

# *Not by Sight*



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*To Marjorie*

A woman who lives by faith,  
and a mother who taught her daughter  
to become whatever she could dream



*For we live by faith, not by sight.*

2 Corinthians 5:7

# 1

CHETFIELD HOUSE, MAYFAIR  
LONDON—APRIL 1917

Her father would never forgive her.

Grace Elizabeth Mabry stood in her flowing green costume on the steps outside the grand London home of Lady Eleanor Bassett, Dowager Countess of Avonshire, and clutched a tiny gold box to her chest. She knew the “gifts” she was about to bestow on the unsuspecting cowards inside would ruin Patrick Mabry’s hope that his daughter would ever gain acceptance into polite society.

All those months at finishing school, destroyed in a single act.

“Are you ready with your feathers, miss? No second thoughts?”

Grace tightened her grip on the gold box and glanced at the costumed sprite beside her. “I am committed to this cause, Agnes. ‘For King, For Country, For Freedom.’ Didn’t Mrs. Pankhurst say those very words at our suffrage rally yesterday?”

Agnes nodded. “And for Colin?”

Grace smiled. Agnes Pierpont was more a friend to her than lady’s maid. “For my brother most of all,” she said. “And the

sooner we get inside and complete our task, the quicker we'll help to win this war. Then Colin can come home."

And Mother would have been so proud, had she lived. Grace blinked back unexpected tears. The year since Lillian Mabry's death from tuberculosis had been difficult. Colin's enlistment had only aggravated their gentle mother's condition. Yet Grace was proud of her brother. He did his duty for Britain. Just as she must do hers, in any way possible—including today's scandalous act.

Three Rolls-Royce automobiles drew up the street in front of the mansion. Pressing a gloved fist to the bodice of her gown, Grace watched a boisterous crowd of costumed men and women spill out of the cars.

"Ready?" Agnes looked equally anxious. A burst of hyena-like laughter escaped before she could cover her mouth. "I am sorry, miss," she said, blushing. "When I'm nervous . . ."

"It's all right." Grace took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

*For Colin*, she reminded herself. Thoughts of her twin fighting in the trenches of France lent her strength. Surely God was on her side. Grace imagined herself a modern-day Joan of Arc about to rally her countrymen to battle. She hoped to write and submit an article about the night's experience, especially after having received her latest rejection from *Women's Weekly*.

The partygoers ascended the steps, moving toward the front door. Grace and Agnes clasped hands and rushed to join them, slipping into the house amid the crush. They pressed on through the foyer and then down a lushly carpeted hall to finally arrive at the ballroom.

The rest of the company dispersed while Grace paused with Agnes to ogle the sumptuous décor. Her father, a tea distributor and owner of London's prestigious Swan's Tea Room, ranked among the city's wealthiest tradesmen, yet she had never before seen such opulence.

Four table-sized chandeliers hung from the high-coved ceiling, their crystal drops as large as tea balls and glittering like jewels beneath the lamplight. Along one rich mahogany paneled wall, swags of red velvet draperies showcased enormous windows, each pane the size of the entire glass frontage of Swan's.

Grace barely heard the sprightly notes of Mozart floating over the throng as she gaped at the endless supply of champagne bubbling in delicate glass flutes, carried on silver trays by black-and-white-liveried footmen. Men who certainly looked able-bodied enough . . .

Recalling her purpose, she scanned the room. Lady Bassett was sponsoring the ball, a costume affair, for the British Red Cross Society. Agnes had dressed as a winged wood sprite, the earthy tones of her outfit accentuating her fawn-colored hair. Grace, for her part, chose the fabled guise of Pandora.

Such waste, she thought. Hadn't the dowager seen the posters warning against extravagant dress? It was positively unpatriotic.

Grace glanced down at her own beautiful costume and felt a stab of guilt. Still, the disguise had been necessary in order to gain admittance to the party. She and Agnes had a higher purpose, after all.

The newspaper had reported the benefit would aid wounded soldiers. Several "conchies"—conscientious objectors against the war—would be here tonight, performing their community service by supporting the festivities.

It was the reason Grace and Agnes had chosen this particular event.

Edging open the small gold box that completed her ensemble as the mythical troublemaker, Grace withdrew her contraband and hid it against her gloved palm. "For King, For Country, For Freedom," she murmured to herself.

"Miss?"

She turned to Agnes. “I’ll meet you back here when we finish, agreed?”

Agnes pursed her lips and nodded. Grace watched her mill through the crowd toward the opposite side of the room before she scanned the guests on her own side, seeking her first target.

Jack Benningham, Viscount of Walenford and future Earl of Stonebrooke, stood directly ahead. Grace ignored the racing of her pulse, telling herself it was simply nerves as she stared at the tall, broad-shouldered man she recognized only from the photographs she’d seen in the society pages of the *Times*, and from his scandalous exploits recorded in the *Tatler*.

His objections to the war were well publicized, though he certainly seemed fit enough for duty. At twenty-eight, the handsome Viscount Walenford was but eight years older than Colin and herself. He held a long-stemmed red rose and wore black velvet from head to toe. With his clipped blond hair tied off in a faux queue at his nape, he looked every inch the eighteenth-century Venetian rogue, Casanova.

Her mouth twisted in scorn at seeing two women in daring costumes clinging to either side of him—Cleopatra and Lady Godiva. Grace watched as he settled an arm possessively over Cleopatra’s shoulder while bending his head to smile and whisper in Lady Godiva’s ear.

“*Jack Benningham is a playboy, a gambler, and stays out until dawn.*” She’d heard the gossip, spoken in tones of mixed censure and titillation by several of the young ladies who regularly took tea at her father’s establishment. And it seemed true, if Lady Godiva’s blush and tittering laughter were any indication.

At the moment Grace didn’t care if he was the biggest profligate in London. The only moral flaw concerning her was the fact he was *here* while her dear brother was in France, fighting the “Boche.”

Moving toward him, she glanced at the others in his party.



A portly man in laurel wreath and a white toga made the quintessential tyrant, Julius Caesar. The tall elderly woman beside Caesar was Lady Bassett herself, wearing the unmistakable sixteenth-century headdress, ruff collar, and damask gown of Queen Elizabeth.

Hearing a burst of hyena-like laughter rise over the buzz of conversation, Grace paused to glance toward the other side of the ballroom. Agnes must be at work distributing her feathers.

Grace turned back to her quarry and met with Casanova's deliberate gaze. His sudden, teasing smile caused her heart to race a staccato beat to the lively music.

Jack Benningham was a coward, she reminded herself. Yet he was also a viscount, his father an earl of the realm. Grace took a moment to consider the full impact of her actions. Once the deed was done, there was no going back. And Lady Bassett, who happened to be her father's chief patroness at Swan's, would surely recognize her and toss her out.

She thought of her father's reaction. Da might go through with his promise to marry her off or send her to live with Aunt Florence. She wet her lips. Escape was still an option. She could turn around and leave . . .

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Jack Benningham stifled a yawn, resisting an urge to check his pocket watch. He smiled, pretending interest as his father's friend, Lord Chumley—Julius Caesar—regaled him with another pointless anecdote.

Patience, he told himself. It was imperative that he keep up pretenses. Although tonight, for some reason, Jack chafed at having to be here. Plucking another flute of champagne from a passing footman, he took a sip, then looked over the rim of his glass at his target. The man standing across the room disguised as the American film star Charlie Chaplin hadn't yet moved.

Surveillance was tiresome. It made one's mind wander, like

musings for the umpteenth time over the latest lecture from his father just hours prior to the ball. It was always the same: Why did Jack continue to embarrass him with his pacifist views? Why couldn't he have been more like Jack's brother, Hugh, God rest his soul, who took up the battle cry when war was declared?

Ironic how, after Hugh's death, it was Jack's power-wielding father who obtained for him a written exemption from the fighting. No doubt a gesture meant to salvage the Benningham line. Duty was paramount to the hard-nosed earl, who had carped on all afternoon about Jack's consummate philandering and irresponsibility, and how he must start thinking about his duty to family instead of himself all of the time.

All the while, Jack could hear his mother's quiet sobs in the background.

"I say, Walenford, you seem a bit distracted tonight. I suppose it's an intolerable bore listening to an old man prattle on when you have two pretty birds beside you, eh?"

"Not at all, Lord Chumley, just feeling a bit stifled in this cape." Jack smiled at the man in the toga before turning to his hostess. "You've managed quite the crowd tonight, Lady Bassett."

"Indeed." The old woman adjusted her ruff, then narrowed her gaze on Caesar. "And I'll have you know, Lord Chumley, those 'pretty birds' you speak of are my granddaughters."

She turned an indulgent smile on Cleopatra and Lady Godiva. "I've employed them at the behest of Miss Violet Arnold, Lord Walenford's bride-to-be. They are here tonight to keep an eye on him while she visits Edinburgh with her father."

"Ah, yes, someone must keep me in check," Jack drawled. Violet's command no doubt stemmed from a wish to avoid scandal rather than any jealousy on her part.

"I do feel for the young woman," Lady Bassett went on. "Miss Arnold has been through so much." She made a *tsking*

sound. “But a year is more than enough time for her grief.” She nodded at Jack. “And you have met the challenge admirably, Walenford. I’m certain your good father the earl is pleased. Stonebrooke will have its young countess, after all. An August wedding will be just the thing.”

“Just,” Jack echoed with a forced smile. Again he sipped at his glass of champagne. Contrary to his father’s opinion of him, Jack *was* doing his duty—in fact, going so far as to take up his brother’s place at the altar. When the American heiress, Violet Arnold, first became betrothed to Hugh, money exchanged hands—from her father to his. Hugh would provide a coronet in payment for shoring up Stonebrooke’s flagging coffers.

Then his brother had died, leaving Violet unmarried. Without the promised title, the Benninghams owed the Arnolds quite a sum.

It was still difficult to grasp that after months of fighting at the Front, Hugh had returned home unscathed . . . only to drown in a freak boating accident weeks later. A shock not only to his family but also to Violet’s. Yet it didn’t change the financial arrangement. Jack had no wish to marry; however, he knew what was expected. Stonebrooke must be saved at all costs.

Of course, he would have to change his ways, but only for a time. The earl did promise that once Jack married and produced an heir, he could go to the devil if he pleased.

The notion enticed him, as he had little use for a wife. Yet . . . in the back of his mind, disquieting thoughts of settling down had already begun to take root. Jack caught himself thinking less about living in the moment and more about his future.

He discarded the consideration and instead gazed at the beautiful young women on either side of him—off-limits, of course, as he hardly wished to tangle with their lioness of a grandmother.

Still, the scenery was pleasant enough. Raising an arm to rest against Cleopatra’s shoulder, he winked at his hostess’s look of

reproach. Lady Bassett's charming granddaughters served to enhance his romantic guise at the party tonight, without any emotional entanglement.

Movement from across the room caught his eye. Chaplin had left his place by the window. Jack straightened, reminding himself he had a job to do. It wouldn't sit well with his superiors if he failed. Because although he professed to be a conscientious objector, he simply preferred fighting the enemy on his own terms. Unbeknownst to his father, the earl—in fact to anyone but Sir Marcus Weatherford, his friend and a lieutenant at the Admiralty—he was doing his bit for his country without having to set foot on foreign soil.

Jack had become a spy catcher for the Crown.

Espionage, ever present before the war, seemed to have grown to rampant proportions in the past three years. Hundreds of suspected enemy agents were apprehended and tried, with many convicted traitors executed at the Tower. Jack's social reputation allowed him to infiltrate any arena, from dockside brothels to the finest salons, enabling him to make such arrests.

Marcus once said half jokingly that Jack's notoriety as a playboy aided the War Office more efficiently in the boudoirs of London than it ever could in the trenches of France.

He watched as Chaplin moved to another empty spot along the opposite wall. No one had yet approached him.

Jack took the assignment because his section of the British Intelligence Agency, MI5, had received a tip. An unknown German agent was to arrive at the ball tonight and meet with a man already under the Admiralty's watchful eye—the man disguised as Charlie Chaplin. Once an exchange was made, Jack would follow the German from the ball to his lair, where New Scotland Yard could make the arrest.

He lifted his glass to take another sip of champagne. So where was he—?

A shimmer of bright green near the door caught his eye. Jack turned . . . and then forgot everything else.

She was a vision. Jack swallowed as he stared at the exotic beauty only a few yards away. Her cloud of fiery auburn curls looked ready to burst from the green ribbons holding them in place, and her gown, a wispy emerald-green affair, clung to her alluring figure, swaying gently as she turned with a regal air and surveyed the room.

“I say, is that Pandora?”

It took a moment for Lord Chumley’s question to penetrate Jack’s senses. But yes, he’d already glimpsed the small gold box she held against her lovely bosom.

Cleopatra spoke up. “According to myth, the gods made her the most beautiful woman on earth—”

“To ensnare Epimetheus, the brother of Zeus’s enemy, into marriage,” Lady Godiva finished. “She would cause him mischief by opening her box and releasing trouble into the world.”

“I could do with a spot of trouble,” Chumley muttered under his breath.

Jack heard him, and the unexpected rush of anger he felt took him aback. He said nothing, unable to tear his gaze from the auburn-haired beauty near the door.

“Who is she?” Lady Bassett demanded. “I cannot see her clearly from this distance.”

Jack’s pulse quickened as she started in their direction. “Excuse me,” he said, breaking from the women at his side. He ignored Lady Bassett’s frown as he moved apart, waiting to catch Pandora’s attention.

Halfway across the stretch dividing them, she paused. Only half aware, Jack did so too, holding his breath as she lifted her head to scan the room. When she turned back to him, their gazes locked, and he offered his most dazzling smile.

Immediately she straightened and blushed. Then she frowned

at him, and Jack wanted to laugh. Air eased from his lungs when after a moment she flashed a determined look and resumed her trek.

All conversation stopped when she came to stand directly before him. Jack caught the heady, exotic scent of flowers—jasmine?—as they continued staring at each other. He took in her exquisite features, the porcelain skin and dainty nose set beneath wide emerald eyes. Her full lower lip crying out to be kissed . . .

Ever so slowly, the green-eyed beauty held out a gloved hand. Delighted, he smiled and gently grasped her fingers, bringing them to his lips.

Only when she pulled away did he notice the gift she'd given him.

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Grace watched, breathless, as he looked down at the white feather of cowardice. Uncertainty over his reaction warred with the effect his nearness was having on her senses. She discovered he was even more impressive up close. One could drown in those midnight-blue eyes, and his smile . . . sweet heaven, it made her almost giddy.

She had to remind herself again of his cowardice, and as he looked at her, Grace was satisfied to note his smug expression had turned to a look of pure astonishment . . .

Before he grinned and tucked the feather behind his ear.

She glared at him, her moment of righteousness quashed. When he silently offered her his red rose, she set her jaw. Did he think she played some game? Grace had risked her reputation in order to aid her brother and her country. Did this man now think to turn her serious act into a joke? His arrogance was unbelievable! Jack Benningham wasn't just a coward; he was a conceited, overbearing, womanizing . . . turncoat.

Abruptly, he shifted his attention past her and let out a snarl.

Grace drew in a breath at his look of fury. Had the meaning of her white feather finally registered with him? She'd never stopped to consider that her actions might cause violence upon her person.

A scream welled in her throat as he grabbed her by the waist and, with a muttered curse, lifted her easily. Did he intend to toss her across the room?

He set her gently to one side, then strode to the nearest exit.

Dazed, Grace turned to watch him leave. "You!" sputtered the outraged Queen Elizabeth, and then she met with the dowager's look of shocked recognition. "I shall speak to your father, young woman," she promised, before raising a hand to signal a servant.

Grace went clammy with fear, and for an instant she thought to escape. Yet she knew there was no turning back—Lady Bassett could hardly forget the incident.

Colin's image rose in her mind, renewing her determination. Her brother was counting on her! Quickly she sidestepped her hostess and managed to thrust two more white feathers of cowardice into unsuspecting hands before the butler grasped her arm.

Five minutes later, she and Agnes were ejected from the house.

"That was close," Agnes said in a breathless tone. "I handed out my last feather before the butler got me." A burst of hyena laughter escaped her.

Grace grinned, her pulse racing. "I handed out just a few, but one which I hope will reap many returns." She nodded toward Jack Benningham, who was climbing into a cab without a backward glance. "He's an earl's son, a public figure. If he enlists in the Army, I feel certain his conchie friends will follow."

Never would Grace forget the look on his face before he stormed from the ballroom. She'd made her point, and if ruffling the conscience of the arrogant coward might help her brother win the war, she was satisfied.

What she didn't want to think about was Lady Bassett's

threat. Grace knew Da would have the whole story before the kettle was on at Swan's the following morning.

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Jack drove off in the cab, barking instructions to the driver as he mentally cursed his own lapse. He'd not only let the German agent slip from his grasp, but now he risked losing Chaplin. His only recourse was to follow him back to his den and interrogate him, perhaps salvage the situation.

Leaning back in the seat, he frowned at the white feather *she'd* given him—the mysterious auburn-haired minx who had caused his distraction.

If his current circumstances weren't so dire, he'd have been more amused *and* thankful for her action. Jack was aware of his enemy's recent surveillance of him. His cover as a conscientious objector seemed dangerously close to being compromised, a condition that also concerned Marcus.

Pandora's feather had done much to aid his deception, yet he doubted the knowledge would please her. Who was she? Jack had been sorry to leave, for she was not only beautiful but seemed to have a mind of her own—a novelty among the women he normally associated with.

He smiled, recalling the passion in those angry green eyes. And her lips, so tempting to kiss, particularly when she frowned at him.

Jack looked out at the fading twilight toward the docks ahead. His humor waned. He'd made a mess of things tonight. Only by staying focused could he possibly minimize his losses.

Still, he allowed himself another smile as he raised the white feather to his lips. Whoever she was, he would find her, his Pandora—and get that kiss.