

The Noble Satyr

An extract from Louise Grant's delightful tale of love, seduction and intrigue which was the winning entry in the *Woman's Day*/Random House romantic fiction competition

The story begins: Antonia Moran's guardian and grandfather, Lord Strathsay, lies on his deathbed, and the corrupt Comte de Salvan – a leading figure in the licentious 18th-century French court – schemes to force Antonia into marriage with his drug-addicted son, the Vicomte d'Ambert. But he plans to use her for his own perverse pleasure after the wedding. When Antonia learns of his

plans, she begs assistance from her distant cousin, Renard, the Duke of Roxton, who is renowned for his numerous seductions and who is rumoured to have been the lover whose rejection led to de Salvan's wife's suicide. The English Duke reluctantly realises that he cannot leave his young kinswoman in the hands of his lascivious rival and begins to make plans to help her.

His Grace the Duke of Roxton had decided to go to the masquerade to be held at Versailles because he was bored. Had Lord Vallentine accepted his invitation to accompany him, there was no doubt that watching his friend's gyrations among the French nobility would have given amusement. But Lucian Vallentine preferred to stay at home and spend a quiet evening with the Duke's widowed sister, Estee.

As he stood to one side of a mirrored archway, observing the dancers through his quizzing-glass, Roxton spied the Comte de Salvan and his son. What interested him was the Vicomte's stony-faced gaze at the dancers, a gaze the Duke followed to the Duc de Richelieu and his dance partner, a small female in an absurd mask of feathers which sat crookedly on her laughing face.

It did not take him very long to disentangle Antonia from the Duc de Richelieu. She chatted prettily, and contrived to smile when he gave monosyllabic answers and did not look at her, but out across the dazzling multitudes for the closest and most convenient exit.

With the last chord struck by the orchestra, he made as if to return her to the crowd but, once engulfed by the masses, he kept on walking. She glanced up at him swiftly, hesitant to go on, but forced by the firm cool pressure of his hand on her upper arm.

"Do not think I am amused by your antics," he stated, striding through one

drawing room and on through the next one and the next. "All the paint and feathers in the world can't hide your emerald eyes."

He ignored her plea to slow his pace and said nothing further until they were standing in the courtyard awaiting his carriage. As the well-sprung chaise swept out on to the Versailles road for Paris, Antonia leaned from the window to catch a last glimpse of the palace.

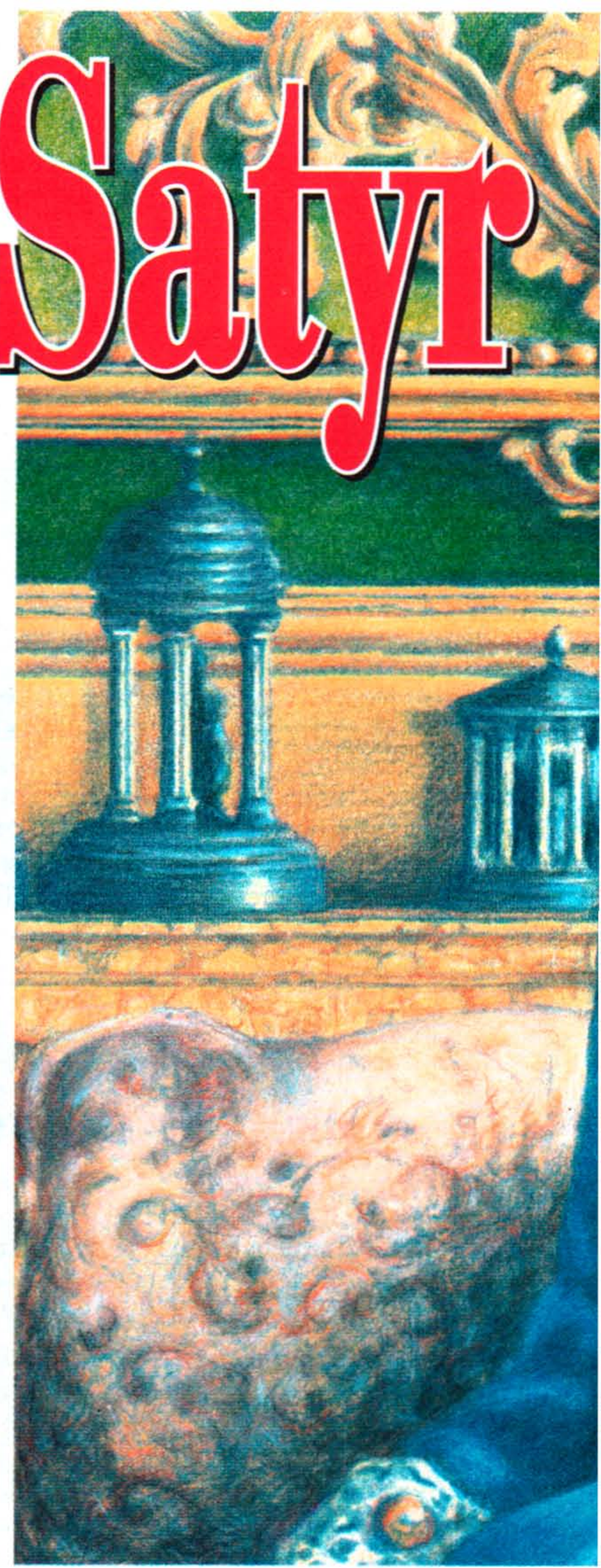
"Put up the window," the Duke ordered, and she obeyed, sitting back in her corner. Her powdered hair was dishevelled and fell in a tangled mass about her shoulders. She did not care and it did not worry her that the Duke kept watchful silence. She was free now of Versailles and the Comte de Salvan.

Roxton looked up from gazing at his gold snuffbox. Antonia's eyes sparkled mischief. For the first time in his life he felt an embarrassing discomfort in the presence of a female. It annoyed him.

Suddenly she was at the window again. "Monseigneur," she hissed. "Did you hear that? It sounded like a shot! And we are slowing down! Do you think there are bandits on this road? Mon Dieu, but this is exciting!"

Antonia started to push down the window. A firm hand threw her back against the seat. "Quiet," whispered the Duke, and he felt in his pocket for his silver mounted pistol and cocked it.

Another report came, louder than the first and from a blunderbuss. The chaise



came to a standstill in the middle of the road. The driver had been struck in the arm, and lurched forward in pain. The rest of the Duke's men stayed at their posts, not daring to move. Only the horses stamped their hooves in fear.

Across the path of the chaise were three men on horseback, hats pulled low on their brows to keep their faces shaded from the moonlight. A carriage travelling in the opposite direction was halted a short distance up the road. The occupants were standing in a huddle, watched by two men brandishing pistols. All were bathed in the eerie moonlight. The surrounding countryside was forested and very dark.

The Duke did not alight until rudely requested by a thump with the end of a blunderbuss on the chaise door. He was leisurely in his movements, quite maddeningly so, and proceeded to take snuff. All the while he took stock of the situation; the position of the horsemen,



Illustration: Linda Arnold

the large scruffy bandit who stood close by. His apparent nonchalance confused this brute, who looked back at his accomplices for direction.

"Search the carriage," was the order.

"If you touch my property, I warn you I will be forced to stop you," said the Duke calmly.

"We want the girl," called the leader. "When we have the girl you are free to go on your way!"

"Girl? There is some mistake."

The leader's voice was harsh. "You have abducted my master's property! He wants it returned." The Duke's fingers curled about the pistol's trigger. The other hand held up a scented handkerchief to his nostrils.

"Your master's property?" he replied coldly. "The minx! You may certainly have her. She assured me she has had no other lover."

All three men began to snigger, and

the large brute with the blunderbuss strode forward and shoved the Duke aside with his shoulder. He grabbed the door, wrenched it open and had a boot on the fold-down step when there was a deafening report.

He lost his footing, staggered back, the blunderbuss dropped from his hand, and he fell lifelessly into the mud.

The sound of a shot so close to the chaise had Antonia instantly in the doorway, frightened that the Duke had been struck. Seeing him standing still near to her, a smoking pistol in his hand brought a smile of relief and she was no longer afraid. But her eyes widened at the dead man lying in a muddy pool.

Thus, when the bandit on horseback charged up to the carriage, shouting and waving a pistol, she was slow to respond. She was unsure of the precise sequence of events – only of the blur of movement all about her, of shouting, and the offensive smell of gunpowder,

falling in the mud, then being dragged to her feet; looking for the Duke and seeing him safe; he calling out to her, but she not hearing his words because of a last deafening report; a searing pain which would not go away; and finally, collapsing into the Duke's arms; and then blackness.

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The Duke came into the foyer of his house, as Estee and Lord Vallentine sped down the curved staircase to greet him. That he was deathly pale and that he carried close to his chest a bundle from which protruded two tiny stockinged feet did not seem to register with his sister or friend. They were just glad to see him alive and unharmed.

But Estee was not blind to the fact that her brother was in shirt sleeves, and that the lace ruffles at his wrists were stained with blood and mud. She ran to him, half-crying, half-laughing with relief.

Please turn the page

The Noble Satyr

From previous page

"Let him pass, love," Vallentine said softly, taking in the situation at once. "The physician been called?" he asked the Duke, following him to a drawing room where a servant was already attending to the fire.

"He's been sent for," said the Duke, and he gently deposited the bundle on a sofa. "Send the servants away," he ordered, then, "Are you comfortable?"

Antonia nodded, her eyes looking about her with interest, despite the dreadful pain in her shoulder. "This is a very elegant house, Monseigneur," she whispered. "May I please have a drink of water?"

"I am glad you approve and are not disappointed," Roxton said with a bow. "The doctor will be here very soon."

"Good. The pain, it is very bad," said Antonia and closed her eyes.

Estee did not like at all what she saw. The girl's hair was a tangled mess of powder and mud and blood, the small painted face smeared with the same. Despite the little nose, high forehead and beautiful curve to the full lips, Estee

could draw but one conclusion as to the girl's vocation. She confronted the Duke with a face of furious outrage. None of this was lost on Lord Vallentine, and he mumbled something about seeing to liquid refreshment and left the room.

"This time you are wrong, Estee," said the Duke wearily.

"You should not have brought the creature to this house. Remove her!"

The Duke's face hardened. "I remind Madame that this is my house."

"Then I shall leave if she is not taken away at once!"

"She has been shot."

‘She tried to cover her nakedness with her torn bodice’

Estee laughed bitterly. "The company one does keep!"

But she shrank back when the Duke took a stride towards her.

Lord Vallentine entered with a tray holding a pitcher of water and a decanter of brandy, and almost upset the lot. "Renard! The girl!"

The Duke swung about and found Antonia swaying on her feet. With a supreme effort of will she had forced herself to stand. The pain was blinding, but she tried to cover the makeshift

bandage and her nakedness with the remnants of her torn bodice the Duke had ripped to her waist in his haste to staunch the bleeding.

"You little fool!" hissed Roxton, scooping her up. He put her back on the sofa and moved aside to let Vallentine administer a shot of brandy.

The fiery liquid burned Antonia's throat but warmed her stomach, and she thanked the handsome gentleman. "Burgundy would be better than brandy, I think. I like burgundy."

"Do you?" smiled Vallentine. "You are too young for either, I'll wager."

"I am not! I will be 17 in October."

"Oho! Such a great age!" laughed Vallentine and looked up at his friend to find him staring at Antonia. "She'll live. There is too much spirit in her."

"Of course I will live!" Antonia said, then grimaced. She was very close to fainting with the pain and opened her eyes with an effort. "I am not so badly wounded as poor Baptiste. He is Monseigneur's driver and we think his arm is broken. Don't we, Monseigneur?"

The Duke pinched her upturned chin. "Yes, child." And he looked at his sister, standing stiffly by the fireplace.

Antonia followed his gaze and spoke to Lord Vallentine. "That is the Duke's sister? I am sorry to be such a nuisance."

Estee went to the door. "If it was

because of you that she was shot, then I am sorry for her, Renard," she said. "Still, you should never have brought her to this respectable household!"

With that, she swept from the room and almost collided with the physician and his assistant.

The fat little physician went over to Antonia's side and smiled down at her.

"So this is the Chevalier Frederick Moran's little daughter?" he cooed. "Your father, he was a great doctor of medicine. But you have nothing to fear in my hands, for I am just as great."

Antonia caught at the Duke's hand. "You will stay?" she asked in a small, fearful voice.

"I will only be in the way," muttered the Duke looking at the small fingers which clung to his hand.

"I will be much braver if you stay," she said and sighed, and the Duke remained watchfully at her side.

The physician turned his mind to the task of extracting the bullet from her flesh. He did not leave until some two hours later, when the house was quiet, and Antonia was tucked up between clean sheets; her shoulder bandaged and a dose of laudanum administered to dull her sufferings. He informed the Duke his patient was not to be moved for at least three weeks and that he would visit daily to follow her progress.

Lord Vallentine slipped into the

library where a fire and chandelier still blazed and the Duke of Roxton sat, now wearing a fresh white shirt and ruffles.

"How is she, Renard? I mean, she – she is so young! My nerves are shredded, I can tell you! It took me forever to coax Estee down from one of her passions –"

"I don't know why you bothered. She deserved to be left to her ill humours."

Vallentine squirmed under the Duke's steady gaze. "I admit when I first saw the girl, I thought as Estee did. It was only natural we would! You ain't exactly a – a saint, Renard, and –"

‘Two peasants lie dead on the Versailles road, by my hand’

The Duke said flatly, "Antonia is a child. I am old enough to be her father. I admit she was dressed atrociously," he continued. "It was her idea of what the worst whores must look like. It only served to get her Richelieu's unwanted attentions and those of every lecher at court. But I suspect she did so to force my hand, which I felt I had to do. I had devised a much neater solution to the problem. Hers only served to have my carriage held up by ignorant cattle."

"What happened?"

"Happened, Lucian?" said Roxton, slowly, looking up from gazing at his emerald ring. "Two peasants lie dead on the Versailles road, both by my hand. The leader failed to take the child from me and escaped. We were shot at –"

"Who would dare?"

Roxton shrugged. "A mystery. Two shots came from the forest. The second found its mark. The ball lodged shallow in her shoulder. She was extremely fortunate."

"Poor babe," muttered Vallentine. "What did the ruffians want?"

"That I hand over the child."

"That's damned odd, Renard."

"These were not highwaymen at all, but men in the employ of someone – someone I have yet to identify. Although I have my suspicions."

"Any witnesses?"

"A carriage was pulled over by the ruffians' accomplices. The occupants were standing in full view of the drama acted out by a silvery moon."

"Won't there be a lot of questions?"

"Probably. But would the most noble Duke of Roxton deliberately obstruct the course of French justice?"

Lord Vallentine grinned. "You've already dispensed your own as it is! And they deserved it! Murderous dogs to want to abduct a – a – child!"

Please turn the page

The Noble Satyr

From previous page

"Her name is Antonia Diane Moran, daughter of the famous physician, one Chevalier Frederick Moran. He eloped with the Earl of Strathsay's young daughter, who died when Antonia was five or six years old. Her father died only a year ago. She has no-one in the world save a dying grandfather, the Earl of Strathsay and his estranged wife –"

"Your cousin Augusta is that girl's grandmother?" blurted out his friend. "Well! Wait until Estee hears about this! Do you think it was Strathsay who tried to have the girl abducted?"

"No, I do not believe that." Roxton looked levelly at his friend and smiled thinly. "And no, I did not abduct her. My sordid reputation has magnified itself tenfold, even in your tiny mind. Thus it is no use telling you she is well aware I am her grandmother's cousin and that she approached me some weeks back to – er – extricate her from an unpleasant situation. She wants me to see her safely to England."

The Duke had gone to the fireplace and was absently poking a log with the toe of his shoe. "She cannot remain in France," he said. "First, Strathsay is in the process – but we await to see if he lives a little longer – of contracting a match between his grand-daughter and the Vicomte d'Ambert. The Vicomte, it seems, is loath to marry her; she is beneath his touch. I do not know Mademoiselle Moran's feelings for him. And second, no sooner will Salvan wed his son to her than he hopes to take the girl himself –"

"Good God! Disgusting!" declared his lordship. "Salvan and that child?"

"Quite. Nonetheless that is Salvan's intention," said the Duke. "He needs his son to make an advantageous match. Antonia will be an heiress when her grandfather dies. What price the family name if Salvan can bag an innocent heiress for his son whom he also wishes to bed?"

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Antonia sat on the window seat. She was supposed to be sitting by the warmth of the fire, with a coverlet over her knees and a cashmere wrap across her shoulders, but she could not sit still.

She heard shouts and laughter and the clash of steel on steel. Yet the only persons in view were two lackeys, each with a coat over an arm and holding a goblet of wine.

Her patience was rewarded when the two swordsmen came into view. They traversed the courtyard from corner to

corner. There was the hiss and sing of blades as each fought for mastery over the other. First the Duke was pushed back by Lord Vallentine, then he proved stronger of wrist and forced his lordship against the low stone wall. They were stripped to their white shirts, oblivious to the cold and not caring.

A pain shot up Antonia's neck and along one arm, a grim reminder that she was not as mended as she would like to believe. When she looked out of the window again, the battle was over.

The two gentlemen leaned against the wall, drinking wine. Lord Vallentine looked up and said something to the Duke. Antonia waved and Vallentine responded in kind. The Duke did not even glance up, not even when they passed under the window to go inside.

She sank back on the cushions and frowned. This was how Estee found her, not at all pleased her patient had left the warmth of the fire.

"How long have I been here?" asked Antonia wistfully

"Six weeks and a little more," Estee answered and picked up a hair brush and set to brushing the girl's long curls. "La! You have such hair and of a colour I adore. You make me envious, child." She gave a sigh and pinned up the girl's hair and threaded ribands through the weight of clustered curls.

"Why hasn't the Duke visited me? Lord Vallentine, he comes every day to play at backgammon. But the Duke never comes."

"He has been very busy," answered Estee. "He went away to Fontainebleau to hunt with the King, and after he was a good deal at court. He has not been in Paris at all while you've been confined here. He may come and see you today."

Antonia went over to the looking glass and peered at herself. "I look very well I think, Madame. Thank you. Oh! And you have affixed a nice clasp to hold up my curls. They *are* diamonds and emeralds, not paste?"

"What will you say next? Don't let Renard hear you call his gift paste!"

"It is a gift you say? For – for me?"

"Of course. It is not my hair clasp. Emeralds don't suit me. Don't you like your gift, child? Stop frowning! Come here, I have something else for you."

Antonia gasped when Estee dropped two diamond-and-emerald-encrusted shoe buckles into the palm of her hand. "They are mine, too? But you have given me so many lovely things already!"

"They are from my brother. I was instructed not to give them to you until you were well enough to leave your rooms. You are pleased with his gifts?"

"They are beautiful and he is very generous and good to me," said Antonia in a small voice. "Monseigneur spends too much on me. I – I don't deserve –"

Please turn to page 86

The Noble Satyr

From page 84

"Hush, child. Of course you deserve it all," said Madame with a smile. "What is the expense to Renard? He is very rich."

In sauntered Lord Vallentine, now in a Venetian scarlet frock coat of velvet and with a freshly powdered wig atop his head. When Antonia saw who it was, her sparkle died.

"It is only Vallentine," she said.

"Is that how you care to greet an old friend?" he asked as he kissed Estee's hand. "Good morning, Madame. I trust our little patient is behaving herself?"

"See for yourself, Lucian," said Estee, smiling at him. "Then tell me what you think of the miracle I have wrought."

"Well, I ain't one for miracles," said his lordship, turning to look at Antonia who had hidden behind the door as he came in. "Well, I'll be damned – I –"

Antonia chuckled at the expression on Lord Vallentine's face. "You look like a fish!"

"Antonia!" cried Estee.

"I am sorry," said Antonia without any real regret.

His lordship was astounded by the girl's transformation. With her honey curls washed, freshly scented and tied up with ribands, she was dressed in a froth of petticoats with a bodice cut low.

He said: "Renard is going to get the shock of his days!"

"He is coming?" asked Antonia.

"I don't know, chit. But I hope I'm about when he does set eyes on you! Small wonder why he abducted you. I'd not have run the risk of leaving you at court to be –"

"He didn't abduct me!" declared Antonia. "I asked him to bring me to Paris and he was kind to oblige me –"

"I suppose he'd have done the same for any other female at court? And then he murdered those kidnappers into the bargain just to oblige you, eh?"

"He didn't murder anyone! You shouldn't say such things! And you call yourself his friend. He – he merely defended himself, and was forced to fire at them! He is not a murderer! You must not say such horrid things!"

Lord Vallentine laughed. "A regular fire-eater, ain't you!"

"Must you goad her?" admonished Estee. "You know she will defend Renard every time. She always does."

"I apologise," said Antonia. "But you must not say such things about the Duke. It upsets me. I cannot help it."

"Lord save us!" said Lord Vallentine. "Wait until Renard learns that he's got himself a chit who defends him right or wrong, sunshine or hail! Don't it amuse you, Estee, to think that your brother's character is defended so vehemently? And he with a character which is not worth saving!"

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The Duke entered the library and approached his favourite chair. By it was a pair of silk-covered shoes and a leather-bound volume, a silk riband tucked between two pages to mark a place. He scooped up a shoe with its large diamond-and-emerald-encrusted buckle, then leaned on the high back of the chair to peer down at its occupant.

Antonia was fast asleep, her face turned away from the dying fire, one arm caught in a quantity of tangled curls, the other resting limp across her bodice. The layers of her silk petticoats surrounded her like a soft pink cloud, and exposed her small stockinged feet to the warmth of the fire. Roxton couldn't recall the last time he had been at leisure to admire the pretty ankles of a sleeping beauty. The sensation was new to him and made him smile.

Lord Vallentine strode into the room, a coverlet over one arm, and tapped the Duke on the shoulder. "She would fall asleep in your chair," he whispered apologetically. "I didn't have the heart to wake her so I thought it best to fetch this myself." He arranged the coverlet to his satisfaction and glanced up at the Duke. What he saw gave him a start. "Renard, what's amiss? You've not taken ill?"

Vallentine followed Roxton to the middle of the room. "You've got a little minx there," he said, sprawling on a chair opposite the sofa where the Duke sat.

"Indeed?" said Roxton.

"She's just a bundle of mischief. It's refreshing. Sometimes it puts Estee out of all patience. But, if you ask me, that's just feminine jealousy."

"You amaze me."

"Your sister is a beautiful woman, a damned beautiful woman, but Antonia, well, she's – she's – unusual."

"Unusual in what way?"

To Vallentine's discomfort, he found his face warming. "You needn't look at me in that way! I ain't in love with the chit if that's what you're thinking," confessed his lordship. "I admit I find her company a delight. And I ain't blind, so don't sneer at me! I can see she's a little beauty. But she don't try and use it on a man either, as most females are wont to do. She's just – she's just herself."

"In fact," he continued belligerently, "I find her adorable! But that don't mean I want her; not in that way. Besides, she don't want me, or that young puppy of Salvan's."

"No?"

"And any attempt on my part, or Estee's, to say a word against you, and the lovable little minx turns into a hellcat."

The Duke frowned. "Why do I deserve such adoration?"

"You can be indifferent if you like," said Lord Vallentine sarcastically. "I suppose you've done nothing at all out of the ordinary, except that it must seem out of the ordinary to a girl Antonia's age. Quite the hero rescuing her from Salvan's slimy paws and shooting two ruffians dead on the Versailles

road, not to mention tending to her hurts with your own fine hands.”

He turned to the sound of rustling petticoats as Antonia took a sleepy peek over the chair back. When she saw the Duke, her eyes widened into a smile. She ran and dropped a curtsy at the Duke’s feet.

“It is you! I thought I was dreaming, but when I heard my Lord Vallentine’s voice, I knew it could not be true. Why would he be in one of my dreams?”

“You see what I mean, Renard,” groaned his lordship. “I believe I will ignore you, chit.”

Roxton smiled at his friend’s bruised ego, but kept his eyes on Antonia. “He has been good to you, so he tells me.”

Antonia nodded and sat beside the Duke on the sofa. “Do you like this gown? And thank you for the clasp, and the shoe buckles and my gowns, and all the other things you had Maurice make for me! Maurice is a very good mantua-maker I think. But he talks too much and fusses like a woman. I cannot think a man who wears one pearl drop earring and colours his eyelids anything but laughable, can you? Do you think he is one of those men I have heard about who prefers his own kind?”

Vallentine gaped at her. “Antonia! Where do you pick up such – such –”

“At court,” she answered simply and looked to the Duke. “I should not say such things perhaps? Did I shock you?”

“Not in the least,” answered Roxton, his hand across the back of the sofa absently fondling a lock of her hair. “I have always thought him to be of that persuasion. You may have shocked my friend, however.”

“You are right,” said Antonia. “But he is very easy to shock, and also to beat at backgammon ... Will you play me at backgammon, Monseigneur?”

“If you wish it, child,” said the Duke. “But I warn you, I am a better player than Lucian, and make no allowances.”

“Then we will have an interesting contest,” she said. A sudden thought made her frown. “You – you aren’t going away again, are you?”

“No, I am not going away, Antonia. We can do whatever you wish.”

Her smile returned and she touched his arm impulsively. “You see,” she said to his lordship, a sparkle in her lovely green eyes, “we shall all enjoy ourselves now that the Duke stays in Paris!”

Lord Vallentine nodded but he did not hear a word of what she said. He was watching the Duke and he had made a startling discovery: one he could not wait to share with Estee. The Duke of Roxton had finally fallen in love.

You can read the rest of Antonia and the Duke of Roxton’s adventures when Random House Australia publishes prize-winning novel The Noble Satyr, by Louise Grant, in the autumn of 1997.