

## A Summer Afternoon in Piccadilly, 1872

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*Last month's issue told of our heroine Clara Bowman's being stranded during a blizzard in Riverdale, New York, overlooking the Hudson. This month, we turn to a single incident, a single, brief afternoon liaison between Clara and Sir John Adams, presumptive Sixth Baron of Salisbury and the brother of Clara's great new friend in England. It comes, as did the prior story, from [A Studio on Bleeker Street](#), from the early days of that story.*

As Mrs. Bowman Hoped, her daughter Clara slowly emerged from the grief that had sent her spiraling down after the deaths of her best friend Ashley Davis and of Ashley's brother Thomas, the man all knew Clara would eventually marry. That was all back in New York, though, and the summer air of London and the serendipitous meeting in Regent's Park with the young artist Felicity Adams did wonders for Clara's recovery.

Then there was John Adams. Felicity's brother and the heir to a title. She had met him when he came by Felicity's flat one afternoon and again that night with Felicity and Mrs. Bowman for dinner.

For all her claims of being immune to his charms, Sir John was not unlike the Adams's mansion in Piccadilly, of which Felicity gave the two Bowman women a tour the week before. How, for some reason Clara could not articulate, that house was superior to the grand ones with which she was familiar in New York.

Now (and at a deeper—or perhaps more superficial—level), there was something about Sir John that was a cut above the gentlemen she knew at home. His Saville Row suit was slightly better tailored. His laugh the slightest degree more amusing. And even his face and his moustache were the slightest degree handsomer than even the most well-regarded young man who attended the balls and operas that Clara enjoyed before that horrible day in May when the Davises were killed. And when he

pretended not to be waiting for her so he could accompany her to her hotel from Felicity's—claiming to “be passing by chance” his sister's building when Clara happened to emerge from it—a white lie he owned up to when he understood she'd not be so easily fooled—and told her as they walked south how pleased he was to be in her company, she felt the pleasure was on balance more hers.

Meeting and then walking with Sir John just the once removed a veil over everything, one she did not realize she'd put in place with Thomas's death. She suddenly felt deep inside herself the physical loss from that death. They had never had intimate contact, nothing beyond a brotherly kiss. But that was the point. They had never had physical contact. Now they never would.

An ocean from home and a charming, titled man. Clara dared to think about him as a *man* and herself as a *woman*. So, yes, she would keep that first stroll *entre nous*, as he asked at its end.

And from that point, she began to anticipate his appearance on the street when she prepared to leave Felicity's flat over the next days. But he did not come and she walked back to her hotel alone and disappointed.

Then he did come.

It was quite a nice afternoon, and Felicity offered to accompany her guest to the Langham Hotel, but Clara declined. She did not say why. When she stepped onto the sidewalk, she was thrilled that she was alone. For there her brother stood, a smile plastered on his face.

The walk was much as it had been that first time; *was it just a week earlier?* Yet Clara felt the two strolls were worlds apart. She walked a hair closer to him and held his arm the least bit tighter and they did not speak quite so much. By the time they reached the Langham Hotel, she felt a desire to lie with him. She knew he was opportunistic. She knew he was shallow. She knew he was engaged.

She also knew that she would soon be gone. They'd never cross paths again. So when he suggested they share another, longer turn the next afternoon, when, he said, Felicity had an obligation

with the family barrister to review and sign some papers, she agreed.

That next afternoon, Clara told her mother she wished to walk alone for a change after lunch. After a morning the Bowmans and Felicity Adams spent together, and lunch at the Langham, Mrs. Bowman went to their suite, and Clara accompanied Felicity to the street. When they parted, Clara told her new friend she would take her own stroll to Regent's Park. Which she did.

It was where she met Sir John.

She quickly was lost to him. His modesty and kindness were so at odds with how he was with his sister. Felicity had warned Clara about him, yes, but she was perhaps jealous that Clara would spend time with him and not with her.

She lost track of the time, but it was warm and she was tired. John asked if she would like some refreshment, and when they left the park near its southern end, they were in Piccadilly, not far from the family house. They soon were in its foyer.

Jones appeared, and John directed that refreshments be brought to the drawing-room on the left, off the grand stairway. The butler brought lemonade and small sandwiches and left the couple to it. Clara was on the sofa, and John was beside her, his arm draped over the sofa's back.

"You look awfully warm." His hand reached for her neck, and she allowed his fingers to graze against her skin. Far from rejecting his touch, as she knew she should have, she embraced it with a moan. She inhaled his smell, a masculinity she had never before known, and it filled her like some strain of opium and fueled her excitement. He stood and reached out his hand and she followed him up each step of the single flight that brought the pair to his bedroom, ignoring the paintings of his notable ancestors.

His room was infinitely more masculine than his sister's. The shades were lowered but not so much that the room was dark. The window was open and the slight sounds of the street drifted in. Even the air had a musky, manly smell.

Clara let him lower her gently to his bed and lift her lower dress and petticoat. Her moans had grown to panting, and she felt

the sweat on his neck as she pulled him down for their—her—first lover’s kiss. Clara knew every moment what she was doing and she did it. She allowed him to make love to her. It was in some respects painful but in others glorious, until he was done. He stood and cleaned himself as well as he could before pulling up his trousers, leaving her unfulfilled and alone on his bed.

“I shall be waiting in the drawing-room when you are decent,” and Sir John was gone.

Her mother had spoken to her shortly before she came out about relations with men, and her friends had spoken in general and sometimes very specific terms about it. They shared pulp novels and at times circulated particular passages from scandalous books purloined from beneath a brother’s bed, and half-laughed at what they read. While there were times Clara was tempted to explore matters with Thomas, she never did, and he never insisted, much as she knew he wanted to. Now Thomas was gone and it was never done and it never would be done. She would not let that happen again. She had known what she was doing and insisted to herself that she did not regret it.

Until the moment she heard the door of Sir John’s bedroom close behind him. It took her some minutes to make herself outwardly presentable. She could do nothing about the bedsheets or the odor she felt covered her skin. She slowly went through the door and down the stairs to the drawing-room. She was able, with some difficulty, to compose herself.

He was at a window, looking out. He had a glass of lemonade in his right hand and a half-eaten sandwich in his left. He turned when he heard her.

“That was very pleasant. But I must get you back now.”

Without waiting, he put what he held on to a nearby tray and passed her on his way to the door, his steps then bounding down the stairs. When he saw her at the top of the broad stairway, he called out, “Thank you, Jones. We shall be off now. I shall be back to dress for dinner in an hour or so.”

He waited, and Jones appeared. When Clara’s foot hit the floor of the foyer, the door was opened for them, and she followed Sir

John to the street where he hailed a cab to return her, alone, to the Langham, kissing her hand before she left.

When she was deposited at the hotel, she told her mother that she felt under the weather—"Perhaps it is something I had at lunch." She undressed carefully and took a bath, alone. Mrs. Bowman let her be after they shared, wordlessly, some tea and sandwiches brought to their suite.

In the warmth of the summer evening in her room, Clara lay on her bed and stared at her ceiling until sleep reached her after she knew not how long. When she awoke, she could not recall what she'd dreamt but promised herself that no one would ever know what she had done.