anyway."

"But you..." Amelia struggled. "If your preferences are for women, you won't find my anatomy disappointing?"

Theresa only snorted. "Amelia, I enjoy the company of women. I don't fancy cunts." She paused, squinting. "Well. That's not entirely accurate. Cunts are lovely. But they're hardly everything, which is the point, here." Smirking impishly, she darted forward to kiss Amelia all across her face.

Amelia wailed, "No, no, I'm disgusting! The snot! Oh god —" But then their lips met. Her protests were silenced. Only then, when neither of them were trying to communicate with words, did she realize what Theresa was saying. She wasn't going anywhere. Amelia kissed her back.

Amelia was endlessly pleased that her own giggles seemed to inspire the same in Theresa as she dragged her, now, finally, up the front steps of Uskweirs towards her bedroom. While it had been gratifying to hear her lover earnestly propose that she disrobe for her then and there in the hollow, the ground was

damp and cold. Amelia wanted to be bedded in a bed.

The two of burst through the front doors, eyes fixed on the grand staircase leading upstairs. But before they could make their ascent, a round-faced Indian man leapt up from the chair he'd been occupying. Elizabeth sat in the neighbouring chair, looking curiously pensive. "Miss Wright?" the man asked, looking from Amelia to Theresa and back.

Amelia staggered to a stop, Theresa all but colliding into her. Amelia tried to keep her giddy joy out of the smile she gave this stranger. Difficult, with her lover's hand pressed up against the small of her back. "I'm Miss Wright. This is Theresa Chesterley."

"Oh," the man said in sudden surprise. "My— my husband is a great admirer of your pamphlets." He enunciated 'my husband' with a deliberateness that said "yes, we are standing in Uskweirs but I also belong here."

"Thank you, you're very kind," said Theresa with a tight smile. She had other places she wished to be.

Meanwhile, Amelia turned saucer eyes on her. "You publish under your own name?!"

The author shrugged. "I'm proud of what I write."

"And pride goeth before the fall," Amelia retorted. "No wonder you get arrested."

The man cleared his throat. "If I may, my name is Julian Clark—"

"Oh, my man of affairs," Amelia turned back to him, with a far more genuine smile. "Such a pleasure to finally meet you face

to face!"

But the look on his face was anything but pleased. Instead, he looked pained. "Miss Wright, I'm afraid I come bearing bad news, as well as two letters from your mother."

"Those are so often one and the same," Amelia quipped with a roll of her eyes. "They couldn't wait for the regular post?"

He shook his head. "Perhaps we can speak in private somewhere?"

It took Amelia a moment to realize he meant without Theresa. "Whatever you need to tell me, you can say in front of Miss Chesterley. And Miss Randall, for that matter. But this does sound like more comfortable seating is in order." She led the way into the nearest sitting room.

"My parents believe I am in Iceland on an ill-defined dilettante expedition," she explained for Theresa's benefit as she invited her to share a settee, and gestured Clark and Lizzie to facing chairs. "I imagine this is the point where they demand my return and threaten my allowance. Mother is often deputized to forward my father's blustering threats onward to me."

"I'm afraid not," said Clark, with a delicacy that belied a great depth of helpless worry. He fished into a valise and produced two letters. "But I believe I should let your mother's words take precedence. She delivered the one on top to me herself and entreated me to forward it with as much haste as humanly possible. I felt like making the trip myself best fit that description of the task. The letter on the bottom I had received a few days prior and was destined for the weekly packet forwarded

to you here."

"My mother gave this to you herself?" Amelia asked, stomach dropping out of her. "In London?!" She stood to take the letters from his hand and, without sitting, tore open the first.

"Youngest"—

Your father fought valiantly for four days against the greivous wounds done to his body. He was the best among men but his time had come and the Lord called him home. He passed away early this morning. Now I find myself alone.

Or I would be alone had not Iris arrived on my doorstep while the Duke still lay on his deathbed. My prodigal daughter-in-law came with her raucous children in tow along with all the rest of her baggage. Apparently Eustace had mortgaged his house without telling her; his creditors have evicted her and seized the property. Now penniless, she has thrown herself on familial charity. In short, she has backed me into a corner in my on house of grief.

I have always been happily ignorant of the estate's assets and investments. I have run your father's house for three decades but my knowledge and interest stop abruptly at the edge of my gardens. Your late father's agents insist they can manage things indefinitely but I do not know who among them is worthy of trust and who required your father's strong hand and watchful eye.

Iris is hoping for some kind of allowance to live on and I do not know the first thing about arranging for this, nor recovering her house (if such is possible) or finding her a new one so as to get her out of mine. I cannot manage these affairs nor any the rest. Your family requires your presence. I beg you to return

home on the earliest ship.

You will of course have questions and deserve answers. However I neither know nor trust this Clark through whom you do business and will not hand him our family business to publicize through some newspaper gossip for crass profit. I will share all when you arrive.

Please hurry,

Edith Somerset, Dowager Duchess of Suffolk

Amelia read the letter silently, scowled at it, and then read it again, this time aloud for the rest of the room. Theresa gasped at the end of the first paragraph; Elizabeth's silence suggested that she had known the morbid news was coming. Perhaps Clark had told her.

"Yes I certainly do have questions," Amelia hissed at the letter. "What grievous wounds? And where is my brother in all this?!"

Clark cleared his throat and sheepishly gestured to the second letter. Amelia tore it open. It was just one page instead of three. "This came to you three days prior?" she confirmed. Clark nodded, and Amelia read aloud:

Youngest—

Your brother is dead. You are now the heir.

—Edith Somerset, Duchess of Suffolk

Amelia's knees went out from under her and she collapsed back into the settee. Theresa placed a gentle hand on her

shoulder, but the girl was too shocked to lean into the offered embrace. “How on earth are they both dead?” She asked wonderingly. “This is absurd.”

Clark made a face. “The London rumour mill says it was a duel gone wrong.”

“What father and son would fight a duel with each other?” Theresa asked, incredulous.

Amelia sighed, letters crumpled against her legs. “If any father and son would, it would be my brother and father.” She screwed up her face, looked down at the longer letter. Exhaled. “I have to go home.”

The room exploded in argument.

“You can’t,” Elizabeth objected immediately. “Amelia, you’re not that person any more. You can’t go back.”

“You think you can claim the duchy?” Theresa asked, alongside a look that Amelia did not like at all. She bore no trace of incredulity, just speculation. “Are you the new—“

“No,” Amelia cut her off before she could say it. “Despite what my mother writes, I did not become the heir. Women do not inherit duchies.”

“Then who is the new Duke?” asked Lizzie.

“My nephew,” answered Amelia. “Eustace’s son, one of the raucous new additions to Mother’s house.” She waved a letter to illustrate, not even sure it was the right one. “But they don’t know that, and won’t until I tell them who I am. Or fake my own

death, I suppose, which would completely abandon my mother.”

Lizzie sighed gustily. “Amelia—”

“Don’t tell me I can’t,” Amelia interrupted.

The other girl scowled. “So you’re giving it all up? Forgive me, but I’ve worked on you for nearly a year and you’re throwing it all away for the woman you couldn’t even trust with your real identity.”

"She said please!" Amelia wailed. "My Mother. Said please. She's desperate."

“I’m not even sure you can go back,” Lizzie kept arguing. “Even if we chopped off your hair, bound your breasts, and squeezed your rear end into some breeches. You don’t look like you did when you came here.”

“I can’t just leave her there, alone,” Amelia insisted. “I can’t send her condolences by post and not... be there for her. What kind of daughter would that make me?”

“She doesn’t know you’re her daughter,” Elizabeth reminded her. “She knows you as Amelia Wright, a charming young lady with neither fortune nor prospects. You had a whole conversation with her.”

“More than one,” Theresa chimed in. “We spoke with her over breakfast and luncheon at Malvern. Of course I didn’t know she was your mother then. And obviously neither did she.”

The other ladies kept at it for a few minutes, not that Amelia heard what they were saying at all. Instead, she was thinking furiously, frowning out the window, and looking speculatively at

Julian Clark. It was only when she started nodding that Elizabeth and Theresa realized that she hadn't said anything for a few minutes.

"Mellie?" Elizabeth hazarded.

Amelia ignored the nickname and shifted her head from bobbing up and down to shaking side to side. She looked to her friend and then to her lover and took a deep, steadying breath. "I have a terrible idea."

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