

*The Unhappy Marriage of the Lady de la Pole, Marchioness of Winchester*

*by Riley Smith*

“Mistress Isabella was of course quite beautiful,” Mrs. Boleyn began snidely, “As she must be. An ugly person never makes for a good heroine. So we will say Mistress Isabella was the most beautiful girl in her time, be that historically true or not. What is known for certain is her dowry would be massive. Fortune can make up for any amount of ugliness.

“She had two prime suitors, both Marquesses: Lord de la Pole of Winchester and Lord York of Countwell. Winchester was popularly regarded as a bit of a weasel, but a roguish, charming weasel who was always getting into rows and hosting marvelous parties. Countwell was a dull fellow with pride and unruly temper, but his honor was unquestionable. Neither were exactly admirable material for a husband, but both were unarguably suitable matches in terms of rank.

“The dilemma was both suitors were equitable in land, wealth, and political pull. Her father had died the year before, and Isabella was put in the charge of her eldest brother, the new Earl of Blackworth. He very much loved his sister, and gave her leave to marry whomever of the two she loved best, but it was difficult for Mistress Isabella to decide who she preferred. My guess is neither really struck her fancy, but her true feelings on the matter are lost to time.

“Before anyone could make a decision, Winchester got Countwell in such a fit that Countwell hit him, square on the face. Winchester promptly demanded satisfaction in the form of a duel. They would compete to the death for Isabella’s hand.”

“I thank you, my dear friend,” Mrs. Austen said happily, “This is just the sort of thing I was asking for. Spend a good deal of time on the duel, if you please. Unless Countwell dies. I am rather rooting for him, as he sounds the better man overall, and if he loses his life for the depraved Isabella I will be in great distress.”

“She was not depraved quite yet,” Mrs. Boleyn clarified, “Unless one takes the position a

person is born bad or good.”

“I certainly hope not,” Mrs. Austen exclaimed, “For then there should be no effort in goodness, and therefore no real virtue. Nor would there be any amount of fun in badness, the thrill of misbehaving chiefly deriving from making the overt decision to avoid uprightness.”

“I believe a certain level of goodness and badness is innate,” Mrs. Boleyn reasoned, “Since some families are full of scoundrels, and some others full of grace and nobility.”

“Every family has at least one scoundrel in it,” Mrs. Austen said.

“Even good cream can curdle,” Mrs. Boleyn retorted.

“That is true,” Mrs. Austen said, having positively forgotten the initial point. She poured a glass of tea and took up a plate of cake.

Mrs. Boleyn discovered, “I had been telling you of the duel for Mistress Isabella’s hand. So it was that both men selected their seconds. Each of them had in their retinue a gentleman of well-known character. So Wellington had a second known as Sir Connors, who had been knighted by the throne for valour, and Countwell selected one of his sworn men, Carter Baswick. Both Sir Connors and Baswick were men of distinguishment and local fame. They each resolved to sensibly conclude the duel, and as the matter in real question was the marriage of Mistress Isabella, both of the Marquesses agreed to consider their honor satisfied if she would only make a choice.

“She floundered for a bit, preferring one and then another. Both men of course tried to convince her, and the seconds explained to her quite clearly she could cause a man’s death if she prolonged her choice. Eventually, the Marquesses would not be stayed from dueling, and Mistress Isabella could not be made to choose.

“The time and manner of battle was set. In the midst of night, both Marquesses would ride out to a wooded area huddled deep in a valley, at least ten miles out from the castle where all the court was assembled. Their seconds would accompany them, bearing their rapier and lanterns, serving in the duel

as witnesses. When the moon was high, the four men found what they sought: a dark clearing in the trees just large enough for them to swing a sword.

“Sir Connors handed his lord the family rapier, at least three generations old and inlaid with a single ruby. Baswick handed Countwell an ungarnished blade, a gift newly received from a relative abroad. Little did he know what mischief had been done to his weapon.”

“No!” Mrs. Austen blurted, “Poor Countwell. Keep going, my dear. We have started the whole sorry business and now must finish it.”

Mrs. Boleyn continued after a moment of annoyed, pointed glaring, “The two men took their positions, several feet away from each other. Neither deigned to shake the other’s hand. The seconds recounted the rules: The fight was to continue until first blood, at which point both gentlemen were to desist. The victor would be called by agreement of the seconds, and the victor would receive the lovely Mistress Isabella in marriage. The loser must accept these terms without any retaliation or further hostility.

“Sir Connors asked Wellington if he understood the terms. The man just nodded and smirked, his little black mustache twisting up at the corners.”

“It is gratuitous,” Mrs. Austen scolded, “To give him such facial accoutrement. You have no idea what his mustache might have looked like, if he had one, and you have no business giving him one so like a picture of an incarnate demon.”

“I know exactly how his mustache looked,” Mrs. Boleyn insisted, “Especially within context of a story I am so obligingly sharing with you, even at the expense of my husband’s family name.”

“I am much obliged to you for sharing,” Mrs. Austen said, “But I require a bit of fairness. Even though I am positively rooting for Countwell, if you gave him golden hair and made him the tallest man on record I would call you a fool.”

“Countwell was rather on the shorter side,” Mrs. Boleyn said snidely, “It was Wellington who

was tall.”

“I admire your realism,” Mrs. Austen applauded.

Mrs. Boleyn said with force, “Countwell the short and Wellington the tall were assembled for the duel. Both held their rapiers at the ready, and the night stilled.”

“It did not,” Mrs. Austen scoffed, “What nonsense. A forest would not quiet down for two foolish men to war.”

“This forest did, as it had a modicum of respect, unlike certain people,” Mrs. Boleyn fumed, “Should I tell the story or would you prefer to do it?”

“If I knew the story,” Mrs. Austen said impishly, “Then I would certainly tell it. I like nothing so much as to hear my own voice. But as it is, you must tell it.”

“Then do be quiet,” Mrs. Boleyn said sweetly, like a sugar-coated stiletto knife, “For I am trying very hard to tell the story well, and both entertain and inform. I have not yet begun the duel. For your sake, we will say the forest continued its usual cacophony of howls, hoots, and insect clicks. The backdrop was ghastly and dark as trees lurched overhead and Countwell stared with blood-red rage. Wellington was cool, unruffled and forever smirking.

“It fell to Baswick to call the start of the duel. He shouted to begin. The rapiers clashed with a thunderous clang.”

“Like two kitchen pots colliding,” Mrs. Austen said happily.

“In a most distantly related way,” Mrs. Boleyn groused, “Only this sounded deadly and would not be followed by good soup. So the two men locked in mortal combat, each sounding the forest with raging grunts like bulls. But after only a few parries and slashes, Wellington hit at Countwell’s plain sword toward its back. The entire blade fell from the hilt.

“Later, it would be discovered the relative that sent the weapon never really sent it at all. The note was forged by Wellington, and the sword was forged to fall apart. At the moment, it was all

Countwell could do to dodge Wellington's blows. Baswick attempted to intervene, but was stopped by Sir Connors. The duel was to go until first blood. Baswick, no doubt feeling as if he had failed his liege, though he had no inkling of the sword's defects, accused Sir Connors of the most horrible treachery. He took out his dagger and made to dig it in Sir Connors's chest.

"Sir Connors reacted quickly with the only weapon he had at hand: the lantern he was holding. He dashed Baswick across the face, sending burning oil across the man's cheek and eyes. Baswick was blinded in a moment, his face forever scarred, but he lunged madly for Sir Connors and gouged his knife into the knight's chest. Sir Connors fell to the forest floor and bled, while Baswick writhed in pain from his fiery facial wounds.

"Countwell managed to evade Wellington's blows, until finally Wellington stabbed his stomach. Countwell fell to the forest floor and raged like a wounded bull, but he had no way to harm his felonious aggressor. Wellington looked to his second, but saw Sir Connors had died. He hefted the body onto his horse, and rode quickly back to the palace.

"He rode into the courtyard with the first morning dawn, and rang out a piteous wail for his dead friend. He told everyone his version of events: Wellington had drawn first blood, but then Baswick had accused them of cheating, and launched himself at Sir Connors, murdering him. Wellington then said Countwell broke his own poorly built sword, in order to effect a reason for his loss, and for Baswick's rageful misdeed.

"In the forest, Baswick had recovered himself enough to drag his master up into the saddle. They rode back quickly, but they arrived far after Wellington and his lies. When they arrived in the palace, Countwell wounded and Baswick deformed, no one would believe their true tale. The wedding date for Wellington and Mistress Isabella was set that evening.

"Countwell nearly died from an infection from his wounds, and Baswick was nearly hung for the killing of Sir Connors. But the coming to blows of seconds in a duel is not uncommon, and he was

only charged a fine for disturbing the peace, as were the Marquesses. Countwell honorably discharged this fee for his second, and then released him from his service. Baswick took to the Far Lands, self-exiled by his infamy and grief at having killed an innocent man.

“Mistress Isabella was married, and became Lady Isabella de la Pole, Marchioness of Winchester. Countwell, soon as he had healed enough, took to the seas. He built a military galleon and pursued pirates ruthlessly for a decade. In that time, Lady de la Pole gave birth to an heir for Winchester, whom they named Lionel for his father.

“When Countwell returned to court, called back by the King himself for his admirable advice in war, he found a miserable Lady de la Pole. Her husband had not ceased his profligate ways. He was a drinker and an adulterer, and he routinely shamed her in public with her lack of fertility. She had, after all, borne him but one son. He would loudly claim that while he had no problems bringing forth life, as his copious numbers of natural children would attest, she had borne his virility but one child. He was rude to her and ignored his son. He was altogether the most abhorrent sort of man.

“Even so, he was Isabella’s own doing. If she had initially selected the better man, instead of waffling and leaning toward the seductive nature of Wellington’s easy charm and sparkling expenditures, then she would have been happily married.

“But Countwell found his love for her, an adoration he had thought buried long ago, only too strongly reared up once he returned to court. He could not withstand his passion for her, and therefore declared his thoughts in mighty overtures. He wanted to go straight to the Marquess and challenge him to a duel for shaming Lady de la Pole. But the lady feared for him, even if he should win. Nothing he said was false, it was true she was at fault for their lack of progeny. So Countwell had no legal standing to demand satisfaction, especially for the sake of another man’s wife. Even if he killed Wellington, Countwell might still be punished for murder.

“So instead, the Lady de la Pole dragged her noble lover into a life of sin. They began an affair,

disgustingly carrying out their love whenever they might not be espied. This kept up for a year or two, before Wellington found out in a rather peculiar way.

“He came upon his son, Sir Lionel, giving a kiss to one of his playmates. This girl was a daughter to one of the kitchen staff, and she left a smudge of dirt on Sir Lionel’s cheek. The girl departed and Wellington asked his son, ‘Why so friendly, boy, with the housemaids?’ The Marquess thought it a rather amusing display, and hoped his son had inherited his own capacity with women. The boy replied, ‘She had to leave, so I was telling her goodbye.’ The Marquess said, ‘What a way to say goodbye!’ It might have ended there, had not the little boy said, ‘It is the way my Lady Mother says goodbye to her friend.’ The Marquess was struck by that.

“He asked his son, feigning disinterest as much as he could, ‘All of her friends, or just one special friend?’ His son replied just one. The Marquess asked for his name.

“It was discovered that Lady de la Pole and Countwell had been caught by Sir Lionel in their unacceptable embraces. They had quickly covered their transgression with a lie, explaining falsely to the child that they were merely friends saying an affectionate goodbye. Sir Lionel had believed his dark-hearted mother, and copied her behavior, and so revealed her deceit.

“Wellington took the opportunity well in hand. He was a most dastardly, diabolical sort, and thought happily that he could not only avenge his wife’s betrayal and remove a long-held enemy from life, but his wife’s massive fortune would come completely under his control. Her monies would be inherited by Sir Lionel, and as his father Wellington would control that income.

“He hired a spy and inserted her amongst Lady de la Pole’s servants. The woman spent all her time following Isabella, marking her movements, and finally found where she and Countwell were wont to meet. She discovered the time of their next meeting, and she revealed all this to Wellington. The cuckolded Marquess gathered to him, on the pretense of a pleasure party, several well-regarded courtiers. He brought them all to the place of the illicit meeting, and pretended to just hear through the

door his wife's voice cooing lovely things.

“He faked great pain and bid his friends help him break through the door. They did so, and found irrefutable evidence of her sinfulness. Countwell lunged for Wellington in a murderous rage, but the men there held him back. Lady de la Pole was sent to clothe herself, and then both were taken into custody on authority of the Crown. In a few days, Lady Isabella de la Pole and Lord Charles York, Marquess of Countwell, were executed for adultery.”

“This sounds to me, rather than a treatise on the immorality of woman,” Mrs. Austen said with feeling, “Like a young girl being battered about by two men trying to manipulate her and her love, and then the two supposedly adult men going off their rockers and trying to murder each other. Then the poor girl was trapped in an unhappy marriage, and when the reprieve of true love came, she took what solace she could. I feel rather bad for Isabella.”

“Feel bad for Countwell,” Mrs. Boleyn enthused, “He was drawn by her web into a doomed affair that ended with his execution,” a pause, a consideration, and then, “If you really feel so badly for Isabella, I can tell you she was probably revenged.”

“Probably?” Mrs. Austen said with amusement.

“It is well known that her brother, the Earl of Blackworth, protested her execution, calling for like recompense for all of Wellington's marital indiscretions,” Mrs. Boleyn story-told, “But as there was no law restricting the extramarital activities of men, no legal recourse could be had. It is said that Blackworth took to illegal recourse.

“One night, Wellington was indulging in his favorite dessert, a sort of blackberry mash. While eating, he began to choke. He was alone in the room, and in a few minutes died. When the serving staff came to clean the room, they found his face in the bowl of mashed blackberries.

“The servants laid him out and called for a doctor, who arrived the next morning and inspected the body. He thought it must be a case of asphyxiation, only he found no blocks in the Marquess's



throat. The doctor wondered at that, but decided it altogether possible it had been knocked out by moving the corpse, or had dissolved over the course of the night. No one had any thought of foul play.

“Except the woman who had cooked the dessert was discovered to have been previously in the employ of the Earl of Blackworth. A brief inquest was followed but no evidence of wrongdoing could be found. Especially since the woman had disposed of the offending bowl of blackberries before any investigation could be made. She returned to the Earl’s service immediately after the inquest was completed.”

“That all seems very suspicious,” Mrs. Austen said, “Goodness, imagine death by one’s favorite dessert! How cleverly awful and awfully clever.”

“You think you are quite adorable when you say little turns of phrases like that,” Mrs. Boleyn reprimanded.

Mrs. Austen smiled. “Am I not adorable?”

“No,” Mrs. Boleyn said, “You are an adult woman.”

“You are bitter,” Mrs. Austen countered, “Because you think I do not lend your story enough credence. You are wrong. I very much believe your account, and take it to heart. I do believe every family, any person at all, has skeletons in the closet.”

“Yes, but that is just my initial point,” Mrs. Boleyn said with a finger-stab, “Which I am glad to return to. The Burgundy family is just like any other.”

“Except they have Kings and Dukes and war heroes in their lineage,” Mrs. Austen laughed, “While we have rural landowners.”

“Landowners every bit as important as a war hero,” Mrs. Boleyn insisted pettishly.

“Each man is meant to do as God intended,” Mrs. Austen said smoothly, “In that capacity, he is always important. We should admit, dearest, that the mischevious, underhanded dealings of nobility are altogether more interesting than our quiet utility.”

“If I had mounds of money,” Mrs. Boleyn pouted, “I would be very interesting, too.”

“You already are interesting,” Mrs. Austen said graciously, “As is this cake. Might I bother your cook to jot down the recipe?”

The Boleyn cook was called and quickly acquiesced.