Mona Lisa Smile

by FemmeMalheureuse

Summary

Unlike many other Regency-era stories in which an unmarried man is trapped or an unengaged woman is snared, this story is about threats and the L-word: leverage. Leverage has several definitions; in general use, it may mean "influence or power used to achieve a desired result," and in the financial world, it refers to "any technique to multiply gains and losses."

An unmarried woman herein wields leverage rather deftly.

[Image: by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (sketch, cropped and modded; original image is in public domain)]

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Her head thrown back over the edge of the bed in complete surrender, she screamed as she succumbed under his attentions.

The vision of her generous breasts moving in a wave-like action, combined with the pull of her wet heat were too much for him. He growled as he yielded to his own climax, gasping for air as he flopped like a fish on top of her before rolling slowly off to the side.

Neither of them moved for several minutes, feeling very much as if they had endured the proverbial petite mort.

Pushing his tawny hair out of his eyes, he rolled toward her to lie on his side, enjoying the view of her utter capitulation — her skin flushed pink, the fine lines around her eyes and mouth relaxed after their mutual vigorous exercise, her once-bright hair spilling over the bed, freed from her cap and pins. Unleashed from the confines of a heavily-boned corset and a stiff brocade bodice, her breasts really were some of the most delectable he'd ever had the privilege to enjoy. His body reacted as one might expect given his age and the presence of a yielding, recumbent odalisque. Once again he began his attentions, lavishing the luxuriant flesh with leisurely licks of his tongue.

She moaned, both pleased and frustrated at the same time. He smirked at the sound, knowing what would follow too well.

“What will this performance cost me this time?”

“Madam! You cut me to the quick asking such a thing.”

“Oh fiddlesticks, you cur. You do not rudely show up quite unannounced unless you have a specific monetary aim.”

“I was traveling through on my way to London on an assignment at my colonel’s orders. Naturally I thought I would stop in and pay my respects, my lady.”

“Someone will pay, all right, but it’s hardly respect you have bestowed upon me. You will find thirty pounds in the right hand drawer of the writing desk, the same amount as last time. Take it when you leave.”

“Oh, my lady, I am so hurt by your dismissiveness.” He mocked her, clutching his chest.

“Hurt? Bah, you have no feelings that could be abused. You are heartless, without ethics, and without pride.”

“Perhaps. But you, my lady, you do have both heart and pride, and you do not wish either to be injured by the public disclosure that you have allowed a mangy cur like me to frequent your bed.” He paused to check her reaction. He knew he had hit his mark once again because of her stillness. Ruthless as ever, he egged her a bit more.

“I find your mention of ethics at this moment quite amusing, but a reminder, my lady. There’s the matter of persons who’ll talk soonest and loudest. You know I can drum them up in a heartbeat. The wife’s family—”

“If you but had a heart.”

“Yes, but we are both agreed that I have none.”
A smug smile crossed his face as he caressed her breasts, tweaking a dusty rose nipple as he suckled the other.

She moaned again, crossing her legs to provide some relief for the increasing pressure his efforts promoted. He smirked again around the areola in his mouth as he shifted his body, pressing his fresh erection between her thighs.

“All right, all right, forty pounds. Make this worth the extra ten or I’ll have to find someone better and worth the annoyance of a possible compromise of my good name.”

“Certainly, my lady. I’ll do my best.”

He thrust into her again, this time proceeding with a slower cadence now that their initial hunger had been sated.

After quite some time and several changes of position, he could feel her next orgasm begin to mount. He rolled her over to her knees and began to pound a staccato from behind while grasping her milky white breasts, nipping at her shoulder as if he were a lion holding his mate in place.

She began to sing, her scream mounting in volume and pitch as she reached the pinnacle of pleasure. Thank goodness they were in the remote dower house or she would have brought the entire staff and the town’s constabulary down upon them.

Her pillowy hips beneath his hands and the airy panting gasps she made as she floated down from her climax tripped him over the edge, sending him once more into pleasure’s white light. She fell forward, her now-weak arms unable to support her weight; he fell with her, the warmth of his energetic youth providing the final satisfying caress along her back while he enjoyed the silky feel of her greying blond mane flowing over the pillow on which he laid his head.

They had nearly drifted off to sleep when the bedroom door opened slowly. Neither moved, hearing not the slippers gliding across the carpet from the door to the bedside.

“Mother?” a feminine voice asked sharply.

The older woman awoke with a start, flailing for the sheets with which to cover her nakedness. Her partner groaned, unhappy at being roused from much needed rest and at losing his advantage.

“Anne! This is not what it appears to be!”

“Stop, Mother, you need not lie to me. I’m quite aware of what this is.” The younger woman waved her hand contemptuously in the general direction of the bed before standing arms akimbo nearby. “You may have sheltered me to excess, but Fitzwilliam ensured I was educated about such matters.” She glared at the bed’s occupants, taking in their state of complete deshabille.

“And Wickham. Really, must you harass my mother, a member of the peerage? Can you not find a willing doxy at the local pub?”

George stretched like a cat, caring not one whit if he was exposed beneath Anne’s cold stare. “Anne, how lovely to see you—”

“Spare me your drivel, Wickham. Set yourself to rights and be gone, immediately. Peabody?” Anne gestured to her faithful footman, known for his utter discretion, his absolute loyalty, and his
hulking mass, standing at attention at the door.

Peabody collared Wickham as soon as he had put on his small clothes and a shirt, dragging him out the bedroom door, the rest of his clothes in tow.

“Mother, how could you? This is utterly incomprehensible and unpardonable! What if the Collinses were to discover you in flagrante delicto? Or if you had been exposed to any of the help? You trained them to be ridiculous gossips. They will not stop simply because it is you.”

“Anne, I am so sorry. I don’t know what possessed me. Wickham is well-practiced with his flattery, and you know that I am quite partial to both blandishments and evidence of a well-honed craft, in spite of his vulgar impudence.”

Anne stared fiercely at her mother, looking not one whit like the sickly, amiable girl the lady had raised. “Rise and get dressed. You have made me quite cross. I will have to straighten this room after you leave so that the servants do not realize it has been used to such ill ends. May the good Lord help you should your wicked proclivities reflect upon me if they are ever discovered. As the heir of Rosings I would eject you from the estate and send you to the farthest reaches of the Americas.”

Lady Catherine could say nothing as she donned her undergarments and corset. Anne assisted her, tugging rather too tightly on the stays, emphasizing her frustration before aiding her mother with her gown and her hair.

Once Lady Catherine had left the dower house — rather furtively, watching every bush and grassy hillock for prying eyes — Anne collected the thirty pounds in the writing desk drawer after remaking the bed. She made her way to the dower house kitchen, where Peabody remained at attention after producing a lunch from a basket for Wickham.

“Thank you, Peabody. You’ll find something extra in this week’s pay for your assistance. Thank Cook for the basket.” The ever-silent footman smiled knowingly and nodded before stepping out the backdoor to follow and observe Lady Catherine at a careful distance, en route to Rosings.

“What was it to be this time, Wickham, thirty pounds?” Anne watched him with narrowed eyes, knowing too well what Wickham would attempt if one did not know his tells.

“Fifty. We negotiated fifty pounds in payment.” Sans cravat with weskit unbuttoned, he continued to munch on a piece of bread and a slab of cheese, taking a healthy draft from a jug of cider. But he never looked up from the comestibles or the table itself; he never could look Fitzwilliam or Darcy in the eye when he was lying even as a child, no matter whether the three cousins and their erstwhile companion found themselves at Pemberley, Matlock, Rosings, or London.

“Wickham, truly? She had thirty pounds set aside in the desk drawer for you.”

He looked up at Anne, seeing at once in the firm set of her jaw, her steely grey-blue eyes, and her crossed arms he had lost this hand. “Fine, forty. I told her more than last time. But bloody hell, Anne, she wore me right ragged! I could have spent the last day in the pub and made more money playing cards with far less effort.” He took another swig of cider.

“Hmm. I’ll grant you the amount of effort. I’m sure you are quite fatigued, and you’ll find a bed in the servants’ quarters for the night, provided you are discreet. Peabody will cover for you, of course. But let us be honest about your ability to play cards. Playing in the bedrooms of the gentry and peerage has been far more lucrative for you, and less dangerous to your health.”
She reached into her right hand pocket and pulled out several bills and coins amounting to forty pounds, slapping it on the table before Wickham, who immediately swept it up and thrust it into his interior vest pocket.

“And here is another ten pounds for your effort, and five to ease the expense of travel back to Newcastle.” Anne pulled some cash out of her left hand pocket and placed it on the table, where Wickham stared at it for a moment.

“What is this? This is not how we’ve settled up in the past. Your mother pays me thirty, you pay me another ten, and we’re done.” Wickham never looked a gift horse in the mouth, but this was Anne de Bourgh — one of the smartest women he knew next to Elizabeth Bennet Darcy. There surely must be a catch.

“Let us just say that I know you expended additional effort this visit, and I’m quite appreciative of the results, especially with the additional fillip of catching you both this time. What a fine piece of playacting.” It was Anne’s turn to smirk; she knew Wickham would not understand the gains she made whenever he visited, or that she knew he would be back sooner rather than later if she was a wee bit generous now and again. It really was in the family’s best interests, as well, for Wickham to continue with these and similar visits; if he kept to certain bedrooms and away from gaming, he would be less likely to be shot or knifed, and more likely to keep his money for his own growing family.

Wickham raised his eyebrows for a moment in surprise, but questioned no further since Anne was not forthcoming. He gathered up the money and put it in his vest pocket as well, continuing to eat his lunch as he watch Anne carefully.

“I trust you’ll be discreet as always. One word to Fitzwilliam or Darcy and you’ll find yourself transferred and shipped to the continent, or kidnapped, drugged, and shipped to Australia. Lydia would be a widow for all intents and purposes, free to move on. Your children would not know you.”

Wickham nodded warily, murmuring his assent through a mouthful of bread and cold meat.

“Speaking of discretion, how is Lydia? When is she entering her confinement?”

“She’s angry with me as always, tired from chasing our boy who started to walk on his own. She tossed me out of the bedroom again until I settle my debts with the shops. The new baby will come in another month, which means I won’t make it back here for two months. You’ll want to plan accordingly.”

“Ah, thank you, I’ll do that. If you care to draft and address a brief missive to your wife for me to mail, I’ll enclose ten pounds to help with the baby’s immediate needs. Just leave the letter with Peabody and I’ll handle the rest. And congratulations in advance of the happy day.”

“Thank you, Anne, that’s very kind and quite generous of you.” Wickham relaxed, feeling unusually sentimental now that he was utterly satiated and unexpectedly blessed with both extra cash and familial sentiments.

“Hmm. It’s all in the family, cousin. Ugh, how revolting, to think you are both a cousin by marriage and you have been servicing my mother.” She shuddered delicately, closing her eyes in disgust.
Anne left the dower house, even more satisfied than her mother. She could not imagine how much it would have cost her this last couple of years to get the old biddy serviced by some unknown stallion. Nor could she imagine the potential scandal were such an arrangement and relationship ever to be found out by the ton. Wickham was gentlemanly in manner and speech, well groomed, predictable, biddable given the leverage she had over him, and reasonably priced. Lydia was also happy to have her feckless husband out from under foot and out of her pocket book, even at the expense of sharing him with Lady Catherine, and other equally discreet women of a certain age and class in London. For the price of an evening gown and accessories — from Anne’s long unspent personal budget — she could address the unmentionable needs a lonely, long-widowed woman of a certain age apparently still possessed, while assisting Wickham and his family.

After each visit by Wickham, her mother would be relaxed and sedate for several weeks, often smiling for no apparent reason, humming to herself while taking greater pleasure in daily tasks. The older woman would also ease up on her incessant nagging of her only daughter and their servants; she’d given up on the idea of dragging Anne to town for a season of torture by social events. The Fitzwilliam and Darcy families noticed and appreciated the softened tenor of their lady aunt’s behavior.

This particular visit, though, brought an even bigger benefit: Anne could now cow her mother into submission permanently, having “discovered” the illicit relationship.

Lady Catherine would not be the only one wandering around Rosings with an enigmatic, Mona Lisa smile.

~ Finis ~

End Notes

[Title “Mona Lisa Smile” attributed to 2003 movie starring Julie Roberts, produced by Revolution Studios, Columbia Pictures, and Red Om Films Productions.]

Author's Note: I think many if not all the adaptations of Pride and Prejudice do not do well by Lady Catherine. Even C. E. Brock's illustrations don't do her justice, and might actually have entrenched the canon that Lady Catherine is an unattractive elderly tyrant rather than a vital mother who dealt with loss and the limitations put on her gender as best she could. Granted, she's not a cuddly character, but if any of us put ourselves in her shoes we might be rather inclined to be prickly, too. Maybe I'm more sympathetic now as a fifty-something year-old mother of young adults, too; I know I grew into this opinion of Lady Catherine over time.

In my mind I see her as an amalgam of the possessive Lea (from Colette's Chéri, played by
Michelle Pfeiffer), the moral Madame de Volanges (played by Swoosie Kurtz in Dangerous Liaisons), and the manipulative, controlling Madame de Merteuil (played by Glenn Close in Dangerous Liaisons). All three of these women were old enough to have adult children, still desirable in their own way, and fighting against the loss of their youth, the threats to their family, livelihood, or reputation, but restrained by their sex at a time when women were little more than chattel. De Merteuil is down right mean compared to the other two, but she didn't amass personal power by being a nice girl, yes?

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