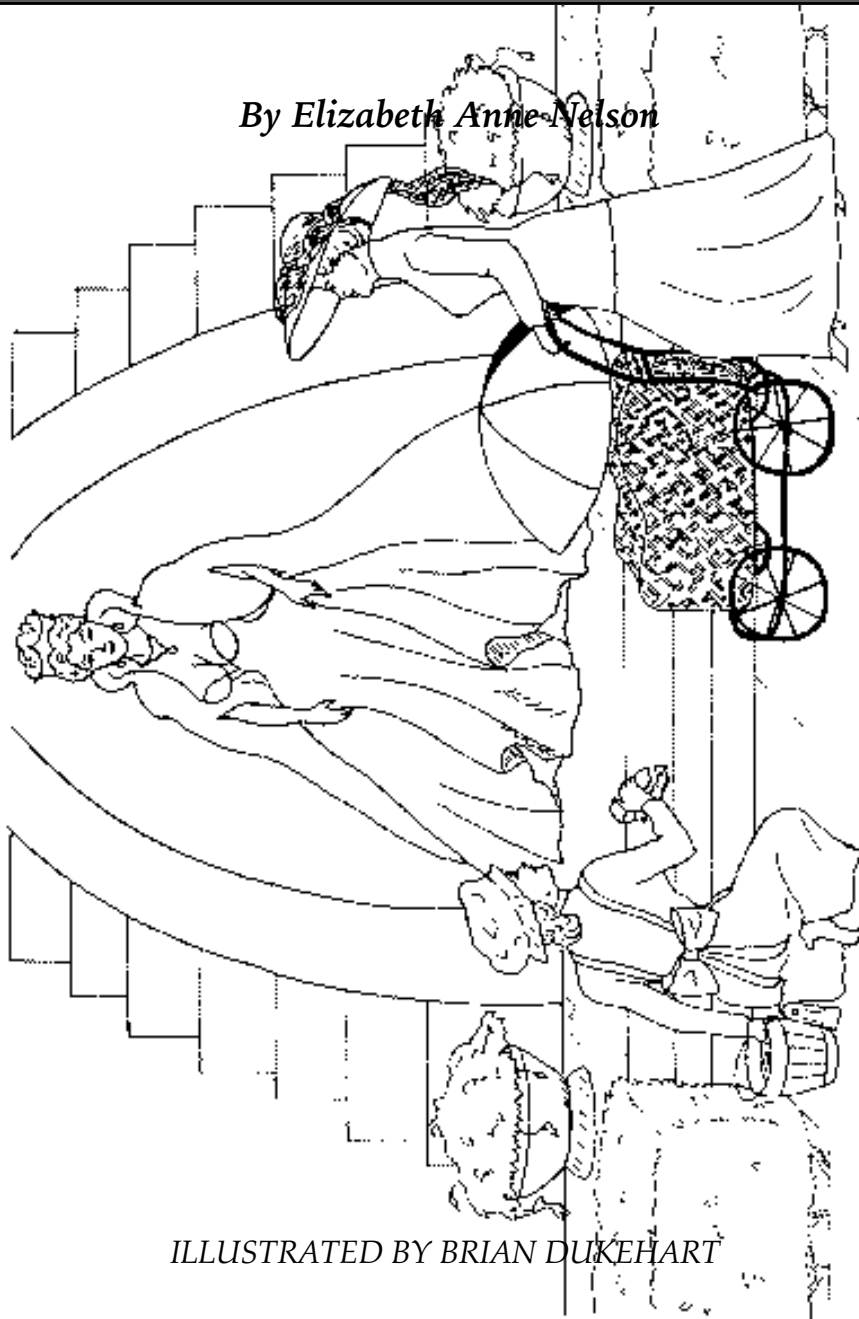


# AUBERAN

*By Elizabeth Anne Nelson*



*ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART*

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**A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL**

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## AUBERAN

by Elizabeth Anne Nelson

### **Chapter One: The Dowager Duchess Of Auberan - Begins Her Confession**

Today, I pause to celebrate my ninety-sixth birthday. I attended my party, not because I chose to have a party, but because the family expected me to be pleased by this singular achievement of survival. This is said to be very English, or, to be more precise, British.

It may certainly be rather appropriate to consider ninety-six as an age when confession may well be good for the soul and rather safe for mortal remains.

Therefore, I take this moment to reveal the most singular events that describe what really happened to my three late step-sons who were reported perished at sea shortly after the death of their dear father, Sir John Percy Dinadan, my late husband, the Duke of Auberan, who awaits these seventy odd years for me to join him in the vaults below as another family heirloom.

A confession should have a starting point.

I was born Anna Maria Leslie in 1875 on an April morning full of grace. My father was disappointed and thought me quite plain enough to be the boy he so wanted, except MotherNature decided to please my mother's whim for a girl.

Sepoy Hall, where I was born, was named after the Indian revolt that led to our family fortunes and my father's retirement as a Brigadier in the Queen's service, so that he might enter commerce. The family was scandalized by his materialism. As one of my aunts exclaimed, "A Lord does not enter the trades in preference to the military!"

Both my father and I lived to please others in compensation. He led the life of an English Lord with Sepoy Hall as his country estate and a large house in London, when not engaged in the "Trades".

And I was torn between being the perfect young lady to please my Mother and a tomboy to please myself and father. At Sepoy Hall, I would indulge my masculine tastes and ride with the hounds astride my stallion dressed in breeches and shirt with my brown hair tied back in a boyish knot. In London I was clapped into petticoats and bleached with creams as a part of my mother's exhaustive efforts to undo the country's coarseness. But, whatever Mother tried, I remained a rather robust and plain girl.

Family trees are arbors of boredom, but it may be instructive to pause and view the forest of characters that my family presents to this accounting.

To begin with, my father was a Kitridge, and since he and his sister, Lady Greensmith, were the last Kitridges of his branch, suffice it to say no more of him, and much more of his sister later.

My dear Mother was a Farley. Her brother was therefore Lord Farley. Her sister married to become Lady Morely, which made a wonderful pun when I was a little girl. Now when Lord Morely died, she sold Morely Hall to a Mrs. Crisp. Mrs. Crisp converted the gloomy old hall into an orphan asylum for girls, who she raised to their proper station as servant girls for the best families. She was a very good but strict Christian woman.

And thus it was with the sale of Morely Hall that my Aunt, her daughter Susan, and a cousin named Mary Caldwell came to live at Sepoy Hall. This pleased Mother very much because now my favorite retreat had become a virtual harem of girls and women. Susan, Mary, my beautiful and fair sister, Angelica, and I were raised as if we were all truly sisters and we dearly loved each other, dreading that day when marriage would separate us. Susan was the first to leave by marrying Lord Brian.

Angelica attended an exclusive finishing school where she fell in disgrace by falling in love with the Head Mistress's brother, a struggling law clerk whom she married to become plain Mrs. Fell. A singular name, indeed.

Now my mother's younger brother, Lord Farley, married a stout Scot of the McDouglas wealth and kept her happy by having many children. Mary Caldwell became a Governess in their service and I am afraid to say, my uncle's mistress, until she fell in love and married a sea captain who was soon lost at sea. But, that tale is much later in my story.

So, back to the point where my parents died of the fever and father's wealth was placed in trust to care for my needs while my father's sister, Lady Greensmith, took charge of her rather plain and spinster niece of twenty-one to see what could be done about finding her a husband. Her approach was direct in its simplicity. She posted a dowry of several hundred thousand pounds, not to mention my allowance until I was twenty-five, and started me on a social whirl that declared me to be fair game for any desirable titled gentleman. School girl romance was not to be mine, for she was bound to arrange a "comfortable" marriage with no nonsense. I vowed that never again would I allow another to run my life in such a fashion.

I would control my own destiny.

Of course, I had no choice then. I was a strong-willed girl, but she had the strength of my father's family bloodlines and so amid many tears and much frustration, I followed her orders like a little school girl and dove into the social whirl of parties and balls. And it was at just such a ball that I met John Dinadan.

The Duke had just recovered from a grievous wound that he had received on the Northern Frontier and therefore he begged to talk rather than dance. I was delighted because my slippers hurt and my corset waist was killing me with its twenty-one inch lacing. Besides, he reminded me strangely of my father, perhaps it was his time in India, I do not know.

One thinks of her own father as being the age he was when she was a small child. John was that age, but the similarity ended there, for in all other aspects, he was the complete opposite of my father. He was barely my height with a lithesome slenderness that came to a waist smaller than mine, which made me quite envious, for nothing makes you wish more for a naturally tiny waist than a stiff corset! His hands and feet were almost delicately feminine in comparison to mine. And I could not help but observe that his face had the perfect heart shape with great beautiful eyes and a perfectly flawless complexion, he looked barely twenty compared to the other men in the room.

It was remarkable to think that he had fought bravely in the war, had already survived one wife and had three boys.

My aunt had a long chat with him after noting our brief retreat from the dance floor. She discovered that he was now retired and quite willing to remarry and settle down. When she mentioned her niece, he was cold, saying he had his wealth, but when he learned it was me, he accepted, saying that a plain girl would be best for the Dindadan bloodlines.

And so, the Duke of Auberan gained a tidy fortune in a dowry, control of a vast estate, and myself, in order of traditional importance. England, which will fight wars to end the slave trade, had a rather different attitude concerning her women during that modern Victorian Age. The idea that I had been married off in such a fashion steeled my resolve to take charge of my own life as soon as possible.

But, despite my resolve, I must confess that John was attractive and the Cinderella fantasy of any girl to be a Duchess in her own castle took romantic control of my sensibilities. I was actually a bride. And, as a plain girl, I was grateful. How silly it all seems now, but perhaps I owe John the debt of loving recognition that he never broke my illusions, for his burden was that he actually did love me in his own way. And I was soon to learn that I was going to have to control his affairs before I could control my own.

Auberan Hall stood starkly upon ancient battlements among rolling green hills like a shaft of red arising from grey upon green with a backdrop of clear blue sky. The Hall was larger than my aunty had described, but she hadn't seen it since she was a girl. A new wing, uncovered by the ivy vines of the old, stood to our right as the carriage swung up the circular drive to stop at a great pillared Georgian front entrance where my Lord's major-domo awaited with footmen to collect our luggage.

The major-domo simply took charge with the efficiency of his exalted position to present the staff to their new Mistress. The two rows of servants divided by their uniforms into a strictly observed class structure ranging from scullery girls in their coarse, blue cotton dresses with starched white aprons to the military livery of the major-domo. My own maids were shown to my suite so that my belongings could be unpacked and properly arranged, and under the guidance of the major-domo, we were swept past the curtsying staff to the library where my Lord's sons awaited their new mother.

“Now, Anna, don't fuss over them. Just imagine that they are all in their forties and you will know how to act and be accepted,” John offered, noticing my uncertain apprehension.

With this word of advice, we were ushered into the library to have the doors firmly closed behind me to face three young men for the first time. I think that none of us at that moment had any idea what a fateful meeting it was to be, for first impressions do have a lasting effect in the formulation of events.

Steeling myself against any sign of nervousness, I assumed the character of my governess, Mrs. Sharp, and vowed to take a formal tack of matronly responsibility and control. I would take their measure in my own good time. I must confess that even John seemed a bit childlike before my newly adopted role. It was most impressive.

With great poise, I surveyed my new charges as they arose to face their new mother, or was I to be the fabled “wicked step-mother?”

“Boys, this is your new mother,” John began as if serving a new meal, or presenting a gift. “My Dearest, this tallish lad is my eldest, John Charles.”

John Charles acknowledged his presentation with a whisper soft voice, as if to conceal his pre-pubic, clear soprano.

He bowed his “Madame” somewhat stiffly and I ignored his error of address in surprise over how charming he looked dressed in a fawn colored suit, framed by the library red velvet curtains. I drew my breath when he looked up from his bow to reveal Dresden blue eyes and a heart shaped face that would have been any girl's complete hope and vanity. Add to this a delicate nose, long, thick, golden lashes, a Cupid's bow lips, and sparkling golden hair to crown pastel pink milk skin and I could but hint at his strange beauty.

“Do you like to ride, John?” I asked, simply noting the crop in his hand. “Perhaps you could show me the estate?”

“If you wish. Your Grace,” he replied with a haughty coolness in such superior tones, despite the address that I had a sudden image of Catharine VanDeek, a rather snooty, middy blouse philosopher I had known as a child who deemed it a hardship to play with us stupid girls. “There is really little to see.”

“I shall show you, my Love,” my husband gallantly offered, turning to the next youngest, “and this is Randolph Abel.”

Randolph wiped his nose on the cuff of his blue velvet suit before acknowledging his introduction with a rather awkward bow of portly imbalance. He had undoubtedly just been dressed in the handsome, Eaton-styled suit, but already a button was missing and a chocolate stain marked his habits. His round, chubby face may have had the same delicate features of his older brother, but I saw that his basic character left him plain, plump and fair skinned with long lashes and unruly brown hair.

“I like to ride, Your Grace,” he offered, kicking one patent leather pump against the other as he turned more properly to look at his older brother.. “John can't really ride so well as I can.”

John let the challenge pass with disdain and I thought of my constant war with my beautiful sister. Had I been so slovenly at this age? How ghastly. He really needed a firm hand. I must find a crusty governess for him like Dear Mrs. Grinch. She would put him in order! With a little discipline, he could be a fine looking boy, albeit a bit pretty...

“And, my youngest, James Edmund, who is barely nine.”

Little James curtsied, to his own chagrin, his brother's laughter and his father's discomfort. I could but laugh playfully and curtsy back, offering my hand to draw him closer for protection and comfort. He accepted this without any protest and smiled happily. “I am glad you are to be my step-mother. You don't look at all wicked like in the fairy tales, nor are you at all plain like my governess said you were!”

“And you are honest,” I countered, looking at the doll like child all dressed in red velvet with a richly ruffled, white, satin and lace blouse.

Doll-like suited him as a description, for he was hardly as large as the average four-year-old. He was at least as beautiful as his eldest brother, except that his beauty was directed away from maturity towards an extended infantilism with plump cheeks, a dainty, up-turned nose between saucer eyes, and rosebud lips.

I simply could not accept him as a nine-year-old and I had the strangest feeling that of the three he was the best adjusted to his beauty. “Do you like to ride?”

“I have a pony, mother,” he sighed, “but I like to...,” he paused as if suddenly catching himself as he looked at his father in respectful awe.

“He plays with the girls,” Charles revealed to his little brother's blush, adding with malicious relish, “I caught him dressed in a toddler's kilt suit yesterday, playing with June, a three-year-old, while Jane and Susan fussed over them like nannies!”

His father grew a bit pale and was about to say something rash so I took his child closer, saying, “You really should take me for a ride in the morning. I am sure that we shall have much fun together. Is your pony big enough to pull us in a cart?”

“Oh, yes,” he sighed in relief.

And to think that at nine I was out to get a gun! I would have a real task keeping him away from playing with dolls.

“I think you should see the rest of Auberan Hall,” John suggested, feeling nervous with the children, since most of his life he had lived away from them.

Seeing his strain, I kissed little James and released the others with a nod as I swept after my husband, out into the hallway.

“It is not so large as Sepoy Hall, but it is much older,” John noted, seeing my thoughtful pause once the library door was closed, “what is it, Dear?”

“Are they why you wanted a plain wife?” I asked from my thoughts. “They are the most beautiful boys I have ever seen.”

“It is the curse,” he muttered darkly in mock tones of a secret horror that stalked Auberan Hall. “Tonight I have a very special guest who will explain the curse to you before it is too late, if you will accept a scientific guess. But, come, I can show you the

curse. But, I must warn you that it is said that one bride fled the house when she heard of our family secret. Her husband stoutly claimed that it was her first sight of his great virility that frightened her off.”

“Oh, my Lord, let us hope that that too is a family inheritance,” I laughed, taking his hand before he swept me into a crushing hug and kiss. “Oh, John, the servants...”

“Bother them,” he swore with a shrug. “Come to see our curse.”

“I really don't know...,” I began uncertainly as we moved into a long hallway that proved to be a family portrait gallery.

“The Dunadan name is recorded back to the fourth century, and the curse is at least that old. In the Morte D'Arthur, it is told how one of my great ancestors fared under the curse:

“And then, with great scorn, they get Sir Dinadan into the forest there beside, and there they put upon him a woman's garment, and so brought him into the field, and so they blew into lodging. And every Knight went and unarmed him. Then was Sir Dinadan brought in among them all. And when Queen Guinievere saw Sir Dinadan brought so among them all, then she laughed that she fell down. So did all that were there.’

“As best as I can remember.”

He paused before a metal plaque that was mounted beneath a very ancient sword. I could barely read the words and then I knew not what language it was.

“It is said to be an exact copy of a scroll. The sixth Duke put it on bronze to remind his heirs. It reads:

‘This Christian Sword did slay Auberan in the hands of Sir Dinadan, and the Druid King's lands fell to these hands as a gift from a grateful Lord. But, mark well the dire curse of the Auberan. For as Sir Dinadan did dress in the clothes of a woman to slay their King, so from this day forward from Father to Son, shall pass a woman's beauty, until the House of Auberan shall fall when the last Duke is a woman proclaimed a Lord by his Peers.’”

“A bit long and utter nonsense. The Fairy King, indeed,” I laughed, brushing back my hair with the back of my hand, to hear my laughter echo in the hall, or was it mine? “I should think that grown men would not accept such fairy tales.”

“That plaque tells a simple story. Perhaps Celtic legend and truth are not too far apart. The Auberan were a people who lived in this area. They were not fairies, but their druid-like magic was well known. Perhaps that is why the names came to mean the same. The scroll predates the Family's elevation in title. The Duchy followed the Norman Conquest, due to a most fortunate marriage.”

“Someone put words in the translation of the plaque. How could someone say the *Last Duke* centuries before there is a *First Duke*. After all, there is little proof that King Aurther even existed, let alone his knights and fairy kings,” I answered with a shrug, “and it's a silly curse to boot.”

“Come look for yourself.” He walked to the portraits.

The rows of Family portraits covered at least four hundred years, from primitive, unsung painters to not a few Masters, and the unmistakable image in each was the glowing beauty of each Dinadan male! “Of course it is due to very strong blood lines. It can simply be said that the Dinadans' breed true, like a fine strain of horse flesh.”

I paused, looking at a portrait of a woman dressed in the fashion of the early Georgian Age at the turn of the last century. Her golden hair was quite natural to her shoulders which were bare to a wide, rather revealing décolleté. Her dress was a pale, pink, satin with a rather full skirt and a fantastically narrow waist emphasized by the inverted triangle of her deep bodice of white lace and full puff sleeves. In her left hand, she carried a golden fan with matching satin folds like her beautiful dress. I looked at the brass plate: “Denise Maria Dinadan, 1682 to 1746, Fourteenth Duke of Auberan, as a lady of fashion.”

“Indeed!” I looked at John a bit uneasily. “You do not have the petticoat vice, do you?”

“My last time in petticoats was when I was four. Since then I have been properly breeched, my Lady. Denise had the vice which lost him a governor's chair in the Americas. He lived most of his life in dresses and it was thought that the line was doomed when his younger brother died. But, the rogue had caught a royal princess in Europe unawares, she thinking him a Lady, and she sired the next Duke. He left four sons and made a great deal from the rum trade.”

I passed on to another portrait of the Regency to discover another transvestite Duke. “It is nice to have such a curse and be beautiful,” I noted, “are you sure you don't sneak about in silks?”

“Father dressed up a couple of times for a fancy ball, but I haven't the slightest urge,” John noted, turning from a portrait of his parents. “But, I must confess that my Mother had the most damnable affection for dressing me in frills. And when I went to school, I had to prove my masculinity more than once! It is not easy to undress...” He caught himself and moved on, pointing to a suit of chain mail. “That is from the First Crusade... But, enough of History and old Family curses. Let me show you the gardens before supper.”

“Who is going to give me a scientific lecture on my first night of love as the Mistress of Auberan?” I asked, wondering what his undressing would show.

“A professor from Germany, Dr. Max Eberhart.”

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Dr. Eberhart returned to the library to accept a brandy from a tray held by Maxwell who then withdrew to the kitchen. Dr. Eberhart sniffed the brandy and then looked up, his cold blue eyes peering from beneath a high forehead and jutting brow like two little lights from caves. The flickering flames of the gas lights reflected off his bullet head that seemed most suited for his dueling scars and a helmet rather than a scholar's use.

“It was so kind of you to let me come and see your remarkable gallery and physically examine you and your sons, Your Grace. As a physical anthropologist, I am greatly honored to be permitted to examine first hand this so-called Family curse.”

“It is real enough,” John noted, motioning to a seat before the fire. “Perhaps we should sit?”

“What is your explanation of the curse, Doctor?” I asked with interest.

“Your own Professor Darwin and geneticists are your clue. If not the simple facts of animal breeding,” he continued, taking his seat after I and my Lord. “The ideal of beauty is said to be the woman. Some say that she is more primitive than man, while others hold her to be more biologically perfect. I can not say. But I do believe that it is quite possible that certain dominant genes determine what is male and what is female. Nature is constantly changing and not always perfect. There are many babies born who resemble that sex which they are not. Now, the Dinadans have somehow bred into a family of feminine males. And, judging by your portraits and your appearance, Your Grace, it is genetically dominant. And thus, the fittest survive.”

He raised his brandy in a salute and sipped from the goblet, then set it aside.

“The 'curse' is merely a tale told to explain away dainty feet and hands, slender, graceful legs, pleasingly plump seat and hips, slim waist, rudimentary breasts, lovely neck and soft shoulders, a beautifully shaped head, and some pseudo hermaphrodite tendencies. But, the facts are as simple as those isolated villages where we find six-fingered people everywhere and the like. It is merely genetic.”

“Pseudo-Hermaphroditism?” I repeated in wonder.

Professor Eberhart shrugged. “If I may be frank. Biological sex evolves in the fetus from female to male, so to speak, for the male. It appears that your husband and the boys all have a blind gut under their male genitalia that might be a rudimentary false vagina. Most so called, hermaphrodites, share this birth defect. I have never seen a true hermaphrodite, as defined by the Greek legend. But, I have seen some cases that border on being awful close, with surgery being the only way to tell the child's true sex. Such is the case with your youngest boy, who might actually be female with an enlarged clitoris that passes as a penis. I would have to operate on him to establish what his true sex is.”

“But, why? Is it just an accident?” John asked with growing concern for young James. “An operation?”

“When the child is older,” Professor Eberhart noted in matter of fact tones. “My guess is that your family had a mutation of some sort and various versions of sexual organ defects tend to be passed on from generation to generation. Until recently, such defects have been treated as curiosities and have gone uncorrected. We can now surgically alter some of these defects.” He paused to sip from the brandy snifter. “I suspect that your earliest ancestors were Anglo, rather than Celts. You may remember that Saint Mark once proclaimed that they were not Angles, but Angels,” the professor commented. “That would explain the blond hair, blue eyes, and slender body. The Celts tend to be a sturdier stock.”

“It certainly isn't a curse. European Families have been selective breeding for centuries for a beauty like this. Since pre-Roman times. There are many examples of the ideal male being somewhat feminine. Is it not natural that the proper genes mix to start a new bloodline, a perfected hybrid that becomes a new breed?” I noted in answer

to my husband's question, seeing the Professor's nod. "If it works with horses, why not with humans as well?"

"Why not, indeed," my husband replied thoughtfully. "And the dresses are..."

"Merely a minor delight of the mind. I have a great interest in Eonism, or Trans-Vestism, and I have studied many such cases. However, I have not dealt with cases like this, where the Eonism exists in several generations of the same family," the Professor noted with some satisfaction over his good fortune in having been invited to see for himself the curious Dinadan family. "I have studied some cases where men and women, who have to all intents changed their sex. It is not really all that rare when we discount those who are raised from birth in the wrong sex."

"Changed their sex? You mean a man can become a woman?" my husband asked in disbelief.

"Nonsense!"

"No, my Lady. There are men and women, who live full time as if they were born in the opposite sex. And there are a few who have had rudimentary surgical changes." Professor Eberhart shrugged. "Such a change is relatively easy in the case of the hermaphrodite. The classic historical example of such a transformation was the youth, Sporus, that Nero had altered to be his wife's replacement because of a similarity in looks. I have seen cases where the new woman married and her husband suspected nothing." Professor Eberhart smiled to himself.

"Not to feel a man in bed," I countered, not liking to be made fun of. It was impossible to believe what the professor said, but as events unfolded during the future I came to realize that he was telling the absolute truth as available at the time. "I think you are telling us a modern fairy tale."

"Ah, but true, nevertheless. I have performed such surgery myself," he paused to pull his watch from his coat pocket. "My train leaves in an hour and I must be in London tomorrow. I am giving a lecture to raise funds for my new clinic."

My husband stepped from the room to fetch a servant for the coach.

"Perhaps I might send you a check for your good works," I offered, thinking that it was only polite. And then a question brought a blush to my cheeks as I asked, "How do you make breasts?"

"A rare drug from the Amazon," he said casually, replacing his watch. He took a calling card from the same pocket and handed it to me. "Thank you, Your Grace, for your kind offer, and if I can ever be of service to you, please contact me."

"Thank you, Professor, but I doubt if I will ever need your help," I answered as my husband returned for Professor Eberhart and I retired to await my husband's pleasure on this, my bridal night...