

*Miniature
Rose*

Scarlet Rose

*The
Lady's
Bargain*

*Leslie
Dickens*



The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

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Dedication

To all who have believed in my dreams.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

Posing as a governess should have been a simple matter, but when Lady Christine Claybourne altered her name and appearance to match her new station, she hadn't counted on the childish whims of Miss Ellie Preston. Fingers clamped tightly to the rough bark of the tree she currently found herself stuck in, Christine closed her eyes and listened to the incessant pounding of her heart.

"I'll be back, Miss Archer," called the mischievous voice from below. "Don't go off!"

Humor from a ten year old was not what Christine needed right now. Especially since that ten year old was responsible for her present predicament.

She sucked in a deep, courageous breath and slit her eyes open, forcing herself to look at the ground below. It didn't seem that far as she was climbing, or maybe it was just the motivation to reach her pupil who claimed being stuck. When, in fact, Miss Ellie Preston could easily climb up and down this large, ancient oak.

"Help is here!" the girl yelled.

Her stomach already in knots, Christine slowly took a full glimpse of the figures at the bottom of the tree. Next to her rotten pupil was a man with a ladder. He leaned it against the trunk, and Christine's heart sank when the top rung came to a rest several feet short of her perch. The man said something to Ellie. She nodded and ran off while the man climbed not the ladder but the tree.

He scaled the oak without effort. His lean, muscular legs and powerful arms pushed off the trunk and branches with

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

masculine ease, stirring a long forgotten tickle in her belly. His yellow curls caught the sunlight and shimmered with golden highlights. Christine assumed he was tall, certainly more than her, for he reached branches without any of the stretching she had to do.

Finally, just before reaching her, he stopped and looked up. Her breath caught at the hard angles of his face. Pale grey eyes, rimmed with dark lashes, rested above high cheekbones. A slight dimple in his chin softened a strong jaw.

"Good afternoon." A deep voice shimmered over the words, quickening her pulse. "You must be Ellie's new governess."

Dressed casually, this man might have been a gardener or someone from the village. But something in his demeanor, his speech, led her to believe he was of a much higher station. Someone who could prove most dangerous to her.

"How do you know that?"

He scratched his chin. "Well, let's see you are the fourth one in two years. And every one of them has left after she sent them up this tree."

Christine groaned. It wasn't bad enough that she was stuck way up in this tree, but that she had been as gullible as the others before her. Well, she wouldn't dare leave because of this trick.

The curl of his lips hinted at a devilish rake. "Mind if I join you?"

Before she could answer, he swung himself up on her branch and sat, causing it to bounce with his weight. Ice washed through her blood. Instinctively, she clutched his leg.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

A large, warm hand settled over hers. Sparkles tingled up her arm. What was the matter with her? It had been years since a man affected her this way.

"It won't break. I promise you."

She swallowed both her fear and her wantonness and looked from their hands to his face. "Haven't you come to collect me?"

He nodded.

"Why ... why are you sitting here with me then?"

"Getting to know you." His eyes danced.

"My name is Miss Archer. I am the governess for Miss Ellen Preston, third daughter of the Earl of Remington." She sighed. "Now may we get down?"

He ignored her question. "Have you a first name, Miss Archer?"

Even a recluse like her knew the rules of society. He was either trying to be rude or he was flirting with her. "I have," she answered.

"Is that your name? I have? It sounds Scandinavian or maybe German."

She wanted to be annoyed at him, teasing her while she was frightened for her life. But his charming grin and sparkling eyes disarmed her. "Victoria," she said, forcing herself to say the name she'd taken six weeks ago.

"Our queen." Skepticism colored the words.

A tremor of concern flickered in her chest. "Yes. And my name. Victoria Archer. Are you satisfied? Now can we get down?"

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

"You don't look at all like Queen Victoria." His gaze took a slow sweep of her, dragging down her loose fitting bodice and back up again. "No. Victoria doesn't suit you."

Her body burned at his glances. Heat gathered between her legs. Oh Lord, she'd denied herself for too long. She sucked in her breath, but it only made her aware of his heady masculine scent.

"I-I believe you should be referring to me as Miss Archer. My Christian name is quite irrelevant."

Those gray eyes of his stared at her, then suddenly shifted away. He appeared to struggle with himself, debating whether or not to say something. But the smile returned to his face and he said, "I've always liked to break the rules."

Christine swallowed, somewhat unnerved by his admission. She wanted to ask who he was, what his name was, why he didn't introduce himself. But she couldn't find the right words.

A breeze gusted up the branches, rustling the leaves and lifting his hair. An urge bubbled inside her to brush her fingertips along the hard planes of his face, down the skin of his strong forearms. Something about him mesmerized her, captivated her. He could be her downfall if she wasn't careful.

"Why aren't we getting down?" she asked, changing the subject.

"See that ladder?" He pointed to it. "I need two men to come and hold it still."

Christine gripped the tree tightly. "How are we going to get from here to the ladder?"

"I'll carry you."

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

"Carry me?" Her heart resumed its frantic shuddering. But she now wondered if it were from being so close to him rather than fear. "How?"

He lifted one shoulder, his sly grin returning. "I'll throw you over my shoulder, of course."

"Shoulder?" she echoed. She licked her lips and glanced down at the grass. The distance made her gasp. It was so far to drop. And yet, being so close to his body, held securely in his power...

She'd been a recluse far too long.

Thick fingers tipped her chin toward him. A shiver spread through her breasts, making them ache. "Is it the height or the fall that frightens you?"

"Both," she answered. "What frightens you?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I have yet to find it."

"Nothing?" She tilted her head. "Thunderstorms? Darkness? Snakes?" He shook his head as she persisted. "Loneliness?"

His fingertip traced her jaw, and Christine's eyes closed of their own volition. "Are you frightened of being lonely, Miss Archer?" His words were a whisper. He leaned toward her so that she could hear his breathing, smell the mingling of sweat and cologne.

In an instant, a tingle raced through her and her breathing turned shallow. He was close. So close. She wanted him to kiss her. God, yes, please.

Fire blazed in her bloodstream, wetness dampened her legs. She wanted him. Perhaps it would be better if he were

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

the gardener. She could assuage this ache without getting herself into trouble.

Suddenly, there was only emptiness as his hand moved away from her face. "Open your eyes, Miss Archer. I'm not going to kiss you."

The flush of embarrassment that swept through her quickly turned to anger. How dare he tease her this way? The rake! Her eyes flashed open, and she glared at his charming, smiling face.

"Not yet, anyway."

Her gaze sharpened on him. "What does that mean?"

Raising an eyebrow, he swung his legs. The branch danced with his movements. "I know who you are and it's not a governess named Victoria."

A gasp escaped her lips. A mistake. Now she could not deny it. "Who am I then?" she whispered.

With a wink, he slid closer. The heat from his body washed over her, teasing her. "Lady Claybourne, of course. The woman who was supposed to marry my brother."

* * * *

Even if she tried to deny it, William Preston, Lord Kingston, could read the shock on her face. Damn, he loved it when he was right.

It had taken him only a few minutes to see through her disguise. She was no shy governess. She was a lady on the run.

On his brother's last visit, John told him about the elusive bride. She had distinctive auburn hair and eyes the color of

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

jade. His brother described her perfectly, though he had not seen her face.

No, in fact, he'd signed the marriage contract sight unseen. It was only a costume party that he glimpsed his masked bride-to-be. The same party from which Lady Claybourne had slipped away and disappeared. William guessed it was the only thing she could do to avoid the marriage.

"Do you deny you are Lady Claybourne?"

Her lovely green eyes blinked. "I'm afraid it's too late for that. How did you know?"

"I make it my business to know my brother's business."

Those slender fingers gripped the tree firmly. "What are you going to do with this knowledge?"

William shrugged. "How badly do you want it kept secret?"

A blush colored her cheeks. Damn, was it charming. He wanted to brush his lips across the vibrant marks, lick her neck until she was red for an entirely different reason.

"Do you know why I want to remain unwed?"

Two servants descended the hill towards them. "You are a recluse. There were damaging rumors about your London Season. You never left your home after you returned in shame."

Succulent red lips twitched. "How do you know I was shamed?"

William laughed. He liked her more and more. "My brother isn't a cruel man. You might learn to love him."

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

"I do not want to love him. I want to return home. To the land and house that should be mine. It belongs to me, not to some man who claims my hand in marriage."

"Oh? Then why does your uncle wish to wed you off?"

She sighed. "I can only claim the property if I am not married by my twenty-seventh birthday, when I would be a certain spinster. He wants a share in something on the property which men covet."

His gaze swept over her again. Though the governess dress fit loosely, it could not hide the ravishing beauty of the woman underneath. Her skin glowed with sweat, auburn hair trailed down her neck. He could imagine her in bed, how she would twist beneath him and arch her back to take him in. He'd thrust his lips against her throat, dig his fingers into her glorious, thick tresses.

Within seconds, he was hard.

William cleared his throat. "How close are you to twenty-seven?"

"One month."

"In one month you can return and claim your inheritance?"

"Only if I am unmarried." She glanced to the base of the tree.

Help stood near the ladder waiting, but he wasn't ready to let her go yet. No, she'd probably disappear from here just like she disappeared that night at the ball. She intrigued him like no other. Besides, she was destined to be his brother's. And that made her all the more tempting.

"Why should I keep silent on your masquerade, Miss Archer? Or should I call you Lady Claybourne?"

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

"I will beg you if I must." Her lip trembled.

How he would rather her beg him for other matters. Like having his tongue slip between her folds. Or having his cock pound her into bliss. His erection pulsed.

William brushed his hand across her leg. A sharp intake of breath hissed between moist, parted lips as her gaze moved to that spot. He trailed a finger from her knee up her thigh. "I have come to save you from this tree. I know the secret you keep from my brother. Certainly there is something you can do for me."

"You want me."

She said it without looking at him, without taking her eyes from his roaming fingers. She said it without disgust or reservation.

"I'll not ask you for that, Lady Claybourne. That is yours to give. I will settle for another means."

The air between them thickened, quieted with the heat of her thoughts.

"My lord?" A shout came up from the ground. "Are you ready to descend?"

William waved his hand at the servants. He needed more time with this intriguing woman.

Her cheeks paled. "How is it possible that the employment I found to keep myself hidden is with the father of the man I am running from?"

"It does seem like an evil twist of irony. But perhaps fate has other plans for you."

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

"It's not to marry him!" She bit her lip then looked at his dark, imploring eyes. "I've only one more month. You can't tell him. Please."

He felt sorry for her. Sorry for her predicament. Yet, in a way he was excited. He'd love nothing more than to dupe his brother, to keep the one thing he wanted most away from him. For his entire life, William was always second best. As the second son, his father did not approve of his carefree lifestyle although he was given little responsibility. No, it seemed he could never please his father. Long ago, he'd given up trying and set out to enjoy life with all of its gifts.

His brother did not love Lady Claybourne, he wanted her inheritance, the rich fields attached to her manor. Marriage to her was a business arrangement. It was the only reason John would forgo the rumors and agree to marry an eccentric spinster.

"I'll do it." Her voice had strengthened.

"Do what?"

"I'll trade you my body for your promise."

His arousal leapt, but his chest constricted. No matter how he longed to have her beneath him, he was not a heartless cad. He'd not use her this way. "I can't accept such a bargain. Even a rake such as myself has some honor."

"I am desperate, my lord. I'm ready to do what it takes to keep my home."

"You think by me taking you as a lover, it will keep my lips sealed?"

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

"William!" It was Ellie. She stood at the bottom of the tree with her hands on her hips. "Aren't you coming down with Miss Archer?"

"A moment, my love, a moment." Not until he had this situation clear with Christine. He turned his attention back to the woman beside him. The woman he'd very much like to have as his lover. The woman who should be John's wife. "As tempting as your offer is, I find I cannot—"

Her hand came off the branch and rested on his leg. She moved it upward, as he had done to her. William watched, unable to stop her. Those slender fingers trailed over his thigh, then walked between his legs. Her nail brushed across the rise in his trousers. A shudder rolled through him.

"Don't you see?" Her voice was soft, mysteriously sexy. "By taking you as my lover, I guarantee your brother will not have me. So even if you do tell him, I still win. You cannot say no."

He held his breath, unable to move, unable to answer. Her finger swirled around his arousal, stroking it with torturously light pressure.

Fire blazed through his veins. "How ... how could I resist such an offer?"

* * * *

There were names for women like her. Names she'd not say out loud. But desperation made her do things she never dreamed. Wanton desire made her lust for something she'd gone without for nearly a decade.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

Yet, this was what she deserved. She'd been so resistant to marriage that she refused to learn anything about the man who'd signed the contract with her uncle. She knew his name, nothing more. Not where he lived, not who his family was. Nothing.

But her little plan to hide away until her birthday became an irony in confidence. Instead of being far away from the man who sought to control her life, she lived at his family's estate.

Now had come the time to pay the piper for her foolishness.

William's room was at the very end of the long hallway. She learned he'd only come in that day for a short stay with his family. That he arrived the day she was lured into the tree was either fate or cruelty.

Christine brushed her hands over her nightgown. It was nothing alluring. Plain, white and cotton. It would not stir him into madness. But she was skilled. She had known a lover. He taught her how to please a man. He taught her how a woman should be pleased. Then he left her. She'd not had another man since.

She rapped softly on his door.

"Enter," he called.

The house was still. Even the servants had retired for the night. Rain tapped outside the windows, a steady rhythm to mock the frantic rush of her heart.

Christine entered his room and shut the door quietly behind her. There were no lights in his bedchamber, save for the healthy fire casting an orange glow to the floorboards.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

William sat, not on the bed but in a chair near the fire. He wore trousers, but no shirt. The firelight danced across the hard planes of his chest. Lord, he was even more beautiful than she'd imagined.

Heat swelled between her legs. Her nipples pebbled.

"You may change your mind at any time."

She stepped forward. "Once I put my mind to something, I do not change it."

"I'll not tell John who you are. You can trust me."

The floor was warm against her bare feet as she moved closer. "I trust no one."

A light sheen of sweat dotted William's forehead, across his chest. "Not every man is out to betray you."

Her next step brought her to within a few feet of him, just beyond his reach. She could now see a light sprinkling of hair trailing from his navel to disappear under his trousers.

"This is my only guarantee. I can not lose."

He raised an eyebrow. "There is always the opportunity to lose."

Christine stopped before him, then dropped to her knees. "I'll keep my promise. You keep yours."

His legs spread apart. "You'll not wake tomorrow with regrets?"

"No. I have no regrets. I was not lying when I said I wasn't shamed. What I did in London was my choice, but—" She would tell him no more. She'd long ago buried the part of her heart that yearned for love.

William captured her face in his hands. "But you expected him to marry you, did you not?"

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

She pressed her breasts against his legs, desperate and aching. "I've forgotten."

William relinquished the conversation and leaned forward, bringing his face close to hers. A slight sigh of hot breath and then his lips captured hers.

He tasted wild and sinful. She opened her mouth to invite him in, to give him access to her inner sanctum. He plunged inside, sliding his silky tongue along hers.

Drowsy licks of fire spread from her breasts to her belly. She leaned into him, accepted his passion. He commanded her mouth, held power over her tongue. His hands smoothed up her back then rested against the base of her skull.

Wetness dampened between her legs. She was ready for him. The night would be over soon. She'd be satisfied, and then she'd be gone.

William pulled back, his breathing ragged. "No regrets?"

She shook her head. "None."

A devilish gleam flickered in his eyes. "You traded me your body for my silence."

Christine licked her lips. "I said that, yes."

"Then your body is mine to do with as I please."

"Yes, I expected we would—"

He pulled her to her feet as he stood before her. She could appreciate his full height now. Nearly a head above her, this was no man to cross. Shadows danced along his muscled shoulders. Her breath caught.

His lip curled. "And we will. But not yet."

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

William reached for the buttons on her nightgown and began undoing them one by one. "You do not trust me. When I have you, I want you completely. Nothing held back."

His fingers brushed the tips of her breasts as he reached the halfway point. Christine bit her lip to prevent a whimper.

"I will have you trust me."

She swallowed, then found her voice. "How ... how do you intend to do that?" She'd trusted no one in nearly ten years. Especially not men. They'd used her, never loved her. She vowed to never again give herself up completely. Never to give up total control.

William swept his hands across her shoulders and the gown fell to her feet. She stood before him naked. But she was not shy. Christine had come in here to seek pleasure, to seal a bargain. She'd not shy from him now.

His breathing turned shallow. "Damn, you are even lovelier than I'd imagined."

She kept her hands at her side, forcing herself still. "You imagined me naked?" She'd only met him this afternoon.

He stepped forward, close enough that his tented trousers brushed her stomach.

"I imagined you while we were in the tree." His voice echoed with a lustful huskiness. "I imagined you when I came back here to clean up. I imagined you naked until I had to use my hand to find blessed relief."

A jolt of desire sliced through her. Her knees weakened.

"Close your eyes."

"What?"

"Close them. I'll have your trust or you can go now."

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

Christine closed them. "What—what are you going to do?"

"I won't hurt you." His voice had softened, turned gentle.

"Trust me."

She bit her lip but said nothing more. Anticipation shivered across her skin as he circled her. Her nipples peaked, begged for his touch. He was close, near enough she could feel the heat from his body. But he did not touch her. It was torturous.

"Quite lovely. It is a waste that you've let no man near you."

She straightened her spine. "I am not a virgin."

He chuckled. "I didn't think you were. But how long has it been?"

She sighed. "Eight years."

"Ahh, yes, such a waste." His breath blew across her hair, sent shivers down her back.

"When can I open my eyes?" She could see flickering of light from the fireplace but nothing else. It made her uneasy, it made her vulnerable.

"Not yet."

Suddenly, his hands cupped her breasts. She gasped. He was behind her, pressing himself against her skin. His arousal, still encased behind his trousers, dug mercilessly into the base of her spine. She leaned her head back onto his shoulder.

William let go and she nearly stumbled.

"Keep your eyes closed, your hands to yourself. No touching me until I allow it."

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

This was too much. She swung around, sharpening her gaze on him. "Enough. I'm not a toy for you to play with."

"I do not consider you a toy." His gray eyes narrowed. "But neither will I be used by you. As I said before, you either give yourself over to me or there is no need to continue."

She crossed her arms. "You want me to beg."

"I want you to trust. Shall we continue?"

Christine ground her teeth. She was aroused and desperate. Yet tentative. She'd not given up control in eight years. She'd not let another invade her soul. But it was just for one night. She could do this for one night. Couldn't she?

She let her arms drop and closed her eyes again.

A finger traced down her throat. "That's better. You'll thank me later. Now, do you want me to continue on my own or do you want to tell me what you want me to do?"

Her breath stilled. Lord, how she wanted to be held, caressed. Until now, she hadn't realized how lonely she'd been, how badly she needed a man's touch. Tears sprang to her closed eyes. From this moment on, she'd do whatever he wanted as long she lay sheltered in his arms at the end of the night. "Touch me. Everywhere."

Warm, powerful hands settled on her skin. First along the sides of her face, then gently down her neck. He smoothed the length of her arms, down the plane of her back. His fingers brushed across her breasts, over her stomach and along the curve of her hips. He even sank to his knees to caress her legs, then to the small bump of her ankles.

As he proceeded to reverse the action, Christine bit her lip. Tears breached her eyelids and slipped down the sides of her

face. But she'd not weep openly. He'd not know of her keening loneliness.

At last, he stood before her again. "What next?" The words were gravely, thick with desire.

"Kiss me. Please."

He wrapped his fingers in her hair and pressed his lips to hers. Unlike the rushed mating of before, their mouths moved in a slow rhythm. His tongue traced lines along her lip, dipping every now and then to the heat of her mouth. His gentleness was her undoing.

When he broke the kiss and licked the curve of her shoulder, Christine knew she'd made a mistake in coming here. She wanted to use him. To have him use her. She didn't want his concern, his kindness.

But she could not stop him now. His lips were moving downward. Then a wet tongue licked her nipple.

Christine moaned, arched her back. She wanted to touch him, to dig her fingers into his hair. But instead she clenched her hands into fists.

His tongue lapped at her sensitive peak, then moved to the other one. He captured her breasts in his hands, holding them for his capable mouth.

Heat swelled between her legs. Instinctively, she thrust her hips forward.

He gave a gravely laugh. "I'm getting there, my love."

Christine parted her lips, her breath expelling in a fervent sigh. "I want to touch you. Please...."

"Not yet," he answered against her stomach, then swirled his tongue into her navel.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

"Oh God." Even her experience those many years ago did not prepare her for this assault. The talent of William's mouth brought passion she'd never dreamed. Perhaps age had matured her body's responses as well.

His hands circled her waist—hot, strong, male hands. He pulled her closer, flicked the sensitive nub of her navel with wetness. "You taste heavenly."

The fire crackled, snapped. The heat from the hearth was nothing compared to the blaze in her veins. She strained to keep her arms at her sides. She'd been without sight for so long now, she could hear the shallowness of his breathing, the whisper of a draft.

"I'm proud of you." His voice came from below. He must be on his knees. "I didn't think you could do it. I didn't believe you would trust me."

"I ... I'm trying, but I can't take this much longer."

His hands swept over her hips then around to her bottom. He squeezed. "Jesu, you are beautiful." The side of his face pressed against her stomach. "I don't think I can take this much longer either."

The hoarse passion in his voice stirred her into action. Christine opened her eyes, gripped the sides of his face. His gray eyes stared up at her, raw hunger making them bright.

"You're breaking the rules," he said with a grin.

"Don't you think this torture has gone on long enough?"

"Nearly." He kissed her mound of dark hair. "Let's move to the bed."

* * * *

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

William sucked in a deep breath. It was the only way to keep himself in control. He didn't realize this seductive testing of Lady Claybourne would be so arousing. Of course, he'd be tempted by just about any naked woman standing before him.

But this was different. Was it that she was supposed to wed John, the brother who bested him at everything? Was it that he'd only met her today and she proposed this illicit encounter?

Whatever the reason, his cock burned for her touch, his body shook with unreleased desire.

Taking her hand, he led her to his bed. He longed to have his trousers off, to stand free and bare before her. But even the slightest touch of her satiny flesh against him would push him past restraint.

"Climb up and lie at the center."

She balked, as he expected she would. This lady was not used to taking commands. And yet, he would not let her rule him, use him for her enjoyment and deception. When he thrust himself inside her, he wanted her thoughts to be wholly centered on him. He wanted her completely. Not just the external pieces of her tough shell.

He gave her a disarming grin. "You'll not regret it. You can keep your eyes open, if you'd like."

Victoria, no her true name was Christine, lifted her chin and settled herself in the exact center of his large bed. He smiled and sat next to her. Her skin glistened with the light of the fire. From the luscious round breasts down to her finely shaped legs, this woman was beautiful.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

And tonight she was his.

"Now what?" She lifted an eyebrow. He liked that she wasn't ashamed of her body, constantly trying to hide it from him. It made him wonder if she ever found her own pleasure. He would have to find out.

Reaching to the night table, he found the sash he'd put there earlier. He trailed the red silk fabric up her body—from her knees, over her mound, past her stomach, to the tips of her pointed nipples. Her breath caught. His erection pulsed.

"Lift your arms," he whispered.

Her eyes widened, but she obeyed.

William tied her wrists loosely to the spindles of his bed. His mouth watered. Fire scorched his blood. She was a sight. He wouldn't last long with what he had planned. In fact, he'd do better to rid himself of this ache or he'd never have the chance to sink inside her flesh.

She was deliciously warm. He licked her beaded nipples, teasing them with frequent flicks of his tongue. Christine wiggled beneath him. He moved to the other side, suckled and nipped at the tasty skin. Her hips thrust upward, her legs fell open.

She was ready for him. He could take her now and find heaven. But then she would leave. The night would be over. She'd be gone forever. No, he couldn't have that pleasure yet.

Instead, William moved his palm down to the strained fabric below his waist. He wished it could be her hand, but it was too soon for that. The time had not come for her to touch him.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

Christine lifted her head, her breathing shallow. "What are you doing?"

He swirled his tongue around her nipple again, then glanced up at her. "I'm taking the edge off."

"But you can have me now. Why do you wait?"

He stroked his length, resisting the urge to remove his clothing. "Impatience, my love. You need to trust me. Most things are better after the long wait."

She dropped her head, squeezed her eyes closed. "I can't watch. I can't."

He was moving faster now, his nipples tingling, his breathing heavy. "Does it shame you?"

"No." She twisted beneath his weight. "It arouses me. I want ... I need to touch. You, myself. This," she yanked on the knotted sash, "is torturing me."

So he had the answer to his question. She did pleasure herself. Jesu, just the thought sent him blazing forth. He almost untied her wrists to watch her do it, but he couldn't stop now.

William squeezed his flesh, jerking his hand. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He watched her face. She still had her eyes closed, but she chewed her lip. Her cheeks were flushed, shining.

He knew she could hear him grunt, feel the bed rock with the effort of his need. He could smell the scent of her cream.

Lord, that tantalizing moisture. He must taste it. Now.

Shifting down on the bed, he pushed her legs apart and buried his face in her swollen flesh.

She gasped, then sighed.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

He licked the wet folds, slid his tongue between them and delved into the deepness of her womanhood. She arched her back, lifted herself closer. William nibbled at her swollen nub, tasted her rich essence.

His erection throbbed, close to release. Not yet, he wanted more.

Glancing up, he saw her wrists yanking at the sash. He had to set her free. "Slip out. It should be loose enough."

Christine wasted no time getting her hands free. Immediately, her fingers dug deep in his hair. "Oh yes, please."

"Touch yourself."

She slid her hands up her stomach then cupped each breast. Her thumbs circled each pointed nipple, pushed on them, tickled them. Her mouth parted, eyes fluttering closed. The vision broke his restraint.

He reached for his erection again as his tongue continued its pressure on her sensitive knot. He stroked, with both hand and mouth, until his head buzzed and his pulse exploded.

Then her cry rang out through the haze, and his mouth filled with rushing moisture.

William jerked his hand, squeezed his cock, and then collapsed on her thigh with a moan. His whole body shook, twitched, as the steaming liquid emptied into his trousers.

The next time he found release, it would be deep inside her willing heat.

* * * *

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

Christine blinked several times until she could focus. Sensations whirled inside her. Her heart shuddered beneath her breast.

William's face rested upon her inner thigh, his breathing rough.

That was ecstasy. Something she could never bring upon herself. Nor could ever she find it with a man she was forced to marry.

She had to leave. Now that she had learned she was in the childhood home of her betrothed, it would be dangerous to remain. Even for a few more hours. She'd been extraordinarily lucky John had not visited in the few weeks she'd been here.

Yet, she longed to remain. Who knew what other thrills awaited her.

William shifted off her and stood beside the bed. Beneath her eyelashes, she watched him undress. His finely sculpted backside and powerful legs glowed against the gleam of the fire. His glistening flesh, still partially erect, jutted out like a proud warrior.

Already the embers of desire stirred within her core. Her breasts tingled, womb ached. She wanted more. Just a bit longer and then she would go.

His arms crossed, lip curled. "Your turn."

"My turn?"

"To do with me as you please. I will show you how I trust you." He glanced down at his long body. "Have at it."

Grinning, she snatched the sash from the spindles and climbed off the bed. "Stand against the post."

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

His eyebrows shot up. "The bedpost?"

Christine nodded.

Once he was in position, she took his wrists and tied them behind his back. He watched her with steamy eyes, his breathing rapid.

"Perhaps," she whispered against his back. "I should leave you this way and walk out of the room."

William shifted, his muscles rippling. "But you won't."

Pressing her lips to his shoulder, Christine tasted the salt from his sheen of sweat. No, she wouldn't leave him. Not when her body yearned for more of his touch, not when her blood burned for his fulfillment.

Circling him, she kissed the light sprinkling of hair on his chest, before swirling her tongue over one nipple, then the other.

A moan tore from his throat as his staff rose.

Kissing and nibbling his chest, she sank to her knees and let her fingers do the work. Her mouth traced lower, skimming over the trail of hair on his stomach to the dip of his navel.

As he'd done to her, she tickled the small hole with her tongue. He writhed beneath her mouth, attempting to suck in his stomach to escape the assault. He was obviously ticklish.

Christine glanced up. Hot, penetrating eyes stared back at her. His indication of pleasure urged her onward.

The tips of her fingers trailed down his sides and reached around to feel the smooth skin of his backside. He gasped, thrust his hips forward. A full erection now brushed against her neck. The scent of musk and sweat wet her mouth.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

"Christine..." His ragged voice sent shivers down her spine, pebbled her nipples.

She grinned then wrapped one hand around his arousal.

"Jesu!"

But she wasn't done yet. She slid her fingers along the silky hardness, watching it grow with each stroke.

"Oh, God, don't."

"Don't take it in my mouth?"

His breath caught.

Christine licked her fingers then swirled them around the velvety skin. He shuddered. Her legs were damp, her breasts throbbing. If she weren't so intent on pleasing him, she would release this building tension coiling in her body like a tight spring. Instead, she pressed her lips up his full length then raised her eyes to his face. "Don't you wish you could touch me?"

William pulled on the sash, but Christine had tied it securely. He would not escape. His face ruddy, eyes shining, he grinned. "You little minx."

"Now our torture is equal, my lord."

Then she enveloped the whole shaft within her mouth. He inhaled an uneven breath.

The teaching of eight years ago came back in a rush. She remembered how to use her tongue, where to flick it and when to slide it abruptly. Her actions shifted from gentle to rough. All the while William bucked his hips, struggled to free his hands.

"You-you have to stop." He was breathless, tense.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

Christine let his erection slide from her mouth and stood. Without a word, she untied the sash and let it fall to the floor.

Instantly, William snatched her and pressed his mouth to hers. She melted in his embrace, opened her lips for his invasion. He swept his tongue along the crevices of her mouth, battled with her for dominance.

The heat from his arousal burned her stomach, making her flesh ache for it.

Thrusting his hands into her hair, he broke the kiss. "I want to be inside you. But you must tell me again—no regrets?"

Christine licked her kiss-swollen lips. Already she regretted it. She had wanted to use him. Plain and simple. He would provide her with an outlet for her sexual frustration and in return he would not reveal her identity.

But somewhere in all this, she'd begun to care about him. He was so kind, so concerned, and he'd found a way to slip inside her soul. He reminded her of how lonely she'd become. And how desperately she truly did want love in her life, not just the empty rooms of her beloved home.

A lump rose in her throat. She'd not end the evening now. Not until he filled her totally.

His face felt slick beneath her fingers. "I want you to hold me, make love to me."

Gray eyes softening, he swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

Christine could not stop the tears as he kissed her gently on the lips, then on her cheek and shoulders. He took his time

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

exploring every inch of her skin, his mouth never leaving her completely.

Arching her back as he lapped her nipples, she cried out. His tongue invaded the aching flesh between her legs. She buried her fingers in his curls, unwilling to lose the connection to him.

Moist lips pressed against the curve of her neck. Her eyes drifted closed as he moved over her. His fingers threaded through her hair. His erection nudged at her opening, tenderly pressing into the folds.

The man was giving her every opportunity to turn back. Even now, poised to sink inside of her, he was the thoughtful gentleman. She did not deserve his kindness.

Yet, she would not deny this longing. Christine spread her legs wider and lifted her hips. He must have interpreted the action for the invitation it was and slid his arousal inside her. He pushed until he could go no more.

Without shifting his hands from her hair or his lips from her throat, he began moving in and out. His tenderness could not have been more arousing or heartbreaking, and she had to bite her lip to keep from weeping.

With each thrust of his long shaft, the intensity of her longing grew. Christine wrapped her arms around his back, holding him tightly.

William kissed her ear, her hair. He must have tasted the salt from her tears, but he said nothing. Instead, he found a way to increase his tempo without losing his gentleness.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

Through the haze of her desire, she could hear his irregular breathing, feel his frantic heartbeat against her breast.

A tingling raced from her nipples to the sensitive nub between her legs. The rise of a climax shifted through her blood. Christine hooked her ankles behind his legs, urging him in further.

At once, his rhythm intensified. Together they rushed headlong toward that perilous cliff. She bucked her hips, arched her back. He drove in harder, pushed himself in deeper.

All thoughts, all needs for control, emptied from her mind until there was nothing but this man inside of her. Nothing but the two of them connected—intimately, completely.

Her flesh swelled, her womb contracted. She was rising, rising ... and then she was at the peak. A shower of sparkles raced through her limbs, wrenching a cry from her lips.

With one last deep lunge, William shouted a moan against her shoulder.

The weight of him soothed her more than she could have ever dreamed. She didn't want him to move. But she couldn't stay. "I-I have to go."

He slid out and moved to her side but then draped a heavy arm across her body. "You're not going yet."

"I can't stay. I can't—"

"For one night, allow yourself contentment." William kissed her shoulder. "For one night, allow me to hold you."

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

Christine sighed and rolled over, pressing her back against his stomach. She nestled in his warm and powerful embrace, fighting the painful tightening in her chest.

This would be her biggest regret. For now she knew what she'd been missing. Now she knew what she would not have when she returned home.

* * * *

By the time William awoke the next morning, daylight had broken through the curtains and the room glowed with vibrancy. He reached out for Christine, but the bed was empty.

So she had slipped away during the night. He knew she'd go. It would be foolish for her to remain here. Who knew when his brother could come for a visit. No doubt she was already on her way to another location where she could remain hidden until her birthday.

Remembering the taste of her lips, the feel of her body converging on him, he rolled over and stretched. Christine made him feel like no other woman had. She was passionate, strong, yet so very vulnerable. He would forgo ravishing her again just to hold her in his arms for one more night.

William got dressed and jaunted down the stairs for breakfast. Before he made it to the morning room, the rise of voices pulled him to the parlor.

His stomach lurched at the sight of his brother near the doorway. Dread snaked through him. John stood with his arms folded, his dark hair slicked back with severe neatness.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

Of all days for him to return. Jesu, let Christine be gone from here!

"Ah, my dear brother." John waved him over, a grin on his face but danger in his eyes. "I was just saying how fortuitous it is that I dropped by. I missed Ellie's birthday last month and couldn't wait another day to bring her a present."

Someone else was in the parlor. Was it his father? If Christine was in there, she would be trapped. She'd be forced to marry John now. And it would be his fault. He was the one who begged her to stay the night.

"Come in." John nudged his head. "Come visit."

William took a step forward into the blue wall-papered room. The rose-colored sofa and chairs were empty. But over by the fireplace stood Christine, her eyes downcast, hands folded. His concern for her was overshadowed by the uncomfortable ache in his chest. His first impulse was to scoop her into his arms and hold her tight.

"Look who I found in our midst," his brother said, a chill lurking behind the words.

"Ellie's governess?" William would not let the secret out. He'd not be the one to reveal her true identity. "Miss Archer."

John laughed then walked over to her and lifted her chin. "So she wants you to believe."

Her green eyes glanced at him but quickly darted away. William expected to see anger in them, regret, but instead he saw resignation. That couldn't be right. That was not the woman from yesterday, the woman who would do anything to claim ownership of her home.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

"This is Lady Claybourne." It was his father. William hadn't even noticed him standing on the other side of the room. And with Lord Remington's presence, everything changed. Suddenly, William was the good-for-nothing second son, forever living in his brother's shadow.

Inhaling a ragged breath, William pulled his thoughts together. "But you said Lady Claybourne disappeared. Why would she turn up at your father's house as a governess?"

His brother raised an eyebrow. "Why indeed? This is the woman I was supposed to marry. I've kissed those lips, I know those eyes."

Christine flinched.

"And so, John," William replied with more of an edge than he intended. Was the knifing pain in his gut due to the fact she'd been kissed by his brother? "What do you intend to do? It's rather obvious Lady Claybourne does not wish to wed you."

A laugh was the answer. "The marriage contract is legal. She has no choice."

William expected outrage, resistance. He expected Christine to reveal the events of last night. But she said nothing. She did nothing. She stood there, silent. Jesu, had she not cared about what transpired between them? Or had she completely duped him, wanting to marry John all along?

He didn't know the answer, but he did recognize the beastly clench of jealousy in his gut. The thought of his brother's hands on her, his brother taking her to his bed each night. No. Hell, no.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

This wasn't supposed to happen. She was to leave, disappear. Then soon he'd go back to London and spend the rest of his days in drink, frivolity, and endless women.

"The wedding will take place here," his father was saying. "In two days."

Heat rose up William's neck, engulfed his face. "You can't marry her."

John snorted. "You'll find a bride someday. Whenever you choose to end your life of playing."

William snatched his brother's arm. "She was in my bed last night."

The room fell eerily silent with nothing but the ticking clock on the mantel echoing against the walls.

Christine bit her lip, her shoulders slumped. Didn't she want him to come forward with the truth? Wasn't that what she said yesterday? *By taking you as my lover, I guarantee your brother will not have me. So even if you do tell him, I still win.*

His father coughed. "You took Ellie's governess to your bed?"

"Hell, Father," John roared. "He took *my* bride to his bed. The bloody rake seduces any maiden that comes along. I doubt this is the first in this house he's ensnared."

"You've gone too far this time." His father shook his head. "I see you'll never change."

William clenched his teeth. Heat flushed up his neck and face. Of course they'd think him a cad, a bloody rake. He'd not given them any reason to believe otherwise in the past. But neither would he defend his actions of last night.

"Wait."

They all stopped at the sound of Christine's voice.

That determined chin lifted high. "It was I who seduced William. He was a true gentleman. Do not put the blame on him."

John's eyes narrowed. "You thought I'd not want you if you lay with my brother, is that it?" He grabbed her arm. "You thought wrong. I'll have you and your land if I have to lock you in my room."

William rushed forward, but she held up her hand to stop his advance. He took a step back, reeling. Her plan had failed. And it was because of him that she didn't depart last night. And now she accepted her fate without a fight?

"Take me there now then," Christine said with a sigh. "I see no purpose in clashing with you over this any longer."

The blood drained from William's face. "But your home, you told me..."

"It no longer matters if I marry your brother. Alone or with him, it will be the same." An emptiness hollowed her words.

"What will be the same? What's changed?" He didn't understand. Yesterday, she begged him to keep her secret so she could slip away unknown.

Christine bit her lip and glanced away.

"I suppose there is a wedding to plan." John tugged on her arm.

The ache in William's gut blossomed into a full-blown cramp. He grit his teeth, swallowed the rising tightness in his throat.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

He stood motionless as his brother and Christine passed, forcing a mask of indifference on his face. Never before had he been overcome by such a strong urge to pull a woman into an embrace. But, he crossed his arms instead, watching them disappear down a long hallway.

There was no choice but to abide by her wishes.

* * * *

Christine crossed her arms against the chill of the water. She'd been in the bath now for nearly two quarters of an hour, but she couldn't bring herself to get out. She couldn't bring herself to move forward with the next part of her life.

Her future husband had practically stripped her naked himself. Not to have his way with her. Oh no, that would come after they were married, but to be certain she rid herself of all traces of his brother.

Once she emerged from this tub, the scent of William would be gone. The memories of his passionate caress and tender kisses would fade eventually. The one night they shared would be only a distant memory, perhaps a dream to keep her company.

For she would remain lonely.

He'd shown her that. Whether alone or married to John, she would be without love. And without love, there was only loneliness.

The doorknob jiggled. "Christine? Are you in there?"

It was William. She couldn't see him now. He'd only make it worse. Last night she'd accepted her fate. Why couldn't he?
"Go away. I'm bathing."

"Damn it."

His footsteps faded away only to return a few moments later. The doorknob rattled again, then the lock was turned. He slipped in, shut the door behind him and turned the lock again.

Her breath caught as he stalked towards her. His curls were in disarray, his clothing skewed. Yet, his sharp gaze penetrated her. At once, she felt both aroused and heart broken.

He glanced over her submerged nakedness, his lips parting, cheeks flushing. But then his eyes closed. "Why, Christine? Why have you given up?"

"It's not your concern."

"Last night, we—"

"Last night was wonderful for both of us. But it's over. I changed my mind." Last night she'd fallen for the man who was only supposed to satisfy her urge, hold her secret. However, she'd learned enough from the staff, even Ellie herself, what a rake William was. He didn't want to be married or tied to a single woman.

The one thing she realized as she lay in those strong arms last night was that she had no fight left in her. There was no point to being alone, no point to keeping herself secluded in that house anymore. She wanted William's love. If she couldn't have it, why not marry John? At least her life would have some purpose, even if she could never have the one thing she wanted most.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

William squatted beside the tub. "I don't believe you changed your mind." His eyes narrowed. "Did my brother threaten you? Did he cause you bodily harm?"

Christine turned her head to look away. "No. This does not have to do with him."

His fingertip brushed her jaw. Shivers eddied through her, seizing her lungs. Still, she would not look at him.

"I can get you away from him." His voice was a whisper. "I can make sure you won't be found until your birthday."

And then what? Would he walk out of her life? A scorching pain rose up her throat, but she swallowed it away. "It doesn't matter anymore. You must believe me."

His palm cupped her face, turning her towards him. Before she could protest, his mouth was against hers. Its gentle pressure broke her restraint, and she parted her lips. His mouth was warm and commanding. He tasted like the forest, like a man on a journey.

She could kiss him for hours, she could lie in his arms for eternity. Oh God, she really did love him. It wasn't the idea of love she'd miss when gone from here. It was him. It was William. Without him, what did it matter whom she married or if she were alone?

Tears stung her eyes, collected in her throat. She pushed him away. "You have to go."

Gray eyes blinked at her, wet with desire and dark with anger. He didn't understand. How could he?

He hung his head. "How can I leave? How can I think of you with him?"

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

She had to be strong. She couldn't burden him with an admission of her love. William was young, a rogue, he didn't want marriage. He'd been her savior for one night. His kindness had opened her eyes to the world she pretended didn't exist.

She would not have any guilt he harbored make a decision for him. "Go on with your life. You'll forget about me eventually."

William stood. She could see the tension in his shoulders, the stiffness of his jaw. His eyes were hard, guarded. "I won't stay for the wedding. I can't bear to see you make such a mistake."

"I understand."

"Good day then."

He gave her a curt nod then walked from the room, leaving her to shiver in the cold water.

* * * *

William rolled over, his stomach twisting, head pounding. Darkness suffocated him, making it difficult to focus. He reached out but felt only the scrunched up blankets of the tavern bed.

He tried to clear his mind, but the drink from last night made it foggy. Memories thudded inside his brain, but he couldn't put the pieces together.

Card games in the tavern. Strong ale in his gut. A serving wench in his room.

He had desperately wanted her in his bed. He wanted her to make him forget Christine. Just like he drank all that he

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

could to forget her. Forget what was happening miles away at his father's estate.

At some point during the night, William sent the girl from his room. He remembered feeling the need to touch her, to force himself to stop thinking about the woman he'd left behind. But he'd done nothing more than snatch his hand away and rolled over.

Damn. Seeing Christine in that bath tub had made both his groin and chest ache. He'd wanted to ravish her right then and there. He'd wanted to throw her over his shoulder and steal away into the night.

He did neither.

No, he left her, left the house and hurried back to his favorite London haunts. Here he could forget her, become the carefree man he was before.

Jesu, did he want to spend the rest of his days drunk? Faceless women, fast horses, and late-night card games. He had led an untroubled life. Suddenly it felt hollow. Empty.

What had that night with Christine done to him? Had she bewitched him somehow?

It didn't matter. He wasn't the same man. He didn't want promiscuous women and rowdy games. He wanted Christine in his arms.

William sat up. His stomach heaved, then quieted. Slowly, he scooted off the bed and weaved his way to the window. A parting of the curtain showed a faint glimmer of light on the horizon. Morning was creeping up the sky, and soon Christine would wed his brother and be lost to him forever.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

William didn't wash, change or eat. He pushed the horses until he thought they might collapse. But he made it to the long drive of his father's home.

The sun had long risen, and already guests were starting to arrive. He slinked by several, praying they didn't notice him, and entered through one of the side kitchen doors. The smell of ham and pastries assaulted his nostrils, making him both hungry and nauseous. But in all of the chaos of planning for a major party, no one noticed his appearance.

He made it all the way to the rear stairs when he was nearly tackled to the ground.

"William!"

He winced. "Ellie, don't yell. My head hurts."

"You smell." She wrinkled her nose. "Why'd you come back? Poppa said you wouldn't be here."

"Well, I'm here. Tell me, where is John's bride?"

The girl grinned. "Oh, you mean Miss Archer who is really Lady Claybourne? Oh, what talk there has been about that! I just can't believe—"

William laid his hands on her shoulders. "Ellie, where is she?"

She pointed up the stairs. "In her room getting ready."

He took off up the steps, taking two at a time, ignoring the rumble of his stomach and thudding of his head.

Voices carried from the other end of the hallway. They would send him away once they saw him. They would know he meant trouble. But he didn't care. He had to see her.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

He steeled himself as he crossed the long hallway. Several maids milled about, and he could hear his mother's voice above all others.

He had to see Christine.

One by one the maids noticed him. Each one fell silent as he approached. No doubt they'd heard the rumors. They knew Christine had been in his bed before John came.

At her door, he stopped, braced himself against it. She stood at the large window, dressed in a fine gown of silver. Her hair had been braided and wound up atop her head. Small ringlets brushed the tops of her shoulders. The shoulders he'd kissed only a few nights ago. The hair he'd buried his fingers in as he lost himself in her splendor.

"Christine." He was breathless, stunned by her exquisiteness, hungry for her touch.

She turned, as did his mother.

From across the room, Christine blinked. Her lip trembled. She said nothing, moved not a muscle.

But his mother did. She bustled over to him, a cross look on her face. "Don't you start trouble."

"I need to speak to Christine."

"Lady Claybourne is set to marry your brother in a few moments. And Lord help us if John finds you here."

She grabbed his arm, but William broke free and strode to the waiting bride. His brother's waiting bride.

"Christine...."

Her eyes were shining with unshed tears, cheeks mottled.

"I see you have not changed your mind."

"Why have you come?" Her voice shook.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

"I'm locating John," his mother called from the doorway. "I suggest you make haste."

William brushed a finger across her jaw. "I came because I couldn't stop thinking of you."

She glanced away, out the window. "You couldn't stop thinking of me? That's not a reason to come back."

His stomach ached, head spun, but he tried again. "I tried to forget you. I did everything I could. But you were always there."

"I've thought of you as well, but that has not changed my mind in marrying your brother. Thoughts are only a continuation of memories."

Jesu, he wasn't getting this right. He wasn't convincing her that she shouldn't marry John. What did she expect him to say? "I cannot bear to think of you with him."

She smiled, pressed her fingers to the glass. "That is not my concern."

"Damn it." William cupped her face and forced her to look at him. "How can I prove to you that you're making a mistake?"

"When you've given me a good enough reason. Your memories, jealousy, and misery concern only you. I'll not walk away now just to alleviate you of them."

"Good."

They both turned at the sound of John's voice. He stood in the doorway, arms folded, eyes blazing.

"I'm glad to see my bride has come to her senses. Come, my dear, we are ready to leave for the church."

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

Christine lifted her chin and crossed the room. Without a backwards glance, she disappeared with John into the hallway.

Rage swirled in William's gut, hopelessness bloomed in his chest. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know how to stop the events from unfolding. He swallowed, tasting the bitterness of loss.

Outside the window, tables were spread across the lawn. People mingled. Soon the party would be under way. Just beyond the gathering stood the oak tree. It rose several stories to the heavens, its branches spreading like an angel's wings. It was within those thousand leaves that he found Christine. He'd come to rescue her, to save her.

And yet, it was she who saved him.

He had been living his life without much of a care, thinking he was fulfilling his father's prophecy. No one seemed to expect much from him, so why bother to give it? Instead, he spent his days at Ascot, his evenings at cards, and his nights with unnamed women.

It was a life, but was he truly living?

None of those things mattered anymore. They felt meaningless and false. The joy was gone because he knew there was something better. There was *someone* better.

Tears stung the back of his eyes. He couldn't lose Christine. She had given him purpose.

He raced out the door. The hallway was deserted, but a crowd had gathered on the stairs. William spotted Christine on the landing. John was not with her.

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

He pushed his way through until he stood before her. She said nothing, but her face was white.

"Christine." He took her hand. It was ice cold. "The reason I'm so miserable is because I cannot live without you."

Her lip trembled.

"You've made me a better man. You've shown me what it means to truly be living."

Her eyes filled, but still she said nothing.

William took a deep breath, brushed his thumb across her mouth. "Christine, I've never felt this way about anyone before. I-I didn't know what to call it. How to say it."

Her dark eyes widened. "You love me?"

Warmth swam through his blood, quickened his heart. "Yes, yes. I love you. Oh God, Christine, you can't marry John. I want you as my wife."

Tears slipped down her cheeks as she threw her arms around him. The feel of her in his arms soothed the agony in his soul.

Suddenly, he was yanked backward, wrenched from Christine's grasp. The crowd gasped then fell silent.

"Bloody hell, you can't keep your nasty hands off her."

William swung to face his brother. They stood toe to toe. "I love her, John. You can't marry her."

"Oh, can't I? I'm the one with the betrothal contract signed by her uncle."

"You don't care about her." William felt a vein pulse on his forehead, fire burning his face. "You only want that damn land. What's there? Gold? Diamonds?"

John blinked. "Move away before I throw you down those steps."

"She's not going with you to that church."

"Move, William."

He tensed, braced himself for John's attack. "No."

"You can have the land, John, the treasure buried there." Christine moved next to him. "Take the house, whatever it is you want. I'll sign it all over to you."

John's eyes narrowed. "You can't do that. It isn't yours yet."

William took her hand, squeezed it. "But it will be at her birthday in a few weeks."

His brother snorted. "And how can I be assured you won't marry her before then and take ownership yourself?"

"We can draw up a contract. You can have it written, have it say whatever you'd like to protect your interests. I do not care for the Claybourne estate. I have my own." He pressed his lips to her hair. "The only treasure I want is Lady Claybourne."

John shoved his hands on his hips. He stood there, staring at them, no doubt calculating his options. He would be a fool to go through with the marriage, knowing his wife loved another man. A small amount of embarrassment today must be better than a future of his wife pining for her lover.

His brother sighed, his face still twisted in a snarl. "Father's solicitor is down below somewhere. I'll find him now, before you two have the chance to run off."

Their mother rushed up the stairs. "What's going on? What of the party we've planned for today? There was to be a wedding."

"Turn it into an engagement party," William said, twirling his fingers through Christine's ringlets. "Your other son will be getting married in a little over a month."

His mother growled, then hurried down the steps.

And just like that they were alone. All the other guests had moved on, dispersing to other areas of the house or leaving in bewilderment.

William tilted her chin up. "So tell me now what changed your mind two days ago."

"You."

"Me? I don't understand. What did I say or do to—"

She put her finger to his lips. "You held me in your arms. You showed me gentleness and tenderness. I realized how truly lonely I was, how much I wanted to be loved."

Christine brushed the hair from the side of his face. William forced his eyes not to close at her touch. "But if you weren't the one to love me, then what did it matter if I was alone in my home or married to your brother? Either way I would still be alone. Either way I would not have you."

"I'm sorry I wasn't as quick to realize how much I love you."

She smiled. "You had to figure it out on your own, in your own way. Luckily, it didn't take you another hour."

William laughed and pulled her to him. "And I say we're lucky Ellie got you stuck in that tree."

"Yes, I suppose I should thank her instead of scold her."

The Lady's Bargain
by Leslie Dicken

He dipped his head, dropped his voice to a whisper. "Thank her later. After I've tasted your lips."

Christine leaned in, and William covered her mouth with his own. His knees weakened, groin stirred.

In such a short time, she'd taught him so much. About himself. About love. About loneliness. But, mostly he learned a lady's bargain should never be refused.

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