

Every book has a few false starts before I get into the stride of it. Below are the first lines I wrote of *Crimson Rose*. Since both Mary and Vaughn tend to command the public eye, I originally intended to begin each chapter with letter and newspaper excerpts talking about their doings.

This excerpt below, two letters from Miss Lucy Ponsonby originally meant to head up Chapter One, is my very favorite abandoned fragment of *Crimson Rose*:

“...of all things the most wonderful! I nearly Burst with Laughter when I heard the news. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't had it from Percy, who saw them together—Letty and Lord Pinchingdale, that is—with his own two eyes! It's a pity Letty caught him (such a freckled little thing!), but I can much better stomach her as Lady Pinchingdale than our Miss Mary.... If you were Mary, wouldn't you simply Expire of Shame? Balked at the altar by her sister! Perhaps now she won't be so high in the instep....”

-- From Miss Lucy Ponsonby to Miss Myrtia Debenham, 2 July, 1803 [errors in spelling corrected]

“My dearest Mary, I want you to know that all my best wishes are with you in this Most Trying time. I think it absolutely appalling the way Letty behaved, and I cannot understand Lord Pinchingdale at all. He always seemed so devoted. But then Men are such Fickle Creatures, unlike the True Friendship to be found between women. With all the fond and outraged outpourings of my Deepest Heart, I remain your most loving, most loyal LUCY.”

-- From Miss Lucy Ponsonby to Miss Mary Alsworthy, 3 July, 1803

One of the greatest pleasures of writing *Crimson Rose* was getting to look at my old characters through new eyes as I shifted into Mary's perspective. Below is an outtake from Chapter Three of *Crimson Rose*, where Mary, stuck at Sibley Court, critiques my three previous heroines, baffled over why they all have something she doesn't: husbands.

Look at the three recent wives laughing over charades or some other such childish foolery in the Great Chamber. It was easy enough to dismiss Lady Henrietta Dorrington. She was the daughter of a marquess, and that tended to go a long way on the marriage market, especially when coupled with a dowry worthy of the title. But the other two didn't fit any pattern that made the least bit of sense to Mary.

Lord Richard's wife was the sort usually complimented as having fine eyes, which was to say that she didn't have terribly much else to recommend her. Her father had been a French nobleman, but that didn't count for much nowadays when impoverished émigrés were a sixpence the dozen. One only had to enter any ballroom to find a cluster of them hanging about, exchanging tearful reminiscences and stuffing themselves on iced cakes. And she had been

raised in Shropshire. Shropshire, for heaven's sake. The very sheep in the fields blushed to admit residence in that rural backwater. Then there was Letty, who was certainly stuffed full of estimable qualities, none of which were—in Mary's experience—of the least bit of interest to a man. Men didn't care if you had the best organized larder in three counties but they turned into slaving idiots at a glimpse of a well-turned ankle. Letty's domestic skills were unimpeachable but her ankles had always been thick.

Yet every one of these girls, these nondescript, painfully ordinary girls, appeared to have discovered a secret that Mary had missed, something that caught and held the heart as well as the eye—and once it had it, held it firm. It was enough to make Mary believe in love philters and magic potions.

Poor Lucy Ponsonby. She keeps getting cut from the narrative. In the final version of *Crimson Rose*, Mary meets Lady Euphemia McPhee, produces of the Rhyming Historie of Britain, through her chaperone, the obligingly somnolent Aunt Imogen. Originally, though, Mary made Lady Euphemia's acquaintance through Lucy Ponsonby during that eventful night at Vauxhall Gardens. It was more efficient to go the Aunt Imogen route, but I had fun writing this scene, so I'm delighted to have the opportunity to resurrect it from my files:

Before St. George could expatiate on amphibians, a new figure appeared on the scene, blocking Mary's view of Vaughn and his blonde companion.

"We've only just got back from the country," announced Lucy Ponsonby, flinging herself around Mary's neck in an embrace that sent silk fringe up Mary's nose. "It was a dead bore, as it always is. Hunting, hunting, hunting, that's all the men ever talk about. I thought I was going to expire from it."

Mary coolly extricated herself from her self-proclaimed bosom friend, who had been very quick to distance herself from Mary's bosom when the news of the failed elopement exploded through the ton at the end of the last Season. "Good evening, Lucy. How lovely to see you again."

Lucy rustled like a broody hen. "Don't be cross. I did mean to call straight off, but you know how it is, with matters so... delicate. Mama didn't want to risk any scandal spreading. But I told her that it would be positively unchristian to abandon a friend in her hour of need. So here I am."

"How terribly brave of you."

Lucy preened. "Well, I couldn't just abandon you, could I?"

That, Mary knew, translated roughly to "But no one would look at me if I didn't stand next to you!"

“And the little Season promises to be such fun this year,” Lucy gushed.

Translation: “Perhaps this Season someone will finally make an offer.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce your companion to me?”

That needed no translation.

Mary rapidly performed the introduction, trying to see over Lucy’s bobbing curls. Vaughn’s dark head was bent down towards the mysterious woman’s. It was impossible to make out his expression. It might have been amorous or annoyed or anywhere in between.

“May I make you both known to Lady Euphemia McPhee?” Lucy gestured extravagantly at a woman in flowing silver robes, with a long bandeau tying back her white hair. “Lady Euphemia is producing her very own play at her house in Richmond, and I,” Lucy preened, “am to be in it.

“It is,” announced Lady Euphemia grandly, “a rhyming history of Britain.” Her hands sketched out the words in the air.

“A history of Britain all in rhyme!” Lucy explained eagerly to St. George. “You must come see it, Mr. St. George.”

Lady Euphemia froze. “What did you say your name was, young man?”

“St. George?” said St. George diffidently.

“Yes!” cried Lady Euphemia, her draperies crackling around her. “You shall be my Saint George!”

“That is my name,” said Mr. St. George hesitantly, not wanting to give any offense.

Lady Euphemia took him by the arm. “You shall play St. George, slayer of dragons—or dragon,” she corrected herself. “One wouldn’t want to be less than accurate. And you” –her burning gaze lighted on Mary—“shall be a Princess of Britain, rescued from the dread dragons lair by the blazing blade of England’s blessed saint.”

Mary’s mind was rather more occupied with sinners at the moment. One sinner in particular.

“But you told me I could be princess!” protested Lucy.

Lady Euphemia waved a hand in a regal gesture. “One must think of the good of the production. Rehearsal tomorrow afternoon,” she informed Mary and a bemused St. George. “There’s no time to be wasted.”

Mary couldn't agree more, but on different grounds. As she watched, the blonde woman pressed something into Vaughn's palm. It disappeared just as quickly into Vaughn's waistcoat pocket, so quickly that Mary had only a glimpse of something pale against the figured fabric of Vaughn's waistcoat before it was gone.

"Thank you so much, Lady Euphemia," she said graciously, as Lucy turned purple with disappointment and dyspepsia. "Would you excuse me? I see my party."

"Me, too," said St. George hastily, retreating with a speed unworthy of the patron saint of England.

Lady Euphemia flapped her draperies in farewell, already occupied in composing a new rhyming couplet in which the dragon's fire burned bright, bright, bright, but not so brilliant as that valiant knight.

I've always loved the How Their Lives Turned Out bits at the end of novels. So does Eloise. In this outtake from the very last chapter of *Crimson Rose*, Eloise visits the Vaughn Collection gift shop to sneak a peak at what might have happened after Mary and Vaughn's happily ever after:

At least where Vaughn and Mary were concerned, I had been able to satisfy my curiosity. It felt a bit like cheating, like peeking at the end of the novel when you're only on chapter fifteen, but on my way in that morning, I had stopped into the museum gift shop. Among the novelty mugs and the reproduction quizzing glasses, there had been a glossy paperback history of the Vaughns, the sort of book that features a picture per page with a very small paragraph of text underneath. All the pictures were reproductions of portraits in the collection, one per Vaughn.

I had no difficulty locating Mary. Her picture must have been hanging in one of the rooms I hadn't paid to get into. She smirked out at me from the shiny paper, her glossy black hair plaited with pearls. Draped in a silvery silk tissue over white satin (the details of dress come courtesy of the author of the publication), she was posed in front of the ruins of a pavilion that might well have been the remains of Lady Euphemia's personal theatre. In one hand, she held a rose, full-blown and crimson red, dripping fat petals onto the hem of her gown like scattered jewels.

She looked regal, and more than a little bit smug. I had no doubt she had kept Vaughn on a tight leash. She had, according to the blurb beneath, outlasted her husband by more than two decades, living on well into the reign of Victoria, terrorizing grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and a whole new generation of debutantes. At the end of her life, a contemporary had described her as "a woman of unwavering elegance." It seemed a suitable epitaph. Although the portrait must have been painted not long after their marriage, I could easily picture her sixty years later as a steely-spined old martinet, with her skin drawn tight over her elegant bones, a painfully high collar, and a whiplash stare.

Vaughn's first wife was in there, too. With chronological correctness, they had placed her on the page facing Vaughn, united in print as they hadn't been in person. I noted that they had set down 1790 as her death date, repeating the official story of death by smallpox. Mary and Vaughn had managed to keep their secret secret.

In contrast to the vivid colors and crisp lines of Mary's portrait, Anne's looked curiously blurry. Gainsborough had painted her walking through a wood, the leaves whispering around her. With one jeweled hand, she held onto her broad brimmed hat. Under the great hat, her face was pretty enough, but unremarkable, without the character that leant Mary's features such force. You noticed her hair first, a vast pile of ash blonde hair, frizzed out in the fashion of the day and then teased into long curls that bobbed down to one side of her ruffled white fichu. The wind lifted her long curls and whipped her full skirts around her legs, revealing a hint of ruffled underskirt.

She looked, in short, like a woman beset by her environment, tossed on the winds of fortune. They do say that a great painter can see into the subject's soul. Gainsborough had certainly gotten the first Lady Vaughn down to a tee.

Tucking the gold medallion safely away in a corner of the box, where Dempster would have trouble finding it, I spared a moment of pity for poor Lady Vaughn. Her only real crime had been weakness, and it was hard not to feel a bit sorry for her for that, even if she had been born with every advantage and foolishly tossed it away.