

“If He Had His Legs We’d Be In So Much Trouble”: A Doomsday Books interlude

(A group treat, written for KJ Charles Chat to commemorate the Saracens 2023 Premiership win.)

*(Set a couple of weeks after the events of *The Secret Lives of Country Gentlemen*)*

Gareth stared at his wardrobe in a spirit of profound indecision. One might have thought, what with his recent inheritance of a baronetcy and a respectable competence to go with it (not that all the money was respectable in origin, but he wasn't going to think about *that* now), that getting dressed for an important occasion would be easy. He had a set of evening clothes suitable for dining with the Earl of Oxney, and two excellently cut coats that would spur the Squire of Dymchurch's bluff, salt-of-the-earth, incredibly dull sense of humour to call him a dandy. He was very well equipped to meet people in his own moderately elevated station.

He was going to meet someone far more important than that, and he had no idea at all what to wear. Absolutely not evening clothes. His best coat? His most countrified one? Should he be smart, and risk looking as if he placed himself above his company, or dress casually, and perhaps signal that he didn't respect the man he was going to meet?

He wished he'd asked Joss. Instead, he stuck his head out of the door and called, "Catherine! Help!"

Catherine arrived a moment later. "What is it?"

"I don't know what to wear!" Gareth blurted. "What's the...the most *Marsh* thing to do?"

"Wear for..."

He hadn't told her, he realised. "Uh, I'm going to the Revelation Inn to meet Mr. Doomsday. Asa Doomsday."

"To... Oh. *Oh.*" She had a wonderfully quick understanding, for which Gareth was profoundly grateful. Meeting Joss's grandfather, now that he knew about their relationship, would be quite bad enough without spelling it all out to Catherine. Who also knew, of course, but one could be very happy that people knew things without wanting to *talk* about them. He could feel himself going red as it was.

"Yes, I see," she said. "I think... I think a good coat, you know. The blue one suits you well."

It was what Gareth had initially thought, before second-guessing himself into oblivion. "It wouldn't look—well, bettermy?"

Catherine's rare smile lit her face at the Kentish word. "You'll be a Marsh native yet. I expect everyone will say how fine you are, probably quite loudly, but I should rather be thought overdressed than disrespectful. Especially with Asa. Joss is fierce for his grandfather."

That made entire sense. "Thank you," Gareth said wholeheartedly. "I will hold to that. I may be back late, but I have my key. I'll say good night to Luke and Cecy before I go."

"I won't wait. Pass my regards to Sybil," Catherine said, and went, leaving a ghost of affectionate mockery behind her.

Gareth strode up the lane without incident. There was no reason to expect incident, and he hoped he would stop doing so one day. The Sweetwater gang was keeping well away from Dymchurch soil for now, and Joss assured him that Nate Sweetwater had taken an uncompromisingly physical approach to discourage any of his men from so much as looking at Gareth ever again. Nobody thought Gareth knew about the missing guineas, nobody would be lying in wait, nobody was going to assault or kidnap or abduct him. He told himself that, but his hand still tightened on his stick at

every corner and it was a relief to come to the coast road and the Revelation Inn without seeing another soul.

Asa Doomsday was sitting in his rocking chair on the Revelation's porch, with a young female Doomsday at his side. He was always there, a fixture of the Marsh. A fine old gentleman, far darker-skinned than his grandson, but with some similarity in the handsome features. He would have been something special as a young man, Gareth thought.

"Good evening, Mr. Doomsday. Good evening, Emily."

"Sir Gareth. Forgive my not rising." He gestured at his legs, always blanket-covered. "Take a seat with an old man. Emily, go tell Joss Sir Gareth is here, and to pour him an ale to wet his whistle. He'll be in in a little while."

"Granda." Emily nodded at Gareth and disappeared into the inn.

Gareth took her abandoned chair. "Thank you, Mr. Doomsday. How are you?"

"Well enough. Well enough. And you? Been through some bad times, I hear."

"Quite bad," Gareth agreed with some understatement. He didn't intend to add anything, not wishing to complain, but Asa simply puffed at his pipe in silence for long enough that Gareth found himself adding, "It was all very frightening, or I found it so. I dare say it's the sort of thing that is, or used to be, normal here but it wasn't normal for me, and—well. Joss assures me I'll become used to what happened, in time."

"Believe him?"

"I don't know. I expect he would in my place, because he's so good at things. But I'm just a clerk and I've never actually been tied up and left to drown before, so 'getting used to it' seems a *little* unlikely."

That had come out more strongly than he meant. Asa blew out a cloud of ruminative smoke. "What's the alternative?"

"To—?"

“Perhaps you’ll accustom yourself to what happened. Or perhaps you won’t, and what then?”

“I don’t know. Spend the rest of my life jumping at shadows and hearing things in the night and waking up with bad dreams, I expect,” Gareth said. “I’d rather not, but I don’t quite know how to stop. People keep saying time heals all wounds, which doesn’t really help.”

“It doesn’t,” Asa said. “Some wounds don’t heal. Some go bad, and some scar, and sometimes the scars fade to nothing, and sometimes they hurt till the day you die.”

Gareth considered that. He knew Asa had been enslaved as a young man, and Gareth’s limited knowledge of the subject, one from which he had always shied away, suggested horrors that would make his own brief experience of violence and fear seem trivial. And come to that, young Luke Doomsday was wearing a scar that would mark him for life, inside and out.

“Am I making a fuss, sir?” he asked, feeling just a little small.

“Think you are?”

“I’d rather not do so. I’d far rather take it all in my stride, but I can’t seem to do that. I wish I could.”

“Seems to me you’ve done plenty else in the meantime,” Asa said unexpectedly. “My great-nevvy, for one. Doing a lot there.”

“I hope I can do *something*,” Gareth said. “He saved my life, so I do owe him a great deal, and he’s a remarkable boy, extremely bright. And—and it does take my mind off everything, to be honest, while I’m teaching him and trying to work out what to do about his schooling. And of course he’s the real sufferer in everything that happened. Goodness knows I’d rather have my nightmares than his, the poor wretch. If I could—”

He stopped. Asa eyed him, waiting.

“If I could make things better for him,” Gareth said slowly, working his way through it. “If I could give him the chance he deserves, and help him get over things himself, and—and try to make up for it all—then it would be worth it, I think. That is, there would be some sort of meaning to the whole

stupid, unnecessary business if good could come of it—because that was what was so awful, it was all so *random*. It was nothing to do with me. But maybe, if I took control of this now...because, you know, I have realised I can be braver if I have someone to be brave *for*.”

Asa’s face cracked into a smile. “That way, are you? Don’t need to be brave for Joss?”

“He can do that himself,” Gareth said instantly. It wasn’t, perhaps, the whole truth, but he wouldn’t imply Joss was anything less than superhuman to any Doomsday.

Asa’s widening smile suggested he knew that. “Hmph. So?”

“So,” Gareth said, feeling his way, “it would help me very much if I could carry on helping Luke. Which—” He had wondered how to approach this with a great deal of trepidation. But, if he was going to be brave, perhaps he should just say it and risk giving offence, because it needed saying. “Sir, I don’t think he wants to come home. Back here. The way his father died, the amount of bitterness around it—and he feels that it was his fault, because he set events in motion. I’ve told him that’s not true, but...um...he heard someone here say something to that effect.” He didn’t say *Ma Doomsday*, but he probably didn’t have to.

Asa shut his eyes. “If that boy listened less at doors,” he remarked, for once sounding entirely unguarded, and also somewhat testy. “He heard that, did he?”

“He’s still bruised from how his father beat him, he’ll be scarred for life where his father tried to kill him, and he feels as though he’s to blame for it all. He is *being* blamed. And it all comes back to his time here. I don’t know how you repair that, sir, as a family.”

“Nor do I,” Asa said, with a sudden, startling bleakness. “Nor do I, Sir Gareth, and I’m too blessed old. Are you willing to try?”

“Yes. I am.”

“Meaning?”

“He can stay at Tench House as long as he likes. As a, a staging-post to prepare him for school, we could say. He can be out of people’s eyes here while the wounds heal—Mrs. Doomsday’s, and his, and everyone else. Catherine would love to have him to mother.” So, regrettably, would Cecy, whose efforts to take the poor orphan boy under her wing were being received by Luke with abject horror. There were doubtless fights in the offing. “It would be good for everyone, I think. I don’t know if you agree?”

Asa nodded slowly. “You’d have a lot of Doomsdays passing by Tench House if he lived with you. Joss would be turning up all day and night.”

“Yes,” Gareth said, meeting his eyes. “That would probably happen.”

They looked at each other for a moment, then Asa puffed hard on his pipe to make it draw. “Draatted thing. So. Good for Luke, and you, and Joss, then?”

“I think it would be.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do, if it suits the boy. Thank you, Sir Gareth. Dare say my great-nevvy’s in good hands. Dare say my grandson might be.”

“Uh—” Gareth was going scarlet, he could feel it. “I, um.”

Asa leaned back in his chair. “My grandson is living his life free. He’s found how to be happy, and who with, and he’s walking his road as he pleases. You got any idea what that means to me, to know that?”

“Probably not, sir,” Gareth said truthfully.

“Enough. It’s enough.” The chair began to rock, with a soft creak. “You go in, now. Leave Luke’s business to me, I’ll get it agreed tomorrow. For now you’ve an ale waiting for you in there, and Joss too: he’s dressed up fine tonight. And there’s a few other folk in there who’ll want to raise a glass with you.” He gave Gareth a single, comprehensive glance, and added, “Stick to the small beer.”

Gareth had no intention of trying to beat that as an exit line. He bade farewell, and made his way into the Revelation, leaving the old man gently rocking on the porch, watching over the Marsh in silence.

See how that worked out for Luke in September, in [A Nobleman's Guide to Seducing a Scoundrel](#), set thirteen years later...