

Would you be so good
as to unwrap my pudding, sir?



*The Mischief
of the Mistletoe*
“Away in the Manger”

Away in a Manger:
A Very Turnip Wedding Night
by Lauren Willig

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To Joyce, for her amazing cover
and to SB Sarah Wendell and the RWA bar,
without whom (and which) Turnip would still be fully clothed.

“Joy to the world, and tra la la,” warbled Turnip as he set his bays on the road towards home. “Tra la la la la.”

The Christmas season might be over, but he was filled to the brim with joy to the whatsit, and he didn’t care how many hills and vales knew it.

This year, he’d been given the best gift of all—better even than the year that his sister Sally had given him those deuced fetching carnation-patterned slippers that had so perfectly matched his favorite waistcoat. The world was a happy, happy place, all because his wife of five hours, thirty-two minutes and approximately sixteen—no, seventeen—seconds sat beside him on the seat of the phaeton, one hand tucked in her muff, the other hand tucked in Turnip’s.

Even the snow beginning to drift down around them couldn’t mar the perfection of the moment.

“Tra la la la,” Turnip sang.

“La, la, la, la,” Arabella finished for him, and gave his hand a squeeze. He could feel the ring on her finger, the one he had placed there just hours before, pressing into his hand.

It gave him a particularly warm and happy feeling, knowing that, for the rest of their lives, he could always count on her to finish his verses for him, no matter how many times he forgot the words. Not that “la, la, la” were words, precisely. More like sounds, really. But the principle remained the same. From here on, they were two brains with one body; er, two bodies with one brain; er.... Something like that. Arabella was the one with the whatchamacallit in the brainbox; he was happy just to fetch things from high shelves and fight off the odd villain.

They'd been married that morning at Girdings House, by the Dowager Duchess of Dovedale's private chaplain. Turnip's sister Sally was going to be mad as fire when she heard she'd missed the wedding (Turnip made a private note to be far away when Sally got the news, preferably on a different continent, but at least in a different county), but Turnip had wanted to make sure Arabella was his wife in the sight of God, man, and the Dowager Duchess of Dovedale, because while men might dare to defy God, no sensible soul was going to defy the Dowager Duchess of Dovedale. That cane of hers was deuced pointy and she knew just where to point it.

Turnip snuck a glance sideways at his wife. Not that he'd really been afraid Arabella would cry off—the word “love” might have been mentioned a time or two or two dozen—but there'd been a certain amount of drama and confusion surrounding their courtship, involving spies and puddings and spies *with* puddings, and when it came right down to it, Turnip had wanted to make sure that the ring was firmly on her finger before Arabella had time to come to her senses.

Not to mention the whole matter of hastening the wedding night.

Since the wedding had been today.... Turnip engaged in some deep thought. If his calculations were correct, that meant, logically, the wedding night must be tonight. Ah, logic. They'd told him back at Eton that it would come in handy some day. He was only now beginning to appreciate how much.

Of course, right now, he'd appreciate anything that brought him closer to Arabella and a mattress. Or rather, to Arabella on a mattress.

“Shouldn’t be all that long to Parva Magna,” he said. “Only another three hours. You’re sure you’re warm enough?”

Arabella glanced down at the small edifice of rugs and furs piled on top of her legs, or, at least, the area where one might presume her legs ought to be. “The five lap rugs and fifteen hot bricks are keeping me quite toasty.” She tilted her head. “Not to mention the large, warm thing next to me.”

“The—oh, right!” Turnip wiggled closer to her, eager to do his duty as a warming implement. Not to mention that it felt good to feel her beside him, even with a shirt, a waistcoat, and a cloak between them on his end, and a pelisse, a dress, and various forms of unnecessarily complex female undergarments on hers.

Only three more hours, he reminded himself.

Three hours and then an extra hour to remove the unnecessarily complex female undergarments. Very, very slowly. Turnip shifted uncomfortably on the seat. Maybe not so very slowly after all. How quickly could one remove a corset? Was she wearing a corset? And why wouldn’t his horses trot any faster?

The snow was coming down harder now, and the horses picking their way more carefully.

“Perhaps we ought to have stayed at Girdings,” said Arabella uneasily.

“I’ll get us there, never fear,” said Turnip cheerfully, despite the fact that he was beginning to have trouble making out the road. “Can you read that sign?”

Arabella pulled her hood up over her head, so all that Turnip could see was a bit of nose sticking out. It was a deuced fetching nose, even if it was getting a bit red at the tip and begin-

ning to drip. She leaned so far out that the carriage began to tilt ominously. Turnip hastily hauled her back.

“I’m sorry,” she said, snowflakes clinging to her eyelashes. “The snow was too thick.”

Turnip kissed her nose. “No matter,” he said cheerfully. “I’m sure this is the right way.” It wasn’t.

An hour later, the road was all but obliterated, Turnip had stopped singing, and Arabella’s nose had gone from red to purple.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, for the fifteenth time. “I should have taken the other road.”

“I’m not sure there would be much of a difference between them,” said Arabella, her teeth chattering. “They’re both covered with snow. Do you think there might be an inn? Somewhere?”

Holding up a hand to shield her eyes, she peered into the blur of snow, but no inn magically materialized. Turnip wished he could make one appear, just for her. He would slay dragons for her; he would hunt down treasures at the farthest corners of the earth; but right now he’d settle for being able to give her a soft bed and a warm fire. That wasn’t too much to ask, was it?

“I’m so sorry,” he said again.

“I did say I’d take you for better or worse,” said Arabella prosaically. “Although I don’t think there was anything in there about warmer or colder.”

“I’ll fix this,” said Turnip, although he didn’t have the least idea how. “I promise.”

Arabella squinted into the snow. “Isn’t that a building over there?”

Turnip drew his horses to a halt. “It looks like a barn.”

He made a quick calculation. The bays were just about done in and there was no guarantee that they would come upon anything better. These weren't exactly the most traversed roads in the kingdom. As much as he would have preferred a nice warm inn with a roaring fire and a fluffy bed, any shelter was better than none, especially since Arabella's nose appeared to be going from purple to blue and he'd be willing to wager that her hot bricks were no longer so hot.

This was not how he had intended to spend his wedding night.

Arabella bumped her head affectionately against his shoulder. "We can shelter there for the night." Catching sight of Turnip's face, she said gently, "It's all right, really it is."

"I wanted everything to be perfect for you," he said glumly, "and instead I got us lost."

"I'd rather be lost with you than at Girdings without you," she said. "Come on. I'd offer to race you, but you'd win."

Turnip reached up to lift her from the phaeton, but, instead of setting her down, he swung her up into his arm, skidding just a little on the hard-packed snow.

"Turnip!" She was laughing and squirming. He did like the squirming. It brought such interesting things into prominence. "What are you—"

"Only right to carry you over a threshold." He kicked open the door of the barn, and muttered, "Never thought it would be this threshold."

Arabella craned her neck to glance around the barn. "You know," she said, her teeth chattering under her blue lips, "this isn't at all bad. For a barn, at least it's a remarkably *clean* barn."

She always made the best of things. Turnip's chest felt tight with tenderness and love and awe, awe that he'd been granted a chance to share his life someone so... so... Arabella.

He tightened his arms around her, pressing a kiss to her cold lips, trying to tell her with his kiss what he couldn't in words. She smelled, as she always did, of soap and lavender. And just a little bit of horse. Or maybe that was the barn.

Turnip rubbed his nose in her hair. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she said. "But hadn't you better see to the horses?"

Turnip lowered her carefully to the ground, enjoying the feel of her body sliding against his as she regained her footing. She lifted her head to look at him and he kissed her again, a long, slow, unhurried kiss, because he loved her and they were together, even if it was in a barn that appeared to have seen better days.

"Happy wedding eve," his bride said softly.

Turnip glanced over his shoulder, at the open door of the barn. It was hard to tell with all the snow, but it was certainly darker than it had been. "Don't want to quibble over words and whatnot, but I think it's nearly wedding night by now."

Arabella blinked. "So it is," she said. She cleared her throat, and pushed the hair back behind her ears. "Well, then."

There was a wealth of meaning in that "well, then". Turnip could hear the blood roaring in his ears. Unless that was the horses, complaining about being left outside. He knew he shouldn't be a cad, that he should tell her that this didn't have to be her wedding night if she didn't want it to be, but the words stuck in his throat.

"I'll go see to the horses," said Turnip and fled back out into the storm.

He returned to find that his industrious wife had built a make-shift stove by placing the bricks from the carriage in a rough square around broken bits of wood.

“For a fire,” she explained. She looked up at Turnip with a rueful smile. “It’s a good thing you gave me quite so many hot bricks. At least we won’t be cold.”

Just looking at her, her loosened hair falling around her face, made his skin crackle. Cold? What cold? He was burning up from the outside in. It was their wedding night, but unless he wanted to be a complete cad, there was nothing he could do about it.

“We’ll need more wood than that,” said Turnip. “Ah, look, an axe!”

If he couldn’t think himself out of lust, perhaps he could chop himself out of it. He dropped his cloak on the floor. On second thought, the coat had to go, too. His valet would never forgive him if he split a seam. Wriggling out of the tight coat, Turnip dumped it on top of the cloak.

He flexed his arms a few times just to check. Much better.

He took up the axe, and had at it. He would be—thwack!—a gentleman. If it—thwack!—killed him. Because Arabella—thwack!—deserved better.

“Um, darling?” Arabella’s voice sounded strange. “Isn’t that the wrong side of the axe?”

Turnip looked down blankly at the implement in his hand. “Not again.” No wonder he hadn’t been making much headway with the wood. Although it had felt good to work up a sweat. Not that he wanted to think about sweat, because sweat made him think about other things and those were the things he wasn’t meant to be thinking about, and all that. “It’s you, you see. Whenever you’re in the room, I can’t remember which end is up.”

“The blunt end,” said Arabella firmly. “Blunt end up, pointy end down. We’ve only been married a day; I’d prefer to keep you in one piece.”

“Aye, aye!” said Turnip, and saluted her.

Arabella couldn't help but notice how his linen shirt clung to him, the thin fabric rendered half-transparent, outlining the breadth of his shoulders, the muscles in his arms. She'd known he was a fine pugilist; now, for the first time, she could truly see and appreciate the result of all that training in the ring. His handsome face glowed with his exertions. She looked and she marveled that this, all this, was hers to have and to hold. If Apollo ever chopped wood, Arabella thought, this was what he would look like.

Although maybe not in that waistcoat.

"At least the roof seems to be in one piece," she said, not for any particular reason, other than that she had to do something to make up for staring, and, perhaps, if she used her mouth for words, it would stop hanging open.

"Deuced—important—thing—roofs," panted Turnip, bringing down the axe. His waistcoat strained against the movement.

Oh, my. Who needed a fire when she had this?

"Keep—the—precipitation—out, don't you know." Turnip leaned over and gathered up an armload of split wood, piling it into her make-shift stove.

"Yes, yes, they do," said Arabella, with no idea what she was agreeing to. "Hadn't you better chop that bit, too?"

Within half an hour, there was a cheerful blaze in the makeshift stove, a pallet of reasonably clean straw near enough to be warm, but far enough not to provide an accidental exercise in immolation, Turnip had brought in the forgotten picnic hamper from the phaeton, and Arabella had finally managed to get her jaw back into place, although her husband was behaving distinctly oddly, making excuses to rush out into the snow, and appearing again, red-faced, as

though he'd stuck his head into a snowbank. He'd look at her and then rush out again. Arabella found this behavior distinctly confusing.

“See?” said Arabella cheerfully, on her knees next to the hamper. “With the fire going, it’s not half-bad. And we’re certainly not going to starve. I think Letty packed half the kitchen at Girdings.”

So far, Arabella had already unearthed a meat pie, a brace of pheasants, and an entire ham haunch.

At the bottom of the hamper, along with cake, biscuits, and what looked to be a good portion of someone’s wine cellar, was a small bundle wrapped in white linen and tied up with brightly colored ribbons.

Arabella regarded it fondly.

“Look! She even packed a pudding.” Arabella dangled the item in front of Turnip. She tried her best to sound sultry. “Care to help me unwrap it?”

The pudding wasn’t what Turnip wanted to unwrap. He made a strangled noise at the back of his throat.

Arabella lowered the pudding. “What’s wrong? We don’t have to eat it.” Her lips twisted with amusement. “We could always save it to ward off unexpected malefactors. Just in case.”

“I—” Turnip began, but he couldn’t quite get the word out. His throat felt tight, and so did his breeches. “About the wedding night.”

Arabella perked up. “Yes?”

“Don’t want you to feel you need to take advantage of me,” he blurted out. “Er, that is, don’t want you to feel obligated—”

“I don’t understand.” Arabella sank down on her haunches next to the hamper. “What are you trying to say?”

“This wasn’t the way it was supposed to be,” Turnip said desperately. “There was supposed to be a proper room and a proper fire and no-one was going to smell of horse. I always imagined us, well, in a bed. In a bedroom. Not that it had to be a bedroom. But that’s the traditional way of going about it and all that, don’t you know.”

Arabella made a choking sound, a laugh turned into a cough.

“I wanted our wedding night to be perfect,” Turnip said earnestly, “because, devil take it, you deserve it. So, just wanted you to know—that is—”

“My silly love.” Arabella dropped the pudding. Scootching over to him, she lifted a hand to cup her husband’s cheek. “Perfect is wherever you are. I don’t mind the smell of horse if you don’t. All I need for my wedding night is you.”

Arabella lifted a hand to his waistcoat, tracing a figure eight around the elaborate carved carnelian buttons, feeling ridiculously bold. “Don’t you think it’s time we went to bed?”

Turnip’s arms curved around her waist. “But there is no—”

The word was lost as Arabella stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his.

Several moments later, they came up for air. Turnip blinked, trying to recall his train of thought. “What I was trying to say was—”

Arabella’s lips landed firmly on his.

“Mrr-mrr-mrr,” said Turnip, and gave up trying to think at all. Thinking was difficult enough at the best of times; it was nearly impossible with Arabella warm and soft in his arms and curved in all the right places.

She’d removed her pelisse and he could feel the warmth of her skin through her velvet dress. Her hands were on his back, in his hair, pulling him closer. Turnip abandoned all thought of shoulds and oughts and kissed her the way he’d wanted to kiss her for weeks now, his hands roaming as far as they could reach. It didn’t matter where they were; forget their surroundings, he wasn’t sure of his own name. Parsnip, Rutabaga, what was in a name? Nothing that mattered. All that mattered was Arabella in his arms.

They landed with a whump on the pallet of hay. Bits of straw went flying up in the air around them.

There was something missing here. Turnip did a quick check. Arabella was here. He was definitely still here. Oh, right. That was what was missing: a bed.

“Are you sure,” Turnip asked, in a strangled voice, “that you don’t mind not having a proper bed?”

If she minded, he might just have to go outside and jump back into that snowbank. An hour or so should do it. Just long enough to freeze any feeling from his extremities. Either that, or a staggeringly large amount of brandy.

Not that he needed brandy. Arabella was intoxicant enough for him. Which brought him back to the current problem.

“When you think about it,” said Arabella breathlessly, wriggling closer to him as his hand explored the curve of her hip, “what are beds but hay with blankets? So, really, all we’re doing is going back to the essence of bed. Essentially. Oooh.”

Turnip wasn’t entirely sure he followed her reasoning, but that long, drawn out “ooh” was both unmistakable and entirely clear. He pressed his lips to the curve of her neck, to see if he could make her “ooh” again. This time, he got an “aah”. He kissed his way from the hollow of her shoulder to the base of her ear, relishing the symphony of little sighs.

Who knew his wife was so musical? She was full of surprises, his Arabella, he thought fondly. And he had a while lifetime to find out about them.

Starting with tonight.

He propped himself up on one elbow, hovering just above her. “So what you’re saying,” he said cautiously, “is that you don’t mind about the bed?”

She opened her eyes and smiled at him and Turnip knew he had never seen anything lovelier than that smile. “No. I don’t mind at all. Just as long as we move a little bit to the right,”—she wiggled sideways, wincing as hay crackled beneath her—“away from that particularly prickly bit.”

“I’ve got it!” Turnip sprang to his feet, seized with an inspiration. He took Arabella’s hands in both of his, hauling her upright.

“Got what?”

“You.” She looked so adorable, blinking, confused and lightly covered with hay, that Turnip just had to kiss her. He pressed a big, smacking kiss to her lips before turning to shake

his cloak out over the pile of hay. “And my cloak. Like that Raleigh chappy, don’t you know,” he said happily. “Covering puddles for the queen.”

Arabella laughed. “My hero.”

Turnip held out both hands. “My queen.”

Together, they sank down on the makeshift bed, her hands in his, her skirts billowing around his knees, the firelight limning her hair. It didn’t matter anymore that they were in a barn; it just mattered that they were together.

“You are, you know,” Turnip said. “Queen of my heart, forever and ever. It doesn’t matter if we’re in a castle or a barn, I’ll always love you just the same.”

On her knees, Arabella laced her arms around his neck. “I’m growing to like this barn,” she said breathlessly.

“I like you,” Turnip said, and kissed her, his hands busy on the fastenings on the back of her dress. The fabric listed over one shoulder.

Turnip followed the path of it, kissing his way down, relishing the contrast between her creamy skin, like fresh drawn milk, and the green of her gown. Mmm, milk. He’d always liked milk. It did a body good.

He tangled his fingers in the gold lacings and tugged and the dress slid another inch. Through the fabric of her chemise, he could see the shape of her nipples, firm and hard in the cold.

“I don’t want you to freeze,” he said. It was a question.

Arabella looked at him for a moment in confusion, and then, with a single movement, pulled her dress up over her head. The velvet landed heavily on the ground next to the straw. “I won’t freeze,” she said huskily. “After all, I have you to keep me warm.”

With a growl, Turnip pulled her back down to him. He hadn’t intended to growl, but there it was. It just came out.

Fortunately, Arabella didn’t seem to mind. She was covering his face with kisses, while deftly freeing the buttons on his waistcoat.

“You’re deuced good at this, don’t you know,” murmured Turnip, somewhere in the vicinity of her ear, as he eased her chemise up over her head.

Arabella emerged from the chemise, looking ruffled, but exceedingly pleased. “Really? I am glad to hear it.” She turned a fetching color of red. “I haven’t had much in the way of comparison.”

“Mmrph,” said Turnip. He’d originally meant to say something else, but Arabella without a chemise was a sight to rob the words from a more articulate man than he. She was perfection. Her breasts.... Her breasts....

“Your breasts are like puddings,” he said hoarsely.

“What?”

“The best of all possible puddings!” Turnip said hastily. “Scrumptious”—he removed the hands she had raised to cover them—“toothsome”—he lowered his head to kiss first one globe, then the other—“mouthwatering”—he suited action to words, licking his way around each breast, closer and closer to the nipple, as Arabella shivered with something other than cold—“perfectly shaped puddings.”

“Mmm,” said Arabella, and threaded her fingers through his hair as Turnip touched his tongue to her right nipple, drawing it slowly into his mouth.

She clutched his head, pulling him closer, demanding more. Her body bucked beneath his, and Turnip lifted his head to her lips, kissing her long and deep and dizzyingly as they bodies twined together, her legs twisting against his, his hands on her bare back, enjoying every inch of her.

There was only one slight problem.

“I’m wearing too many clothes,” Turnip said, inarticulately.

Arabella shook her head solemnly side to side, making the hay crackle. “It wouldn’t do for you to be improperly attired. By improperly attired,” she added, just so there couldn’t be any mistake, “I mean attired.”

“Don’t go anywhere,” said Turnip thickly. “Don’t go anywhere at all.”

He scrambled off the makeshift bed, trying to remove his shirt and breeches all at the same time, which resulted in a slight falling over episode.

“Let me help you,” suggested his bride, and gently tugged his shirt up over his head. Every movement made Turnip shiver. “Are you cold?” she asked.

“Not cold,” he gasped, as she turned his attention to the fastening of his breeches.

“How do these work?” she asked, trying to navigate the intricacies of his buttons. Her hair fell over her face, tickling his bare chest. Turnip rolled his eyes to the beamed ceiling and concentrated on trying to breathe. Deuced tricky thing, breathing.

“You might not want to, er, touch there just yet,” Turnip said in a strangled voice, gently taking possession of her hand.

“Why not?” she asked, settling back on her heels and shaking her hair back over her shoulders. With the firelight at her back, Turnip had never seen anything more beautiful, or desirable.

Turnip drew a strand of her hair through his fingers, tracing it all the way down.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said.

She swayed forward, her lips blindly seeking his. Skin to skin, they sank down on Turnip’s cloak. She fit so perfectly against him, he thought incoherently. Why hadn’t he seen this years ago? He did his best to make up for lost time, lavishing kisses on every inch of her, starting with her toes and working his way slowly up... and up... and....

“Oh, my!” gasped Arabella, and clamped her thighs around his ears in a way that might have been either, “please stop”, or “please don’t stop”.

Turnip wiggled back up along her body, pausing to visit his favorite breast—he knew it wasn’t right to have favorites, but there it was, there was just something about the left one—up to her lips.

“Was that a yes, or a no?” he inquired anxiously.

“Mrph,” said Arabella, and kissed him in a way that left no doubt of her intentions. Her legs wrapped around him, putting certain things very much in the way of certain other things, especially when she pushed her hips the way she was doing.

“Are you—” Turnip struggled for breath. “That is—”

Why oh why hadn’t he asked someone about defloration? He was the only virgin he’d ever slept with. That was, he’d been a virgin at one point, but it was so long ago he couldn’t remember when it was and he didn’t think it was quite the same thing after all and why hadn’t he

asked Richard or Geoff or one of the lads down at the pub? He rather suspected it was too late to run out for advice.

She moved her hips again and the question became rather more academic. Turnip rolled her over onto her back, trying to take things slowly and not just pounce, although pouncing was sounding like an awfully good option.

The hay crackled, and something went squish, although whatever it was, neither of them knew nor cared, since Arabella was too busy arching up towards him, gasping as he made his way through the initial barrier.

“Are you—?” Turnip gasped.

“Yes,” she panted, and arched up towards him again, making Turnip forget whatever it was he’d meant to ask from the sheer joy of the way she clenched around him, watching her face as her eyes widened with surprise and then pleasure, as the sparks jumped from the fire, crackling in the air.

Afterwards, once he’d gotten his breath back, Turnip pushed up on one arm, trying to get a good look at his wife’s face. She lay with her hair spread round about her on his cloak, her eyes closed, her chest moving gently up and down.

Slowly, she opened her eyes, and her lips curved into a slow, mischievous smile.

“I knew I liked this barn,” she said, and reached for him again.

Turnip was more than happy to agree.

* * *

When they arrived at Parva Magna, everyone agreed that it was quite a good thing that the newly married couple had managed to find shelter in the storm, although there was some confusion as to why it had taken them a full three days to make their way fifteen miles.

Turnip's valet bore away his master's cloak with dire mutterings about "Ruin! Ruin!"; Arabella had a coughing fit and had to be slapped heartily on the back by her husband; and Sally inspected the remains of the hamper, searching for gifts, and commenting on the lack of consideration of Some People who might have known that Other People would have liked to have been present at the wedding breakfast, and for heaven's sake, what *was* that?

With a look of disgust, Sally fished a truly dilapidated object out of the bottom of the hamper, from among the debris of empty wine bottles and a rather massive—and entirely denuded—ham bone.

She held it as far away from her as it would go, dangling from a worn red ribbon. Whatever it was, it was squished flat, dark splotches and bits of straw clinging to the linen wrapping. A resilient bit of mistletoe clung stubbornly to one end.

Turnip and Arabella exchanged a sidelong glance.

"I don't think you want that, old thing," said Turnip.

"Yes, but what it is it?" demanded Sally.

Arabella was seized with a fit of the giggles. "Can't you tell?"

Her husband slid an arm around her waist, and kissed the top of her head. "The comestible that brought us together," he said fondly.

Arabella looked up into his eyes. "I'll never look at Christmas pudding the same way again."

“You can unwrap my pudding any time,” said Turnip tenderly.

Sally rolled her eyes and went off to find someone else to bother. There was no getting sense out of either of them.

Pudding, indeed!