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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Confessions of a Duchess**

Written by Nicola Cornick

Published by MIRA Books

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Nicola  
Cornick

Confessions  
of a Duchess



## *PROLOGUE*

Go, take thine angle, and with practiced line  
Light as the gossamer, the current sweep;  
And if thou failest in the calm, still deep,  
In the rough eddy may a prize be thine.

—Thomas Doubleday

*Brooks's Club, London, July 1809*

“SHE REFUSED ME!”

Sir Montague Fortune swept through the library of Brooks's Club, scattered the gambling counters on the faro table with the edge of his sleeve and gave no apology, and deposited himself in an indignant flurry in a chair beside the Earl of Waterhouse. He smoothed one shaking hand over his hair and beckoned impatiently to a club servant to fetch him brandy.

“Ungrateful minx,” he muttered. “That I, one of the Fortunes of Fortune's Folly should seek to ally myself with the servant classes and be rejected!” He swallowed half the glass of brandy in one gulp and gave the assembled group a furious glare. “Do you know what she called me? A bibulous country squire with watery eyes!” He reached for the brandy bottle that the servant had thought-

fully left on a low table beside him, refilled his glass and frowned slightly. "What does bibulous mean?"

"Damned if I know," Nathaniel Waterhouse said comfortably. "Dex was the one who shone at Oxford whilst the rest of us were running wild. Dex?"

Dexter Anstruther, thus applied to, raised his shrewd blue gaze from *The Times* and looked from the squire of Fortune's Folly to the brandy bottle and back again.

"It means that you drink too much, Monty," he drawled. He looked across at Miles, Lord Vickery, the fourth member of the group, who was smiling quizzically at Montague Fortune's indignation.

"Am I missing something here?" Miles inquired. "Who is the discerning lady who has rejected Monty's suit?"

"You've been in the Peninsular so long you've missed the *on dit*, old fellow," Waterhouse said. "Monty here has been paying ardent court to Miss Alice Lister, a former housemaid, if gossip is to be believed, who is now the richest heiress in Fortune's Folly. He offered her his hand and his heart in return for her money but the sensible female has evidently rejected him." He turned to Monty Fortune. "Surely you have not traveled all the way up to London just to bring us the bad news, Monty?"

"No," Montague Fortune huffed. "I have come up to consult my lawyer and study the Fortune's Folly estate papers."

"Very laudable," Dexter murmured. "Exactly what one would hope for in a responsible landowner."

Monty Fortune glared at him. "It is not for the benefit of my tenants," he protested. "It is so that I can get my hands on the money!"

"Whose money?" Dexter asked.

“Everyone’s money!” Sir Montague barked. “It is not appropriate that half the population of Fortune’s Folly should be richer than the squire!”

The others exchanged looks of covert amusement. The Fortunes were an old gentry family, perfectly respectable but with an inflated view of their own importance, and Sir Montague’s single-minded pursuit of money was considered by some to be very bad *Ton*.

“What does Tom think of your plans, Monty?” Dexter asked, referring to Sir Montague’s younger brother.

Sir Montague looked annoyed. “Said I was a grasping leech on other people’s lives and went off to spend my substance at the gambling tables,” he said.

The others laughed.

“And Lady Elizabeth?” Nat asked lazily. Lady Elizabeth Scarlet was Sir Montague’s debutante half sister and a veritable thorn in his side.

“I cannot repeat Lizzie’s language to you,” Sir Montague said primly. “It is far too shocking!”

The laughter of the others increased.

Miles leaned forward. “So what are you planning, Monty?”

“I intend to assert my rights as lord of the manor,” Sir Montague said, self-importantly. “There is a medieval law called the Dames’ Tax that has never been repealed. It permits the lord of the manor to levy a tithe on every unmarried woman in the village.”

Miles’s lips formed a soundless whistle. “How much is the tithe?”

“I can take half their fortune!” Sir Montague announced triumphantly.

There was a shocked silence around the group.

“Monty,” Dexter said slowly, “did I understand you correctly? It is in your power to levy a tax of half their wealth on all unmarried women in Fortune’s Folly?”

Sir Montague nodded, eyes bright.

“How?” Dexter demanded. “Why?”

“I told you.” Sir Montague’s greedy gaze swept the group. “Medieval laws. Because Fortune’s Folly belonged to the church it was exempt when the secular laws were repealed in the seventeenth century. I discovered quite by accident that all the tithes and taxes are still applicable. In recent centuries they have not been collected only through the goodwill of the squire.”

“And you do not have any goodwill,” Nat said dryly.

“Not now that Miss Lister has refused me,” Sir Montague said, the virtuous expression on his face sitting oddly with the avarice in his eyes. “Had she accepted me I am sure that I would have been the most generous of village squires.”

“And one of the richest,” Dexter murmured.

“Every single woman... Half their fortunes...” Nat Waterhouse was spluttering into his brandy. “That’s...” His mathematical ability, never strong, failed him. “That’s potentially a huge amount of money, Monty!” he protested.

“I know.” With a self-satisfied smile, Sir Montague settled back in his chair. “I have not quite worked it out yet but Miss Lister’s fortune is rumored to be in the region of eighty thousand pounds and Mrs. Everton pocketed a cool fifty thousand under the terms of her husband’s will—”

Miles shot him a sharp glance. “It applies to widows as well as spinsters?”

“All unmarried women,” Sir Montague confirmed.

“But I have a cousin living in Fortune’s Folly,” Miles protested. “You can’t fleece her, Monty! It’s not socially acceptable, old fellow—not acceptable at all!”

Dexter raked a hand through his disordered tawny hair in a characteristic gesture. “Presumably if the ladies of Fortune’s Folly choose to marry they are exempt from the tax?”

Sir Montague nodded. “That’s it, Dexter. Got it in one. I can see why the government employs you.”

Dexter’s lips twitched. “Thank you, Monty. I am glad that my powers of deduction are still as acute as I thought. So.” He paused. “You announce the introduction of the Dames’ Tax and the ladies of Fortune’s Folly have to decide whether they wish to give away half of their money to you in tax or all of it to their husbands in marriage.”

Nat winced. “They will be as mad as wet hens to be forced into this situation, Monty. I hope you are prepared.”

Sir Montague shrugged expansively. “They can’t do anything about it. The law is on my side. I tell you, the plan is perfect.”

The others exchanged looks. “Monty, old chap,” Miles said softly, “much as I disapprove of your avarice, I do believe that you have just made Fortune’s Folly a veritable marriage mart, a positive haven for those of us who are—”

“Impecunious,” Dexter said. “Improvident, penurious—”

“Flat broke,” Nat said, “and looking for a rich wife.”

“You’re right,” Sir Montague said, beaming. “I have made Fortune’s Folly the marriage mart of England!”

## CHAPTER ONE

*Fortune's Folly, Yorkshire, September 1809*

DOWAGER. It was such a lonely word.

Most people thought of dowagers as faintly comic figures, diamonds displayed on their shelflike bosom, possessing a long, patrician nose to look down.

Laura Cole thought of dowagers as the loneliest people in the world.

It was Laura's loneliness that had prompted her to go down to the river that day, dressed in a pale blue muslin gown with a warm navy-blue spencer over the top, a wide-brimmed straw bonnet on her head and a novel in her hand. She had read somewhere that the beauties of nature were supposed to soothe a troubled spirit and so she had decided to take the rowing boat out and float in bucolic peace under the willow branches that fringed the water's edge.

However, the nature cure was proving to be a disappointing failure. For a start the boat was full of fallen yellow leaves, and once Laura had brushed them off the seat her gloves were already dirty. She sat down and opened her book, but found herself unable to concentrate on the trials and tribulations of her heroine because her



mind was full of her own difficulties instead. Every so often, golden-brown leaves would float down and adorn the page. The wind was surprisingly chilly. Laura frowned at her lack of attentiveness and tried all the harder to enjoy herself.

Laura loved the countryside. She had grown up in this wild Yorkshire landscape and had lived in the county for much of her life, though she had spent the previous two years in London. She had hoped that returning to her childhood home would lessen the feeling of emptiness that dogged her steps these days, but it had not, and she could not understand it. It was not as though she was alone in the world. She adored her three-year-old daughter, Harriet, and spent an unfashionable amount of time with her. Fortune's Folly was a busy little village and she had made many new friends there. And she also had a huge extended family with a tribe of cousins in every rank of the *Ton*. It was not even the case that she missed her late husband, Charles, for they had lived apart for the majority of their marriage. She had been shocked when Charles had died, of course. All of Society had been shocked that a man could be so profligate that he overturned his curricule and killed three of his mistresses as well as himself. But Laura had not missed the errant duke. She had felt enormous relief when she had heard that he had died.

*Relief.*

*Guilt.*

*Excitement.*

She had felt a thrill of anticipation that she and Hattie were free and then she had felt guilty again and lonelier than she had ever done in her life.

It was to forge a future for herself and Hattie that Laura had come to Fortune's Folly. She wanted her daughter to grow up in the country, so after a year of formal mourning she had left London, where people insisted on trying to commiserate with her about Charles's death, and had come to this Yorkshire village near to Skipton, where her grandmother had left her a modest house, The Old Palace. It sounded grand but Laura privately thought that it should have been renamed Old Place rather than Palace because it was an ancient and inconvenient medieval building no doubt suited to a not-so-ancient but impoverished dowager duchess who was trying to make a new start in life. Her brother and sister-in-law had pressed her to live with them but Laura had a vision of what that would be like—the dowager aunt taken in through charity, deferring to her brother's will at every turn—and she knew that even solitary poverty had to be better than genteel dependence. Hattie's situation would be even more intolerable than her own as she grew up as a poor relation. It was not to be borne. Skimping and scraping, growing her own fruit and vegetables, keeping bees, making and mending, just herself and Hattie and a few servants had to be preferable to being her brother's pensioner.

Her daughter was a constant joy and revelation to her. And though she sometimes wished that Hattie had brothers or sisters with whom to share her childhood, Laura thought this wildly unlikely now. In order to have more children she would need to take a new husband and it would take an exceptional man to persuade her into marriage again after her experience with Charles. She and Hattie would fend quite well for themselves and soon, she

was sure, her feelings of isolation would start to fade. She did not want her melancholy to affect Hattie. Hattie was such a happy child.

She cast the book aside and untied the mooring rope. Since she could not seem to concentrate on reading, she would take the boat for a short row on the river. Physical activity would help to occupy her and she could admire the autumnal countryside at the same time. She pushed the boat off from the bank and sat back to enjoy the gentle flow of the river.

As soon as the boat left the shelter of the bank the current caught it with quite unexpected strength. The water flowed deep and fast here. Nervous now, Laura gritted her teeth and tried to use the oars to steer back to the side, but she was clumsy and the river was too powerful. One of the oars slid from the rowlock and floated away. The boat began to make its rather erratic way down the river quite of its own accord.

Life, Laura thought helplessly, as she watched the oar bob away from her, so seldom turned out as planned. Here she was, a widow of four and thirty with a small daughter, virtually penniless and with an uncertain future. And now her immediate prospects scarcely looked better than her long-term ones. In fact they looked very wet and unpleasant indeed. She needed to start thinking about how she was going to get out of this situation without compromising her life, if not her dignity.

The boat scraped against the stony bed of the river and Laura made a grab for an overhanging branch, missed it and felt the sleeve of her spencer rip. Damnation. She could not afford to buy any new clothes. She would be the only duchess in the country who would be wearing

darned clothing. People would commend her for her frugality to her face and talk about her poverty behind her back. Even in the small society of Fortune's Folly there was a great deal of gossip, and not much of it was kind.

Laura plied her one remaining oar with energy but little direction and felt the boat start to turn in a slow circle in the water, which was not what she had intended at all. She rowed a little harder and the boat turned more quickly, picking up momentum, swinging around in a way that made her feel slightly sick. She grabbed for another branch in a last attempt to save herself. The sunlight was in her eyes and the shadows danced against her lids, blinding her, and the bark of the tree scored her fingers. She had just managed to gain a faint purchase when she felt the boat lurch as though someone had pushed it hard. The branch snapped, hitting her on the back of the head as it fell into the water. She heard the snap of breaking twigs and a scuffle as though someone were running away.

The boat rocked and Laura's head spun with nausea. She let go of the second oar and clutched the sides. She could only hope that the boat would steady and the current would take her back in to the bank for she was momentarily too disoriented, and felt too sick, to do anything else.

But the boat did not steady. Instead it lurched out into the center of the river and headed toward the fish weir. The current was flowing faster and faster now. Laura knew she should jump but she had left it too late. The river was too strong for her here. She thought that she heard someone shouting but the sound was lost in the roar of the water and the grating of the stones of the weir

beneath the hull of the boat. It rolled violently and then Laura was pitched over the side and the river closed over her head. The noise was in her ears and the water filled her lungs so she could not breathe. She had a last, vivid picture in her mind of her daughter's smiling face and then everything went dark.

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First published in Great Britain 2010.  
MIRA Books, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road,  
Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

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ISBN 978 0 7783 0380 0

60-0710

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Printed in the UK  
by CIPI MacKays, Chatham, ME15 8TD