The Mysterious Lady Jermyn

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Part 1

“That is Lady Jermyn,” said Aunt Maude, with some disdain. “She is a little isolated from society because nobody knows her full story.”

Those words we enough to excite the curiosity of both of her nieces, Penelope and Cassandra. They watched the tall, well-dressed woman walk along the path on the other side of the serpentine, alone but uncaring of that fact, with only a footman five paces behind.

“Do tell us more, Auntie,” Penny pleaded.

“Well, Lord Jermyn went abroad a couple of years ago. He went to India they say, and perhaps to Siam also. Anyway, he never came back. Instead, this lady appeared, carrying with her a marriage certificate confirming that a Christian wedding had taken place in Darjeeling -you know, where the tea comes from. The certificate bore his Lordship’s signature. She also carried numerous letters in his handwriting declaring his love for her – a history of their courtship in those foreign places. He married her despite the fact that she had declared to him she was unable to bear an heir. The details of her condition are unknown, and so they should be. But the marriage appears genuine enough. It is just that she has not been properly introduced into society. It is just not the way things are done. You simply don’t just arrive and expect to be part of London society.”

“She is a very interesting looking woman,” said Cassie. “Beautiful, I think.”

“But not pretty,” said Aunt Maude. “Not delicate. The kind of woman you could expect to find in the colonies. But I understand that she is of high birth. European they say. Her name is Aurora. Well educated – history and geography and such. And she speaks French and Italian, as her husband did, and very refined English, without an accent. Some knowledge of Eastern languages too. She has a dark skinned maid, I am told. Talks to her in some devilish tongue.”

That last part was intended to provoke Cassie a little. She knew that her niece was interested in languages including those of the sub-continent. Cassie simply smiled.

“So what of the family that she married into – have they rejected her?” asked Penny.

“Actually, not really,” said Aunt Maude. “She explained to Lord Jermyn’s brother that there was no heir so he now has the title, but as he is unmarried she is still Lady Jermyn, the dowager.”

Aunt Maude then stopped her gentle wander through the park to turn and face the young women in her care for the season, as if to impart something of great importance.

“On that very thought, I consider that either of you might be a suitable match for Michael, the younger Lord Jermyn,” she said. “He is respectable and wealthy, although I understand that woman over there has some entitlement to a life estate.”

“What is a life estate?” asked Penny, slightly prettier than her sister, but not as wise.

“She is entitled to own and live in the estates of her late husband for her natural life,” their aunt explained. “So, if either of you were to become the new Lady Jermyn, you would have to put up with the old Lady Jermyn for her lifetime. Not as mistress of the house, I think, and not family by blood, but not a guest either.”

“Unless she were to remarry, I suppose. Then she might go with her husband, ” Cassie observed. “But do tell us more about this young peer that you would have us marry.”

“If I can use my influence as I hope I may, then I will ensure that he is at the ball next Saturday when you girls come out in society,” she said.

The ball to be hosted by the Prince of Wales himself, was all they had been talking about since they had arrived in London just a fortnight before with attendance their purpose. Coming out was the privilege of all young ladies of high birth, and it required the right occasion and the right dress and hairstyle. A minimum of a month would be regarded as normal, but they had less than that, and would be busy.

Still, one always finds time for a promenade in the park at the right hour of the afternoon when, weather permitting, those of class would walk and be seen.

Part 2

“Lady Maude Hartness, Miss Cassandra Hartness, and Miss Penelope Hartness!” The announcement rang out as the entered the atrium, where some congregated in front of the entrance to the ballroom. Penny seemed overwhelmed and excited, but Cassie did her best to look as if she dwelled in this ornate luxury at all times. Aunt Maude seemed genuinely unaffected by the surroundings. She nodded a greeting to various people around the room. She would wait for someone to approach them.

It did not take long. Lady Murgatroyd and her daughter Prunella were coming over. The girls had met them both. Penny had made friends with Pru, and they greeted one another warmly

Your girls look delightful, Lady Maude,” said Lady Murgatroyd, known as “Moggy” to her friends, but not in a place like this.

“We are spared the fact that they are not regulars with a steady demand for fine clothes,” said Maude. “Lord knows we don’t want to sell some of the estates to put them in gowns like these every week, Lady Murgatroyd.”

“There are some fine young men here,” whispered Moggy. “Do you have any targets for your charges to consider? I am interested in Sir Tristan Heberden for my Pru. A delightful young man. Please promise us a clear shot.”

“Have you seen Lord Jermyn?” said Aunt Maude. “Is he here?”

“Yes, he is here. And with the great Venus of the East, his sister-in-law in tow,” said Moggy. “She is over there, surrounded by men. So many of them find her fascinating, even those smaller than she. As for the Jermyn the Younger, he will probably be examining the foliage, or doing some “scientifick”, or some such thing.”

“I would like to meet Lady Jermyn,” said Cassie. “Do you know her well enough to introduce me, Lady Murgatroyd?”

“I suppose I do,” said Moggy. “Actually, if we do that we might be able to cut out a couple of young from that scrum for Pru and Penny. Let’s do that.”

The five bustled gowns set off across the grand hall like galleons in different colors sailing in close formation. Penny and Pru chattered, while the older lady observed. Cassie looked ahead at Lady Jermyn, her chestnut hair styled in high curls, her face unpowdered but smooth with just a little rouge on her full lips, but with her eyes painted like an Egyptian.

Moggy moved in like an old sheepdog into flock, with skill and cloaked aggression.

“My Lady, I would like you to meet Miss Cassandra Hartness, or rather she would like to meet you.” Said Moggy. “You know her aunt, Lady Maude.”

“Of course I do.” The voice was high but husky, perfect for the striking beauty of those strong features and height. “Lady Maude, your gown is so wonderful, and I can see that both your nieces carry the Hartness family trait of good looks.”

But Moggy had already moved to introduce Penny and Pru to some gentlemen, leaving Cassie with the chance to speak to this splendid vision in voluminous pink.

“I understand that you have spent time on the subcontinent, My Lady,” said Cassie. “That is a place that fascinates me. I would love to know more.”

“Fascinating by repute, but even more fascinating when you are there, I assure you,” said Lady Jermyn with a warm smile. “I could talk for hours, but tonight I think we both have other duties. You may call upon me if you wish. I would be delighted if you did.”

“So sad that you lost your husband there,” said Cassie. “Please accept my condolences.”

“He left this world much enriched by his experiences,” said Lady Jermyn. “And he wished for me only that I live on as he would like, in happiness and in search of adventure.”

Cassie liked her already. She was a breath of fresh air in a room full of scent. It was no surprise that men gravitated to her. She was interesting. Cassie found herself among her other admirers, and before long she found that the men that enjoyed the company of Lady Jermyn, enjoyed her company as well.

She had quite forgotten that the evening had started with the intention of meeting Michael, the younger Lord Jermyn, that was until she did indeed meet him.

“We should think about leaving soon, Aurora.” The voice was directed at Lady Jermyn but came from over her shoulder, almost close enough to disturb one of the carefully formed blond ringlets that hung by her ears. That forced her to turn, as distance is something that is important to a young woman.

“I am so sorry,” said Michael. “There seems to be a bit of crowd in this corner.”

But she was ready to accept his apology even if he had trod on her toe. It took just a moment to work out who he was, but she was already quite smitten. It was his eyes, as she would later explain – they sparkled with intelligence, more so than anybody else in the room, with the possible exception of Lady Jarndyce.”

“Lord Jarndyce, I presume,” she said. It was almost unheard of. A young woman introducing herself. The young aristocrat knew it too, and it made him smile.

“You have me at a disadvantage,” he grinned. “Will somebody here introduce us?”

“This is Miss Cassandra Hartness, Michael,” said Lady Jarndyce said. “Is it really getting that late? Well, you might be pleased to hear that I have invited Miss Hartness to call upon us next week. She wishes to be regaled of stories from the mythic East.”

“Well, you are the one for that, Sister,” said Lord Jarndyce. Cassie listened for a trace of irony, but she found none. It seemed that there was a real bond of family between the young peer and his recently acquired sister-in-law.

“If you have no objection to my visit, that is, my Lord?” said Cassie.

“Not at all,” he said, looking her up and down despite doing his best not to. “I would welcome it.”

Part 3

“This tea is a special blend from the Island of Ceylon,” said Aurora. “And please, do call me Aurora. How unfortunate that your charming sister could not join us this afternoon.”

“Penny is distracted by other things,” said Cassie. “She is still coming down to earth from the ball last weekend. She has been inundated with letters from admirers. Hmmm – this tea smells wonderful.”

“I agree and so did my late husband,” said Aurora, now a picture in a dress in duck egg blue. “He liked it so much that he bought the plantation.”

“Will that be yours now?” It seemed only right that it should be.

“My dear girl. You have insufficient understanding of our lot as women under the laws of this country. We own nothing but the contents of our jewelry box, if we are lucky. It passes to my husband’s estate and from there to his Lordship, my brother in law. But my husband created a life estate to preserve my position, bless the man. And I am better acquainted to manage foreign property as his Lordship well knows.”

“So fascinating, this tea, and the place it comes from,” said Cassie. “I am somewhat of a student of India, and would love to hear more about your adventures there.”

“Of course. But first, in anticipation, I have some Indian sweets for you to try. I will ring for Usha.” And within seconds of her ringing a small hand bell, a young dark woman dressed in a yellow sari appeared. She was carrying a tray which she placed on the low table. She signaled for the spectacularly dressed servant to stay and motioned Cassie to try the treats.

“What are they?”

“Well let’s see … we have barfi, and kalfi, and this one is gulab jamun – dough balls dipped in sugar and saffron syrup. A particular favorite of mine, but an enemy of a tight corset.” Aurora smiled at her young visitor, who had never heard an older woman speak of the discomfort that all women of the upper classes needed to bear.

“I understand that your husband visited Siam too?” said Cassie. “That is outside my field of study but still interests me. Have you been there?”

I have been everywhere that my husband has been in the east, even there,” said Aurora. “It is an exotic place, and somewhere unconquered by the British Empire. The king there is very curious about Western culture and so we can count them as a friendly nation.”

“And what of the religious mystics? I am very curious about them. It is said that they can lift themselves off the ground y the power of their mind. Do you believe it?”

“I have seen it, my Dear. Or rather I have believed that I have seen it. The power of their mind is to deceive the viewer rather than counter Newton’s law of gravity. Have you tried these? Usha made them herself – she learned from her mother.”

Cassie looked again at the young dark woman. Like her mistress she was tall and with strong features, and with large luminous eyes. She suddenly displayed a perfect set of large white teeth in a satisfied grin.

“The flavors are like nothing I am used to,” said Cassie. “I am enjoying them all very much. It does nothing but confirm my desire to go there. Perhaps you could be my guide, if you ever think of returning?”

“As an unmarried woman, I am free to roam,” said Aurora. Cassie wondered if there might be a tinge of regret in the statement.

“Will you remain unmarried?” Cassie leaned forward. “You are still young and you are very beautiful. Even if you cannot carry your own property, or a child, there are plenty of older men who have lost their wives and …”. Cassie suddenly stopped. She had spoken out of turn. “I apologize Lady Jarndyce, for commenting on your … condition. I have only heard of it, and you have not confirmed it. I can understand if you are offended. I am very sorry for speaking of it.”

“My dear Cassie – I have told you that you must call me Aurora. A classical name like your own. It means the dawn – a new beginning. I always look forward - never back. No apology is necessary. I cannot bear children. It saddens me a little.”

“But you could join a family?” Cassie felt her heart open yet further, if that were possible.

“Perhaps, but we are what we are.” Aurora looked towards her attendant Usha with a sad face of her own making.

Usha spoke. It was not English. It was Hindi. Cassie knew it was. She gasped.

Part 4

“I apologize for Usha,” said Aurora. “She does speak good English. Don’t you, Usha?”

“Yes, m’lady,” said Usha. Responding to a nod from her mistress, she took the tray of mainly consumed sweet treats and left the room.

“Perhaps it is the first time that you have heard that language spoken? Aurora said.

“It is,” said Cassie. “But I must apologize again. You see, the truth is that I am somewhat of a student of India, which is perhaps something I should have revealed. I have studied the language as well, and although I only know it from the page, I think that I understand what was said.”

“Ah,” said Aurora, as if ready to face a barrage.

“If I am not mistaken then I heard Usha describing you both not as barren women but as hijra. I thought at first that I had misunderstood … but then I realized that I had not. Things started to fall into place. Stop me now if I have this wrong.”

“So, you what a hijra person is?” said Aurora with a sigh, as if preparing to face the consequences.

“I do, and when I look over there and see the portrait of the man you call your late husband, I understand the truth. You are – or you were – that man.”

“My Dear Cassie, I am going to ask you for a favor that my life depends on. I am going to ask you to keep my secret. Would you do that.” Aurora clasped her soft hands together as if to implore

“Lady Jarndyce … I am sorry, Aurora – you have shown me nothing but kindness. Of course, I will keep your secret. I only ask … why?”

“Cassie, I doubt whether you will understand this on first telling, but I will try to explain. You see, I am a woman, in my heart and my soul. But I am a woman with a curse. I was born into the body of a man, and worse still a man whose only obligation in this life was to father an heir. It was something I could never do. I could never use the body I was given in that way. I needed to fulfil my true nature and become a woman, but I could not do that here.”

“What an awful situation,” said Cassie. She could see that Aurora’s eyes were wet with tears, and she felt her eyes coming out in sympathy.

I suppose that I was running away in travelling to India, but there and in Siam, I found that I was not alone. There are plenty of people who share my curse in those countries. In India they are called hijra, and in Siam katoey. They can choose to live as the women they truly are, and they are accepted, on the whole. There are compounds to consume and apply to the body, and even surgical procedures practiced for centuries. I am no longer a man. If you saw me naked you would think me that same as you. But I am not a complete woman either.”

“You are talking about … for the purposes of sexual intercourse?” said Cassie, with a gulp.

“The hijra have a hundred ways to please a man without a woman’s sleeve, but to be intimate with a man is for him to know the truth. And only four people on this side of the world know the truth – me, Usha, you and Lord Jarndyce.”

“Your bother knows?” Cassie was surprised, but then that seemed so foolish.

“How could he not. Despite all my efforts to look nothing like his brother, a sibling knows his own. But as I explained to him, he is the peer of the realm now. I wanted to return to Britain but not as an emasculated man, but as a woman. I invented Aurora and the romance between her and the man I was, and the wedding officiated over by a cleric now deceased. I lied and cheated so that I could come home as a woman, with just a little hold on my property.”

“You make a very beautiful woman,” said Cassie. “That is not a wig?”

“It is my own hair, treated by the hijra and other ladies of India. It is down to my waist when not pinned up. And I have a bosom – another miracle of the East – and soft skin. A good corset does the rest, and constant attention to my voice and my demeanor.”

“And Lord Jarndyce … the new one I mean?”

He is happy to be a lord now. The second born must always be ready. I suspect he is a little grateful to me for passing things over to him, but thebtruth is that we were always close. He loves me, although that is not a word that men use easily. Oh, how I prefer being a woman. I love him, and I am not ashamed to say it. And I will tell you this, Cassie, he loves you.”

“I beg your pardon, Aurora. What did you say?”

“I know love when I see it, Young Lady,” said the older woman proclaiming her experience. “He fell for you at the ball, and has been fussing about how to see you again ever since. I have timed for him to appear before you leave. Oh Cassie, now that you know about who and what I am, I could think of nobody better for a sister in law.”

Cassie was momentarily struck dumb, but not in an unpleasant way. She too had felt herself drawn to the young lord at the ball, and the moment that she had walked into this house she had the curious feeling that she was somehow, coming home.

Part 5

Cassie burst into the drawing room. Although it was unnecessary, she could not help but exclaim to them both – “I am home at last.”

“Why is it that as a wife you are so often only arriving after your husband?” said Michael in jest rather than the disgruntlement he affected.

“Because I am busier than you my Dear,” she grinned.

“What news, Cassie?” Aurora demanded, already on her feet.

“Everything has gone as planned,” said a very satisfied Cassie. “Lord Banford came back from his visit to father and has proposed to Penny just as you said he would.” She clapped her hands. Aurora and Cassie ran into an embrace with such speed that Michael had to jump out of the way.

“Marvellous, marvellous,” said Aurora.

Michael watched to two women with a smile – they were the two women he cared about most in the world – his wife and his sister, or sister in law as all others would say. Lady Jarndyce and Lady Jarndyce, the dowager.

“Now if, if you think that is good news, just wait for what comes next,” said Cassie, seemingly rising to a higher level of excitement.

“Go on a tell,” said Aurora. Clearly Cassie had been keeping something form her. Over the past year it seemed that all their plans were jointly formulated and executed. She was a little annoyed.

“Lord Banford’s Uncle was in attendance. You will know him, Sister. Sir John Getheridge.”

“I know him mainly by reputation, and I have met him a few times. Staring blue eyes. Packets of money. Huge holding in India, and a reputation for fair dealing but big returns.”

“He knows all about you,” said Cassie, looking very pleased with herself. “He knows that you speak Hindi and a couple of other languages from over there. He knows that you have a teas business. He does too. He wants to call upon you. And I can tell you that his intentions are romantic.”

“Ridiculous! How could you possibly know that? And, do I have to point out to you that any attempt to woo me must fail, as much as I might wish otherwise.”

“Forgive me Aurora, but I may have given him a few more details about your physical condition,” said Cassie.

“You didn’t …?”

“Goodness no! That is between us. I just mentioned that things had fused and … well, I did not go into details but I described you as having appetites like any normal woman.”

“Sir John Getheridge, eh?” Aurora glanced sideways at the ceiling. “A widower, with a family, maybe a grandchild or two? A good-looking man as I recall. Very tall. Very blue eyes.”

“Staring at you,” said Cassie. “Not everybody, just you.”

“Really? Do you really think that he might be interested?”

“I know he is,” said Cassie. It is just this society we are living in. Honestly these rules and customs can be so stultifying. You will be sitting here in this drawing room talking nonsense for hours before he even tells you what he wants. And even then, he will talk marriage and position and all that stuff, when all he really wants is to get you to bed and be on the receiving end of some of those hijra secrets.”

“Really Cassie!” said Micheal in mock shock. But he reached out to take her arm, thinking of her naked and lying on his bed. It was a thought that passed through his mind at least once every hour.

“I could be Lady Getheridge,” Aurora mused. “Just quit the Jarndyce name for good. Would you mind? Would you consider a dowry Michael – my Ceylon plantation perhaps?”

“How could I begrudge that, as everything I have is down to you,” said Michael, Lord Jarndyce. “Without doubt the best brother, and the best sister, that any man could have.”

The End

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