

# **A Confidential Problem**

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A [Society of Gentlemen](#) interlude

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This interlude is not a standalone story.

It takes place between chapters 15 and 16  
of *A Seditious Affair*.

### *3 March 1820*

Arrandene was a damned big house to feel alone in.

Silas had been here for almost a week now and it still seemed impossible. He simply couldn't feel, as he paced the long panelled halls, hung with untold wealth in pictures and tapestries, or explored the great library, that he was allowed to be here. He was a penniless, homeless radical now, and this place was huge, with something close to a dozen bedrooms for gentry, and three times that for staff. And although there was just one solitary gentleman in residence, there were still any number of servants hanging around, all there to dance attendance on Arrandene's owner, Lord Richard Vane.

One man served by dozens of people whose sole task was to do his bidding, because Lord Richard's will was that the house should always be kept ready for his arrival.

Extravagant prick. God knew what he must spend to keep the place open, when the sensible course was surely to employ only a skeleton staff in his lordship's absences. He could plan his movements a little more, have the furniture put under holland covers like a sensible, thrifty man, and save a fortune. And instead, in these lean and hungry times, he kept the place permanently staffed, and made it clear that he was paying for work, not giving charity. The place gleamed with pride and polish, the acres of garden were immaculate even in this tail-end of winter, and a crowd of eager faces had clustered around Cyprian, Lord

Richard's valet, on arrival in the servants' hall, asking how long his lordship would be staying and what company they might expect and what he'd like them to do.

Silas did not belong here, and he didn't want to be here, amid a houseful of people who adored Richard bloody Vane. He was not a servant, not here to make friends, and absolutely not part of his lordship's entourage, for all he'd been dragged here as Lord Richard's new bookman to get him out of the law's grasp.

A handful of days ago he'd been waiting in the cells at Bow Street wondering if he was going to hang for treason, and maybe bring his lover down for sodomy; by that evening the charges against him had been kicked away by a combination of lies, privilege, and Dominic's iron-toothed memory; the next morning he'd been on his way to the country. You might have said *rushed off*, except that no rush had been visible, at least from the outside. Lord Richard's valet had moved soft-footed through the back stairs while half a dozen men and women scurried frantically to do his bidding, preparing everything for his lordship's departure.

And here Silas was now, in this empty mansion in the middle of empty green fields and fresh air, waiting for nothing or everything.

For nothing. It would, it *had* to be nothing. Dominic had walked away from him, face twisted with revulsion, because Silas had broken their pact and forced him to compromise everything he believed in, and there could

be no coming back from that. Silas told himself that several times a day. He had to make himself believe it, because he'd spent too damned much of his life wanting things he'd never get—a vote, a voice, his Tory's first loyalty—and he was coming to feel that a man could die of hope.

So he was stuck in this damned house, working fourteen hours a day in Lord Richard's library to avoid seeing or speaking to anyone else. Serving Lord Richard bloody Vane, because Dominic wasn't the only one who'd had his principles trampled in the mud recently. Bowing and scraping, not merely to a man of the class he'd cheerfully see guillotined, but to the moralistic bastard who'd made Dom feel like dirt for years.

God rot it all. At least the library was well stocked.

So Silas forced his attention onto the books, not the great echoing halls of wealth around him, and certainly not the nagging, relentless thoughts of whether he'd ever see Dominic again.

He was concentrating so fiercely on cataloguing a multi-volume translation of Homer that he didn't even notice footsteps. That or there weren't any. Harry had described Lord Richard's valet as moving like a cat in slippers, and Silas, jumping what felt like six inches in the air when the man coughed pointedly at his elbow, couldn't but agree.

"Christ. You have to sneak up on a fellow?" he snapped.

"I can't help it if you don't pay attention," Cyprian said. "How are the books?"

“Don’t you have boots to polish?” It was near nine at night, but as far as Silas could tell, Lord Richard kept his valet at his beck and call from dawn to dark. He wasn’t sure when the fellow slept.

“It’s my evening off. And you aren’t required to work these hours at all. I dare say you want to show your gratitude to Lord Richard, but—” He grinned at Silas’s snarl. “No, really. Your dedication has been noted.”

“Go to the devil. I’m not here for your blasted Lord Richard’s sake and you know it.”

“Not for my lord’s sake, or your own,” Cyprian agreed. “So why are you working your fingers to the bone?”

Silas glared at him in lieu of answer. The valet cocked his head. “You’re not a patient man, are you?”

“Don’t have much to be patient about.”

“I think you’re wrong. Time will tell, of course. I could be mistaken,” Cyprian added, in a way that made it quite clear the possibility wasn’t worth considering. “But I’m a little surprised, I’ll admit. I didn’t think you gave up so easily.”

Silas gave him a long look, up and down. They were about the same height, but Silas had a good three stone on the slender valet, and a lifetime of brawling against years of folding clothes. “You’ve got a fucking nerve, friend, talking about what’s no concern of yours.”

Cyprian propped his arse against the desk, folding his arms, in a way that looked far too casual for his

powdered hair and dark green livery. “Not really. If it’s Lord Richard’s concern—”

“Which it ain’t.”

“—then it’s mine. And as to me being right and you wrong—well. I could tell you my reasons, but I dare say you wouldn’t listen.”

Silas was absolutely not going to ask this ginger prick for his opinions on Dominic or anything else. He glowered. Cyprian gave his foxy grin. “What you need is a distraction.”

“I’ve got plenty to be getting on with.”

“Books,” Cyprian said dismissively. “I think we can do better than that.”

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They settled in Cyprian’s room with a bottle on the table between them. Considering that most servants’ quarters were tiny and shared in twos or fours or sixes, the valet did well for himself, but the spacious room was bare except for the paraphernalia of his profession. No books, no pictures, no sign of other interests or personality, nothing except a dusty backgammon box on a shelf.

“Do you do anything except serve his lordship?” Silas asked.

“No.” Cyprian poured the gin and took up his tumbler, ignoring the fact that Silas did not. “Your health. No, I don’t have time. Lord Richard’s service is what you might call wide-ranging.”

“Polishing boots, cutting hair, acting the procurer, getting people off the gallows...”

“All as my lord wishes.” Cyprian’s lips curved. “I exist merely to serve.”

Which was enough to turn a free man’s stomach, except Silas well remembered how the valet had set up that bewildering evening of well-orchestrated lies that had saved his life. “Telling the gentlemen what to do,” he went on. “Setting them to dance to your tune.”

“I use the tools I have to hand.” A sober reply, but Cyprian’s brown eyes glinted in the candlelight. “As my lord directs, of course.”

Silas leaned back in his chair. “Of course. Nice to see a man enjoy his work.”

That sharp-toothed grin flashed out. “Oh, I do. You could too.”

“I don’t do your work.”

“No,” Cyprian said. “But, you know, Lord Richard would not object to you doing your own. Not seditious writing, I needn’t say—we agreed that you’re a reformed character, didn’t we? But, strange though it may seem, your interests and my lord’s overlap at points. And I don’t mean Mr. Frey.”

“Go to the devil.”

Cyprian ignored that. “My lord is a great supporter of abolition, and of Mr. Harry’s charitable education scheme. His name gives a great deal of weight to any reasonable cause. People would listen to Lord Richard Vane’s man, Mr. Mason. They’d listen to you.”

Silas picked up his glass and took a sip. “And why precisely would you be telling me that?”

“Well, for one, Lord Richard likes a happy household. You’ll be with us for a while, so we may as well find a way to make it comfortable for everyone, rather than having you slaving and snarling. And, for another, I want to pick your brains.”

“Aye, I thought there’d be something in it for you.”

“Philanthropy is a rich man’s hobby,” Cyprian said. “I’ve got work to do, and you might be able to help me.”

Silas was disinclined to do that as a matter of principle, but he was also painfully lonely, and desperate for something to think about that wasn’t Dominic. “With what?”

“Well, we’ve a small problem.” Cyprian swirled the gin in his tumbler, watching the way the viscous liquid caught the candlelight. Good clear light, from wax candles; no smoky tallow that needed trimming every ten minutes for Lord Richard’s valet. “When I say *we*... You understand the arrangement? Lord Richard helps his friends, and they help him do it.”

“I didn’t think half a dozen lords and gentlemen set to lying like knaves for love of me,” Silas said drily.

“Indeed not. They did it because Lord Richard required it to protect one of his own, and because he would ensure others protected them if it was needful. That’s how our situation works, and I spend a lot of time making it work. Now, we’ve a gentleman amongst us—not a particular friend of Lord Richard, but a great intimate of Sir Absalom Lockwood. A lawyer, and a Tory of some influence. And I fear he’s been somewhat indiscreet.”

“What kind of indiscreet?” Silas asked, intrigued despite himself.

“Legally. The gentleman, Mr. Peter Arlett, likes to be found interesting, you see, and he is one of those retained on the Camberwick case.” Silas didn’t give a curse for the doings of Society, but nobody who read the newspapers could avoid mentions of that ongoing and extensive scandal. He whistled. “Indeed. And it seems Mr. Arlett allowed himself to be blandished by the excellent brandy and flattering attention of a Grub Street scribbler into saying more than he should have. He has let the cat out of the bag on the case for the defence, and he would very much like my lord to put it back in for him.”

“And how’s he going to do that? No, I know: by saying, ‘Deal with it, Cyprian.’ How’re *you* going to do that?”

“I don’t know yet,” Cyprian said. “This is where you come in. You know Grub Street well; you know what will work with, or against its scribblers—”

“Hold there,” Silas said. “Are you expecting me to help you hush up a scandal, give you a way to silence a journalist for a lawyer’s sake? Go to hell.”

“Remember the arrangement, Mr. Mason. Men lied for you.”

“Their choice,” Silas said flatly. “I never agreed to that bargain.”

“Mr. Frey did. But to answer your question, no, of course I don’t expect you to help me hush up a gentleman’s scandal, or to take our side against Grub Street. I’m not a complete fool.”

“Then what do you want?”

Cyprian drew out a letter from his pocket. “Well, to begin with, read this. Mr. Arlett’s letter to my lord.”

Silas scanned the first paragraph.

*Dear Richard*

*I regret having to bother you as you recruit your energies in the country, but I find myself in need of assistance with some urgency. I have made a rather foolish mistake.*

“Honest for a lawyer,” he remarked, and read on. The letter was written in somewhat vague terms, clearly with an eye to excusing the writer’s behaviour, but the meaning was clear enough. Arlett had got rascally drunk with Nathan Tulney, a gossipmonger Silas knew reasonably well. The fellow had more charm than morality, and Arlett had been led by flattery and brandy to disclose certain facts that would doubtless sell

newsheets, and probably destroy the case for the defence. Silas had little time for Nate Tulney, but less for lawyers, and he read on without sympathy until he reached the last paragraph.

*I would be most grateful if you could exert your influence, as I am rather at a loss. I understand you are rustivating for some time, but perhaps you might send your pretty little henchman to assist me? I assure you, dear fellow, I shall treat him with the tenderest care.*

“Your pretty little henchman’?” Silas repeated aloud.

“Oh, Mr. Arlett is very free with his compliments.” Cyprian gave a tight smile. “And his looks. And his hands.”

“His lordship allows that, does he?”

“His lordship is not aware of it. His lordship asked me, on seeing this letter, if Mr. Arlett had ever been troublesome to me, and I assured him that he had not. If his lordship *was* aware of Mr. Arlett’s attentions, he would make the gentleman regret that his mother ever opened her legs. You may take my word on it.”

Silas didn’t know if he believed that, but he was quite sure Cyprian did, from the valet’s expression, and he suspected Mr. Arlett would do well not to find out. “So why not tell him?”

“Because that is not how it works, Mr. Mason. Because I do not go running to my lord for shelter; because I deal with problems, not cause them; because I do not choose to be vulnerable to Mr. Arlett or— anybody else.” Cyprian paused, as if he was going to add

to that, but took a sip of gin instead. “And *also*, because I may well have use for a well-connected Tory lawyer to finish clearing up the God-awful mess that you and Mr. Frey have made between you. If Lord Richard finds out about Mr. Arlett’s little ways, he’ll knock his teeth down his throat, and I’ll need to deal with the consequences. Whereas if I handle the gentleman myself, I’ll have him safely in my pocket when I need him.”

“And that means doing whatever he asks?”

Cyprian smiled. It wasn’t the pleasantest smile Silas had ever seen. “It may mean doing him a great service, yes.”

Silas half laughed. “Not my style, friend. I don’t help fellows when what they need is kicking.”

“Would you say Mr. Nathan Tulney needs kicking?”

“Nate? Eh. I can’t say I like him, but I’m not going to take sides with this man Arlett against him.”

“But I don’t want you to go against him,” Cyprian said. “What I want is to know in what way I can do a great service to Mr. Tulney as well.”

“Service to—” Silas thought about it. “You want a Tory lawyer in one pocket, and a Grub Street scandalmonger in the other?”

“Ah.” Cyprian’s sharp, foxy smile widened with satisfaction. “Now you’re finding the advantage.”

“What’s that?”

“The advantage. There’s always an advantage to be found, if you look at the situation the right way. What I

want from this business is to give Mr. Tulney reason to be grateful to me. Specifically, I'm going to make him grateful for advising him not to publish what he learned from Mr. Arlett. I want *him* owing *me* a favour for keeping the story quiet, and not the other way around."

"Which leaves Mr. Arlett indebted to his lordship and Nate Tulney indebted to you," Silas said. "You plan ahead, don't you? And what about the *pretty little henchman* business?"

"Oh, Lord Richard is dealing with that," Cyprian said calmly. "He's given me a note to pass to Mr. Arlett, without telling me the contents. If it's not a warning, I'll eat my hat. I'll handle the gentleman if I have to, but if he knows what's good for him, I won't have to."

"So you aren't telling his lordship about Arlett, and he's not telling you, and all the while you both know." Silas raised a brow. "That seems a complicated way to go on."

Cyprian reached over and topped up his tumbler. "Not your business, friend. Now, tell me how I can do Mr. Tulney a service."

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Dominic and other mutual acquaintances had described Cyprian on occasion as, variously, a spymaster, an inquisitor, and a sneaking slyboots ginger bastard. Silas, a veteran of interrogation at the State's hands, had to agree: the man had remarkable skills at

getting the information he wanted, starting by making you want to give it to him. He listened with interest, he asked good questions, he turned things around to make you see them different. Silas thought he'd be a swine to argue politics with, and realised he was looking forward to doing just that.

They talked for an hour on the subject of Arlett's problem, picking over ideas, Cyprian pulling a picture of Nate Tulney's character, position, and weaknesses out of Silas's head. In truth, Silas wasn't entirely sure how much he was needed. Cyprian had fingers in a lot of pies, and he clearly knew how to balance threats and blandishments without help. He reckoned the valet could have handled this very well himself.

But it seemed he wanted to talk, and Silas must have wanted the same, because as the level of gin in the bottle dropped—mostly thanks to Silas; Cyprian wasn't a heavy drinker—the conversation turned to other things. They spoke of mutual friends and acquaintances, the many dramatic recent events in the country at large and among Lord Richard and Harry Vane's family and friends, and by somewhere around midnight they were on first-name terms, with an appointment to try each other's skills at backgammon—the game, not the act—on David's return from London.

Definitely not the act. David was a good-enough looking fellow if you liked them sharp and sly, and didn't mind the powder that caked his hair, but he wasn't Dominic, and that was all Silas cared to know.

But David knew Dominic, knew Lord Richard as well as any man alive, knew everything, near as damn it. He had a trick of looking at things from other points of view that Silas was aware he lacked, and could have used with his Tory. The valet had even made a third for Jon and Will in the past, as Silas had himself, which was an odd thought, sitting here across from him. If there was a man alive Silas could talk to about Dominic, it was surely David, and with a few glasses of gin inside him and this unfamiliar, unmistakable sense of a friendship taking hold, he found he wanted to know what David thought.

“What you said,” he began, and stopped himself as abruptly. Bloody self-indulgent nonsense. He’d drunk too much.

David smiled. “My reasons for thinking you should be patient?”

*I swear, the bugger reads your mind*, Will had remarked sourly more than once. It was an irritating trait. Silas was not in the habit of discussing his business with anyone, far less his heart, and it was none of anyone’s affair. And David couldn’t truly know the things that lay between him and Dominic: the gulf of class and wealth and power and principle; the flimsy bridge of trust that had spanned it and now lay broken.

And yet Silas *did* want to know what David thought, because he’d had a couple of hours with his mind occupied by something other than Dominic gone from his life, and now that memory had come rushing back all the harder for the respite, so that Silas felt empty and airless, as though he had a lung missing.

He shrugged. It was as much as he could do. David's sharp eyes tracked the movement, and his slightly mocking smile twisted and faded to something a little more real.

"I think," he said slowly, "I think you don't understand what Lord Richard and Mr Frey have meant to each other and cost each other over the years. Lord Richard would not have lowered himself to lie for you if he hadn't known it was necessary for his dearest friend. You have no idea how displeased he was about that," he added with some feeling. "And I think, if Lord Richard has come to accept what Mr Frey wants to the extent of swallowing your damned radical insolence for his sake, it's rather lazy that you can't."

*"Lazy?"*

"Mr Frey has already put his life, liberty, reputation, career, and dearest friendship at hazard for you. What the devil more does he have to do? But the fact is, at heart, you believe the gentry are all selfish swine, and you still won't look past his position, or trust him to do the same. I call that laziness."

"It isn't that," Silas objected. "That's not it, not at all." Was it? Surely not. "The problem is he's got principles—"

David rolled his eyes. "God save me from men of principle."

"Aye, well, it's clear enough you've got none," Silas said. "But others do. And not everyone's ready to break them for the sake of a bedmate."

David's eyes widened sharply. For just a fraction of a second he looked as shocked as if Silas had struck him, then his face stilled, smoothing away the self-betrayal. When he spoke, he sounded as calm as ever. "Perhaps so. But I think it's fairly clear that Mr. Frey isn't one of those. I'm sorry to spoil your pleasure in martyrdom, but a sovereign says he'll be down here within the week."

"Tuppence says I'll have blacked your eye before then," Silas said with feeling.

"Don't do that. Lord Richard wouldn't like it."

"Right, yes, Lord Richard. Shall we talk about you?"

David gave him a long look, then leaned forward deliberately, and blew out the candle on the table. "Time for bed. I need to be up betimes to get to London."

Silas could spot a delicate hint when he was hit round the head with one, but that didn't mean he had to take it. "How long are you going to do this?"

"Do what?"

"Dance attendance. Wait on him. Be *patient*."

David's eyes met his. They looked at each other in the dim light, a long, silent look, and Silas couldn't tell what the valet was seeing, but at last he said, as though the words could not be kept in, "I don't know." He tapped his fingers on the table a couple of times, then picked up his full glass and knocked the gin back in a single, deliberate swallow. "I...don't know."

Silas waited, but that seemed to be all there was, or would be. And in truth, it wasn't his business. David

Cyprian was well equipped to get what he wanted for himself, and if he couldn't, Silas was in no position to assist him.

He pushed his chair back, leaving David seated, still looking ahead. "Thanks for the drink, then, and the conversation. Good luck with tomorrow, I dare say you'll run rings round the lot of them. We'll have that game when you're back. And—well. Good luck."

"Yes," David said. "You too. Not that you need it. I'll be dunning you for that sovereign soon."

"We'll see about that." Silas wasn't going to start nurturing the embers of hope on anyone's say-so, even David's. "And—" He recognised the bleakness in David's eyes, a faint echo of his own misery, and felt an urge to offer help, support, *something*, in the full knowledge that he couldn't be a damned bit of use. "Well, you know where to find me if you want me."

"Easy enough," David said with a smile that didn't quite convince. "I'll follow the trail of books. Good night."

Silas took up a candle to light his way to bed. He paused at the door to glance back at the solitary, white-headed figure motionless at the little table. "Aye, well. Night."

David lifted a hand, without looking up. Silas hesitated a second longer, but found nothing more to say, and left him sitting there alone.

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Thanks for reading!

David Cyprian and Lord Richard Vane's story is told in *A Gentleman's Position*, out 5 April.

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