

*A Special*



*English Rose*

*By*

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"A Special English Rose"  
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10 February 1915  
Chippingham, UK

The roll of distant thunder punctuated the sound of rain cascading onto the tin roof of the Officers Club. Three days of constant rain; no let-up in sight. Flight Lieutenant James Norton sat, despondent, with nowhere to go. A half full pint of stout rested, amidst a ring of condensation, on a scarred dark oak table at his elbow. Reaching for it, his thought drifted to the other officers in his squadron.

The Duchess had invited them to the ducal palace, for an afternoon of gaming. Pointedly, at the Duke's insistence, he'd been excluded. So, there he sat, alone with his thoughts. Thoughts of one person in particular. He swigged down the last of his beer and signaled the steward for a refill.

Sweeping a calloused hand through his sandy brown hair, he rose determinedly from the butter-soft dark leather chair. He straightened his uniform and strode to the humidity fogged window. Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved a starched white handkerchief. Slowly, with purposeful circular motions, he wiped the wetness away. Through the leaf-barren trees he spied the towers where she lived. How he wished he could be there. If for no other reason than to cast his eyes on her, the Duke and Duchess's special rose. Again. To drink in her beauty. Hear her laughter, warmer than the summer sun beating down on his face.

James had come to England as part of a contingent of American pilots who joined the war effort by going to Canada and enlisting. With the United States still maintaining its neutrality, it had been their only choice. To help stop the Huns.

When he first arrived at Chippingham Aerodrome he was graciously invited, along with several other new officers, to a luncheon her Grace was giving for them, a welcome and thank you for their aid. It was then that fate stepped in. Entering the informal dining room, he paused to take in the grandeur. When his dark eyes noticed a woman standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling window, overlooking the winter-sleeping garden, they fell on a true English rose in full bloom.

When he first saw Christina, her soft lavender blue eyes, highlighted by long auburn lashes, collided with his. Her long, dark red hair fell below her shoulders, brushed back, held there in place by a simple barrette. Sun streaming in through the window brought out subtle variations of colour. Her simple white day gown, with little roses scattered in the material, settled sweetly over her dainty figure, and its bodice, cut demurely, presented a pearlescent white swan neck, blending into soft, kissable shoulders.

As he passed by her, his hand accidentally brushed lightly against hers. Even with this briefest of contacts he could feel a tingling, coursing from his hand up his arm. As it engulfed him, he swore it went straight to his heart, making it skip a beat. He stopped. Slowly, turning, he grasped her wrist. Her eyes brightened. Without realizing it her cheeks rounded into a delicate, soul-melting smile. Smile was met with smile. Soft. Gently speaking volumes to each. Suddenly, her brow crinkled into a frown as they heard a disgruntled growl behind him. Glancing casually over his shoulder he came face to face with a very distressed Duke, a scowl curling his lips.

Even the disapproving sound from her father, the Duke, wasn't going to deter her heart. This American was the one she'd been searching for. This she knew in the deepest regions of her heart.

As she knew, he knew she was the woman for him. The one he'd been searching for all his life. He'd fight heaven, hell and a disgruntled Duke, if necessary, to win her. Throughout the luncheon, their eyes kept meeting. Disapproving ducal parent aside. The pert little smile he already loved kept showing up for seemingly no reason. To tempt him. And tempted he was.

It had been her father who had imposed the ban, while the Duchess secretly approved the match. "I am not going to have my daughter associating or socializing in any way with a bloody Yank, even if he is in the Royal Flying Corps. Those colonials have no idea how to behave. Totally boorish. No respect for customs or traditions."

No one dared mention that 'those colonials' had won the war over a hundred and thirty years ago. Someone, James guessed, most likely in the not too distant past, had given his Grace a very poor impression of Americans. Now Flight Lieutenant Norton was made to suffer for it. Along with his English rose.

Even though James was never invited again, Lady Christina and he frequently, unbeknownst to the Duke, exchanged missives. Once, they chanced a meeting right under the Duke's nose.

The lovers' favorite spot for clandestine meetings was the local pub, The Black Swan. Here the townsfolk would let him enjoy a pint or two. They never held it against him that he was a Yank, even standing him a pint now and again.

*12 February 1915*

It was on this date, on another rainy afternoon at the pub, that his squadron commander encountered him.

"Ah, there you are. Just the chap I'm looking for. I say, this constant rain's a bit of a bother. What?" Squadron Leader Sedly Smythington commented wryly.

"His Grace has acquiesced and invited you to his daughter's twenty-first birthday ball. If you knew her," he paused, letting the words sink in, "you'd know she can be very headstrong, like her mother. I am assuming that is why you got the invitation. Wanting to include all the officers from the aerodrome."

Norton smiled to himself, knowing full well the reason he'd been invited. Christina and her mother. He could see their hand in it.

"But I didn't get an invitation. Not in today's mail, at least," he said, a questioning bewilderment in his voice.

"But, of course not. They were hand delivered by one of the Duke's footmen. I noticed it and had your batman put it on your bed. You also got another letter from your sister, which is in the orderly room," Smythington said, taking a sip of his Guinness.

Acting as if he was in shock that he'd actually been invited, Norton swigged down the last of his pint. "Better check and make sure my dress uniform is clean and what not. *Cheerio, sir.*" As he left the table he smiled to himself. *Good Lord, I'm starting to speak like a Brit after all.*



A faint knock on the study door interrupted the Duke's train of thought. "Your Grace, Lady Christina," Marks somberly announced.

"Thank you, Marks." The Duke rose from behind his desk as his daughter entered. "We will ring for tea when we're ready."

"Very good, Your Grace." Bowing as low as his aged form would let him, he backed out, quietly closing the door behind him.

Christina, beaming a smile at her father, skipped over to him. She wrapped her arms around his slightly ample waist and gazed into his deep brown eyes. "Oh, Daddy. I'm so excited about the ball. It seems like it's been years since we've entertained." Raising up on her toes, she planted a kiss on his smooth shaven cheek.

"We had a ball here about six months ago, don't you remember. It is this blasted war. Seems to be keeping all the eligible young men away. It was smart of your mother—by the way, where is she?—to suggest we invite the officers from the Aerodrome," the Duke said as, smiling, he retook his chair. Slowly, his smile turned into a frown, remembering *WHO* else had been invited.

"Oh, Mommy will be right along. She's saying good-bye to the last of the officers who were here," she announced, trying not to sound disheartened. The afternoon had been horrible. One British officer in particular, who was next in line for his

pater's title, had gotten quite in his cups, becoming boorish with some of his antics.

A faint knock at the study door interrupted any further conversation. "Your Grace. Lady Christina. Her Grace." Marks stepped aside as the Duchess swept gracefully in.

Coming level with the butler, she stopped. "Marks, would you please ask Mrs. Worthington to join us briefly."

"Yes, Your Grace." He bowed his way out.

The Duchess approached her daughter, giving her a pat on the cheek. "That nice young man Jackie Howard so wanted to say good-bye to you. You snubbed him several times today, darling. That wasn't very nice." Turning to her husband, she clarified, "You know who I'm talking about. He's the son of the Earl of Tutton and, if I'm not mistaken, next in line for the title."

"Ah yes. The Earl and I came down from Cambridge together. Decent sort of chap. Suspect young Howard is cut from the same piece of cloth," the Duke commented. Swiftly, he turned away as a knowing glint sparkled in his eye. Raucous, rowdy memories of himself and Tutton, at college, briefly filled his mind. Mentally shaking his head, he removed the memories, for the present.

"Mom, Dad, the Earl might be a total gentleman, but his son's an absolute cad. When he's not making nasty comments, he tries to get me in the corner, for God only knows what," Christina said with disdain as she felt her face heating as she remembered being with James in the same corner and the pleasurable things he did to her.

The Duke, rising from behind his desk, took a seat on a Hepplewhite chair, while the ladies settled themselves on the loveseat facing him. Opening a folder, he glanced at it briefly. "Susanne, my dear, from the looks of this list, everything should be all set for the ball, don't you think?"

The Duchess murmured her assent.

He passed his gaze over to Christina. "I understand you're going for your final fitting tomorrow."

She nodded, hiding a smile.

"Reggie, I was planning to go with her, but unfortunately I need to stay here to help with last-minute details. If it's all right with you, I thought we would ask Mrs. Worthington to chaperone Christina."

"I see no reason why Mrs. Worthington cannot." The Duke looked from one lady to the other.

A knock, loud and distinctive in rhythm, sounded on the study door. "Come in, Mrs. Worthington," the Duke called out, somewhat annoyed at the unseemly racket. She entered with her usual flourish.

Mrs. Worthington stared accusingly at the Duke. *If he'd only step aside and let true love flourish.* "Your Grace, Your Grace, Lady Christina," she said, looking at each individually. "How may I be of service?" *As if I didn't already know.* A mischievous light glinted in her eyes.

Lady Susanne turned to Mrs. Worthington. "As you know, Lady Christina is scheduled for the final fitting of her ball gown tomorrow. I will not be able to attend her, so would you be so kind as to chaperone?"

Christina smiled to herself, already knowing the answer.

"Of course, Your Grace. I'd be happy to. Will there be anything else?" Mrs. Worthington paused for a non-answer. "If not, you'll excuse me, I must get back to the kitchen." She curtsied before hurrying out.

"Mom, Dad, if you'll excuse me, also, I want to rest up before dinner."

Her parents looked questioningly at each other. "Certainly, darling," the Duke said, before he turned back to ask his wife about the arrangements for the guests expecting to stay overnight after the ball.

Christina quietly departed. Once outside the study, it was all she could do to keep from whooping and hollering in glee. Her machinations had worked to keep her mother here. Of course she'd known Mrs. Worthington, the housekeeper, would escort her.

Now, she could see James again in private—or at least as private as the pub was. After all, it was Mrs. Worthington who'd acted as the go-between with the letters. Instead of heading to her room, she snuck out to the kitchen with a hug of thanks for that good lady. Looking over her shoulder to make sure no one was watching, she purloined a freshly baked, warm raspberry tart on her way out of the kitchen.

"Stop, thief," Cook giggled, seeing the juices dripping down Christina's cheek.

They both laughed.



After getting the news, James ran straight back to his barracks. On the way to his room, he swung by the orderly room to collect his mail. Resting on top of the little pile was the letter Smythington had mentioned. From Christine Norton. Except he knew it wasn't from his sister. It was from Lady Christina. She used the name Christine Norton on the return address as a ruse. Thus the letters would get through without any scrutiny by Smythington. James' letters to Christina were sent through Mrs. Worthington, who'd then secretly pass them along. Impatient to read this latest missive but always careful, he waited until he got to his room.

Once there, he found an ecru-coloured envelope resting on his pillow. *It'll have to continue to wait. This is more important.* Carefully opening the letter with trembling fingers, he peered at the delicately written note. His mind envisioned her small slim fingers gently cradling the pen as she put ink to paper, dark red hair softly caressing her porcelain-fine cheeks before tumbling over her shoulder, barely touching the parchment. He started to read:

*11 February 1915*

*My Most Precious Darling,*

*As you know by now, you've been invited to the ball celebrating my twenty-first birthday. You should have seen my mother berate Father about wanting you included. I thought he was going to froth at the mouth, he was yelling so much. His voice could be heard all over the palace.*

*He was upset because Mother and I wanted you invited. She proceeded to tell him how polite and gentlemanly you were whenever she'd seen you in town. Eventually, father acquiesced.*

*It was OUR Mrs. Worthington who finally put her foot down. Storming into his study she insisted his yelling 'cease and desist at once'. You should have seen him, when she said it. We all thought he was going to have apoplexy. She said his carrying on was disturbing the staff. Then she asked why the outburst, not that she didn't already suspect its reason. Darling, you must remember one thing about her and Marks, they both have known Daddy since he was in nappies.*

*Now for the best news. Mrs. Worthington and I have devised a plan for Saturday. She'll escort me to the dressmaker's for the final fitting. Perhaps we could meet at the pub around noon.*

*Until tomorrow,*

*All my love,*

*Your Darling Tina*

He smiled. Finally, Christina and he could spend a little time together. It had been weeks since they'd seen each other, albeit in public and her chaperoned.

Secreting the letter away in his footlocker with the others from her, he turned his attention to the envelope resting on his pillow. Even though he knew what it was, he opened it. The scent of roses wafted up from the paper. Her scent. Glancing through the multitude of papers and envelopes, he found what he was looking for—a handwritten note. *'I can't wait to see you.'* It

was signed simply 'C'. A smile curled his lips as he filled in the appropriate space on the RSVP card. Of course he would attend. Wild horses and crazed English dukes wouldn't keep him away. A knock on the doorframe interrupted his reflections.

James looked up, seeing Geoffrey, his batman, leaning on the door frame. A grin, stretching ear to ear, belied his approval of the upcoming event. "Just the person I need. Seems I've been invited to Lady Christina's twenty-first birthday ball—"

Before he could finish, Geoffrey interrupted, "Yes, sir, and congratulations. Don't worry, sir, I've already taken your dress uniform out. It's getting a good airing as we speak. Afterward, I'll touch it over with the steamer to rid it of any remaining wrinkles. And your best white shirt is being starched and ironed within an inch of its life. May I say, sir, good luck with the young lady. We're all rooting for you." Turning on his heel, he walked away, leaving James in open-mouthed surprise at his departing words.



Placing his invitation on the silver salver, he let his eyes wander around the ballroom. The gentlemen, in dress uniform or tails, were in stark contrast to the gaily coloured gowns of the ladies. The room was festooned in roses of every imaginable colour. Even the chandeliers had roses dripping from them. Potted plants, positioned between chairs and chaises arranged against the walls for the tired and dance weary, were likewise festooned in roses from the estate hothouses. All were in honour of the Lady Christina and her adoration for the flower and its delicate fragrance.

After being announced, he made his introductions, first to Lady Christina, who was cool and slightly aloof, not wanting to give away their affection for each other. Next were her parents. The Duke scowled as James made his bows, while Her Grace greeted him warmly, bussing him on each cheek.

With the social requirements of the receiving line finished, the Duke led his daughter to the dance floor for the first waltz. Shortly, the floor was crowded with couples joining in.

As the evening progressed, Christina and James shared stolen glances and smiles, always at a forced distance. The Duke, with help from friends, made sure James didn't get within five feet of his daughter.

At midnight, the majordomo rang the bell to announce that the pairing of dinner partners would start soon. It had been planned that the Duke would escort his daughter, while the Air Marshall from the aerodrome would escort the Duchess. Scanning

the ballroom, the Duke searched impatiently for his daughter. He became worried, seeing she wasn't about. Not wishing to cause a disturbance, he whispered in his wife's ear, "Have you seen Christina?"

"Yes. Last I saw, she was over by the refreshment table," Lady Susanne skillfully lied back. She knew exactly where Lady Christina was and with whom. Of course, Mrs. Worthington was chaperoning the two lovers from a discreet distance.

"We have to find her quickly. In ten minutes the final bell will ring, and the guests will be lining up," the Duke said in an annoyed tone, still scanning the room yet again. His gaze slowly settled on the French doors opening onto the terrace. "Darling, isn't that Mrs. Worthington out there?" A hint of shock mixed with surprise in his voice. Subtly he nodded his head in the direction of the terrace. After another hard look, he headed that way, his wife at his heels almost running to keep up.



Christina reached up, threading her delicate fingers through his luxurious sandy brown hair. Her lavender blue eyes beaming with the joy of her love for him. Rising up on her toes, giving him the briefest brush of her lips on his hard square chin.

James wrapped his well-muscled arms around her slim form, drawing her delightfully warm feminine body into him. Her breast crushed against his well-muscled chest. He couldn't take his dark eyes from her lips. Lips wanting, begging, dying to be kissed. Kiss them he did, skillfully angling his head to enjoy the fullness of her mouth.

She deepened the kiss, sweeping her tongue over and around his lips. Teasing and enticing him to open for her. A wanton moan escaping her throat.

So engrossed were they in each other, they never heard the commotion. Never heard the approach. Until it was too late. Then they heard an enraged roar, reminiscent of a lion.

"What is the meaning of this?" a scarlet-faced Duke yelled.

Quickly, the two lovers' lips separated. Still in each other's embrace, they looked to the sound. Only to see, glaring at them with a thunderous look so angrily hot it could melt ice—the outraged Duke.

James and Christina were at a loss for words. Not from the tone of the Duke's voice but from lack of air in their lungs after the passionate kiss they'd just shared. Finally, daring a glance his way, they each granted him a knowing smile before turning back to each other.

The Duchess, wisely knowing a perfect match when she saw one, came to their rescue. "Reginald!" Just the sound of her using his Christian name in public subdued the anger in him. "Can't you see your daughter has found her one true love? On Valentine's Day, no less."

The Duke, admitting defeat, raised his arms and brought the two lovers into his warm and welcoming embrace.



NOTE TO READER: When I wrote this love story I didn't, until I researched the day and date, realize that Valentine's Day in 1915 was on the second Sunday of February, just as it is this year, 2010.



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