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HOORAY! A new book by Leonora Pruner. *Close to His Heart* is much more than a superbly researched historical romance with delightful period detail of eighteenth century England. It is a profound study of true love and the meaning of forgiveness.

Any Jane Austen fans who have ever wondered what Kitty Bennett's life might have been like if she had had a grain of good sense and had fallen into the hands of an honourable man will love this story.

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Love's Secret Storm

Love's Silent Gift

COMING SOON

The Aerie of the Wolf

Close to His Heart

BY

Leonora Pruner



Close to His Heart

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Chapter 1

TREMBLING with excitement, Grace Carstares held her candle close to the face of her mantel clock. Just past midnight. Now. At last!

She ran to her window and gazed at the silvery half-moon sliding behind a gray, smudged cloud. Its glow seemed a sign of her bright future. Hastily, she breathed a plea for God to bless her plans. This moment she was about to cross the threshold into her wonderful, new life. It was like her anticipation before her formal drawing room presentation to the King last Spring. Only this was better. Far better.

As she tied her cloak strings and picked up her two band-boxes, she reflected on the pleasant aspects of becoming a married woman. Freed of her childhood status, even her dear father would cease to consider her as his *little* girl. In Pamela's letter last week, her good friend had said her parents had treated her with more regard following her recent marriage. The adulthood and maturity Grace passionately desired would soon be hers.

She chuckled softly at the image of Mattie's reaction in the morning on finding her gone. Her maid would likely throw her apron over her head and wail loudly. No one in the entire

Greystairs household would be able to make the least sense out of her for half an hour or longer. When she returned, married, Mattie would no longer be sad. She also would have a better place in the household as her maid, along with her mistress.

Cautiously, she opened her door and glanced up and down the dimly lit corridor. No one. All was peacefully silent. Grace was about to run lightly to the top of the staircase, when she noticed something on the floor. It lay in the puddle of light cast by the night candle on the table beside her door. It was white. A leg in a white stocking lay as if carelessly discarded. A man's leg. She froze with one foot raised, grabbing the doorframe to keep from toppling onto him. Her heart gave a great thump. A person, a *man* in front of her door! Why? Who was he?

He did not move. She managed to pick up the hall candle with her fingertips. Making certain her skirts did not brush his leg, she lowered the candle and moved its light along his long, cloak-covered form until its rays illuminated his face. Having no brothers, she had never seen an adult male asleep.

The sight of a man's face in repose gave her a prickly shiver. His peaceful features were not at all offensive. Yes, they were very nice despite the dark stubby growth on his chin. Of course he was not nearly as handsome as her incomparable, golden-haired Edmund.

She studied his face, bending closer, stifling a rash urge to touch it. Vainly, she searched her recollections. Who could he be? A mysterious man wrapped in a dark blue cloak lying across her door! Try as she might to identify him, he evoked not the slightest stirring of memory.

Mattie reported the arrival of a friend of her father's that afternoon. Since Grace pled a severe headache at supper and tea, she had not seen him. Could this man be one of his servants? But why at her door? Could he have mistaken it for his master's? How archaic to have a servant sleep across his threshold!

Suddenly, she realized she was staring into a pair of piercing blue eyes. In only a moment, her shaking body was braced against the inside of her locked door; her heart hammering against her ribs as a frantic, caged bird, the candle no longer in her hand.

When her heart slowed and her breathing approached a more normal pattern, she stepped away from the door. Her toe struck her bandbox. Edmund! He was waiting. How could she get to him? With that awful stranger beyond her door, she could not leave her room.

Her windows overlooked that part of an old moat remaining on one side of their otherwise modern Georgian home. She already knew from an unfortunate childhood escapade that leaving her room from a window meant a swim in the icy moat. She was not ready to do that this night of all nights. She could not go to Edmund as a half-drowned kitten. It would not be a good way to embark on their romantic elopement. With a sinking feeling, she realized she could neither go to Edmund, nor send him a message. He would wait and wait, and she would not come. Unless the man left.

Sighing, she settled on her window seat, prepared to wait an hour or so until the stranger left or fell into a deep sleep. Her beautiful plans in disarray, she gave in to frustration; tears streaked her cheeks.

With a start, she woke to the sound of rain beating against the window. Why was she here, leaning against the cold window-pane instead of in her bed? Her night candle across the room had shrunk to barely an inch in height, casting quavering, monstrous shapes here and there. Touching the rough texture of her travel cloak aroused vivid memories of the evening's events. That awful man across her doorway, and Edmund waiting. Rain!

Hoping the stranger had now gone, Grace snatched up her bandboxes and gently slid back the bolt. The well-oiled door swung open easily, silently. The night candle was gone. Without

light to see whether the man was still there, she knelt down and inched her hands forward in the direction she thought he had lain.

Nothing. He was gone! Relieved, she took her boxes and stepped into the corridor. Through the thin sole of her slipper she felt a thickness. Stooping down, she felt along her foot. Her fingers came in contact with a heavy fabric. A little farther she felt it rise, as if covering a person. She waited, holding her breath, straining for some sound. There was a slight exhale. Then he moved!

It took but a fraction of a moment to stifle her impulse to jump over him and flee downstairs to Edmund. While her intimate knowledge of the house would aid her in reaching the outside door, it would be chained. Doubtless, she would be caught struggling with the keys, and her elopement would be exposed. If she waited, she might succeed later. Stealthily, she retreated into her room and bolted her door.

After some time, the rain stopped. Again she tried to leave, and again the man's presence prevented her. In the dismal gray of dawn, she unpacked her boxes, undressed and went to bed. Mattie must not suspect anything or she would tell Mary, the cook, and all the household staff would know, including Mason, her father's manservant. And they would laugh at her. Worst of all, her father would be angry.

Grace was still crying as she drifted to sleep.

"Do pinch your cheeks, miss, please do. You look so drawn out today," Mattie was saying as she finished arranging several of Grace's golden brown ringlets around her face and adjusted the mauve ribbon wound around a cluster of carefully brushed curls lying on her right shoulder.

Listlessly, Grace responded, "I couldn't seem to sleep. Maybe it was the storm."

Three loud raps on her door interrupted them. Mattie opened

it to a liveried footman. "The master requests that Miss Grace join him in the green salon," he said with unusual formality.

"You heard, miss?" Mattie asked after closing the door.

"Yes. I'll go right away," Grace answered rising from the dressing stool. In her dulled, weary state, she could not muster enthusiasm for anything. At least seeing what her father wanted would give her something to do.

"Please, miss, your cheeks," Mattie reminded her as she twitched the folds of Grace's mauve silk skirts into place over her hoops. "You look lovely, miss. I'm sure your father will be pleased."

Surprised, Grace glanced back in her gold-framed mirror. She had submitted passively to Mattie's efforts, little noting or caring what she was doing. Mattie had dressed her hair rather elaborately for a quiet morning at home. She was wearing a new dress opening over her best, flounced petticoat. Perplexed, she asked, "Why have you dressed me thus? I am not going to a party at this hour."

"Your father sent for you. I made sure he will want you to look your best to meet his friend. 'Tis Lord Buryhill himself, miss."

"Is it? Are you certain? Some time ago, Father said something about his being in poor health. I thought he said he had died." His lordship seemed a nice enough old gentleman when she met him at Petworth some two years past. She recalled him as tall and spare, with black eyes that sliced through to her bones. With a shiver, she thought of the stranger's penetrating blue gaze during the night. Quickly, she turned from her image. "You have done well, although I scarce think it will make much of an impression on them. Father will surely think it odd. They always like to relive school days and hunts and maybe go for a slow drive."

Although still in a numbed state, she glanced about while descending the stairs to see if Edmund was on duty in the hall. He was not. Bainbridge was.

Just before entering the green salon, Grace pinched both her cheeks hard. It would not do for her father to think her ill. He

might restrict her activities to protect her health. With a slight rise in spirit, she decided that as soon as she could safely get word to Edmund, they would plan their elopement again. Then, she could be truly happy. And, in time, a very little time, she was confident her father would welcome them both back to Greystairs.

As the footman Bainbridge opened the door for her, her father turned from the far window where he and his guest stood talking. With an exclamation of pleasure, he crossed to her side, his short legs nearly at a trot. Taking her arm, he led her to the stranger. To her surprise, she noticed her plump father wore his good gold, brocade vest, his favorite brown velvet suit, and his best wig, a fine tribute to his regard for his old friend.

That man seemed absorbed in the view outside. His white bagwig was properly curled with the prescribed three curls above each ear. Surely his health must have improved, for he looked not so spare as she remembered and his shoulders seemed broader. Perhaps it was the skill of his tailor that made him appear thus. The silver braid and embroidery decorating his full skirted coat enhanced its mauve color, a few shades darker than her dress.

"My dear, you are lovely, as always. I have been so eager for you to meet my friend Lord Buryhill."

"I believe I had that pleasure when we were last at Petworth House," she said with a confident smile, looking up as the man turned.

"Did we? I beg your pardon. I do not recall our meeting *there*," he commented in a smooth, deep voice with the barest emphasis on his last word.

His sharp, blue gaze slashed through her composure as an expertly wielded rapier. To cover her shock, she sank in a formal curtsy, much deeper than the occasion required.

"No, no, my dear. You are thinking of his father, my particular friend," her father said. "Unfortunately, he died a few months later. Such a loss! Ah!" he interrupted himself, "Williams is here.

Please excuse me, milord. I must go to see Fine Lady. She foaled early this morning, another perfect colt they say. Grace will entertain you in my absence. This should take but a few minutes." He sped across the room and left.

"Father..." Grace's hand fell to her side as the door closed. Wordlessly, she turned and stared up at Lord Buryhill, trying to bring her disordered thoughts into some coherence. However, once she caught an idea, it had no more substance than a shadow.

During the next few moments of silence, she bore Lord Buryhill's scrutiny uncomfortably. Although he was not frowning, almost smiling, she was nearly strangling with tension.

He spoke gently, "I only assumed the title eighteen months since, after my father died. Doubtless, you expected to see him. He told me about meeting you at Petworth. At that time he formed a very favorable impression of you."

In attempting to clear her mind she shook her head. "Why?"

"Why am I here? To visit your father. We have done business together and he invited me to come here. I wish to continue his friendship. My father valued his advice greatly, as do I."

Again she shook her head. "Why? Last night, why?"

He raised brows. "I might also ask why you were furtively leaving your room long past midnight wearing a traveling cloak and carrying bandboxes."

Goaded into a defense of anger, she replied haughtily, "I am sure my reasons could not be of the least interest to your lordship."

"Quite the contrary."

"How can *my* activities be your concern as a *guest* of my father's?" she countered, working to maintain an imperious manner.

"As a guest, no concern. But," he paused, "I have received your father's permission to pay my addresses to you. What you do is of prime concern to me."

She snapped her gaping mouth shut, then exclaimed, "My father's permission! I...I was not told," she finished weakly. Surely

there could not be a lack of color in her hot cheeks now. A wave of helplessness churned about her as her life spun out of control.

"You were sick with the headache yesterday, so we could not see you until today."

She thought his tone maddeningly calm and sensible as his words shredded her once bright future. In the brief time it took to enter this room and make her curtsy, she had crossed known boundaries and now stood in uncharted, hostile territory.

Politely, his lordship placed his hand under her elbow and guided her to the nearest chair. "Let us sit a bit. You have just sustained several shocks."

Clenching her teeth, not permitting any movement of her facial muscles lest they crack her thin mask, she kept repeating in her mind, I must not scream. I must not cry. But, in the background, she saw Edmund drenched and wretched in the night rain. This unwanted stranger shattered her dreams beyond repair and destroyed her one chance at happiness.

He waited quietly, giving no evidence of any impatience. The unperturbed manner of this man further eroded her self-confidence.

Finally, she turned toward him, fastened her gaze on the wall beyond his right shoulder and asked again, "Why?"

"Why! Why do I want to marry you?" He actually laughed. "Have you not regarded your image in your mirror? You are lovely and charming. Beyond that, because I need a wife. Because you are the daughter of a fine family and my father urged my suit. Because," his voice became deeper, "because if his estimate of your character is as accurate as his observation of your face and figure, I hope to come to love you even before we become engaged."

She gasped at the fervor in his voice. "And if you do not?"

"I do not foresee that eventuality," he assured her.

She persisted, earnestly, "And if you do not?"

Leaning forward, he grasped her chin with two fingers of

his right hand pressing it just firmly enough to turn her staring eyes toward his face. "Am I truly too late? Does he matter that much to you?"

The compassionate tenderness in his eyes completely disarmed her. "I, I do not know what you mean," she faltered.

His voice lowered, increasing his intensity. "Do not lie to me!" he warned. "Does he mean that much to you?" Now his tone demanded her reply.

Unable to move her head, she lowered her eyelids to escape his steely gaze. "Yes," she whispered.

He sighed and released her. "I wanted to come months past, but was prevented by the requirements of mourning and...and various other matters." Again he sighed. "Perhaps I delayed overlong." He paused, then added, "You should know that I informed your young man that you would not be meeting him. He did not wait vainly in the rain."

Astonished, she gasped, "You did what?"

"I sent word that you would not meet him, so he would not wait all night for you."

"But...but, how did you know? How...how did you know what was planned and where he was?"

"It was gossiped about the stable stalls, and my man told me."

Aghast, she repeated, "Gossiped! About the stables! You cannot mean it!" Again she felt her blood speed to her face.

"I very rarely say what I do not mean," he reproved her. "It is quite true. It seems your young man was giving himself airs and dropping hints. The other servants put their heads together to determine why and when. They always do. When they accused him of it, he boasted that soon he would be their master and they had best mind their tongues with him."

She remained staring at him, trying to assimilate what he was saying. "He would not," she protested without much conviction.

"You may set your mind at ease that he did not suffer a

lengthy wait.” He added, “But had we met yesterday, as your father and I intended, I doubt I would have given the least thought for that foolish man’s comfort. He would have waited until dawn and hated you for not coming.”

“I...I don’t understand.”

“It would be an effective way to destroy my competition. I will not countenance another until I have some opportunity to fix your affection,” he said firmly.

“But you sent him word not to wait.”

“That was before I went up to lie before your door.”

“Before!”

“Before I looked into your face by the light of but one candle.”

“Oh.”

“After that moment, I had no thought for that young man.”

Recognizing that denial was futile, she gave up all such efforts. “I...I should thank you for warning Edmund so he was not, did not suffer the storm. I was...worried about him. But...but how did you know I would not escape you and still meet him?”

“Because I lay at your door.”

“I could have jumped over you and escaped by a way you do not know.”

He smiled. “But I am much quicker than you, I’ll warrant. I should have caught you. You could not escape. I knew you thought to do that the second and third time you tested me.”

“You knew, each time?”

“Of course. I was on guard duty. It is a poor guard who does not know such things.”

“Oh.” She felt ready to sink through the floor. “Did you inform my fa – father?”

“I saw no reason to do so. My man warned me when the servants arose. I left just as they came to light the fires. No one else knows beyond the four of us, unless...Edmund has told someone.”

“Oh, he would not!” She paused and added, “But you said it

was talked about in the stables.”

“He may have a very red face this morning. They will scold him for being a coxcomb, if not a liar.”

“Oh, dear. Will they be cruel?”

“Doubtless. Keep in mind, Miss Carstares, he deserves whatever he gets. He would not have suffered at all had he been more discreet. In that event you would have carried out your plans. He risked holding you up to ridicule in the household. My man is busy below stairs and in the stable putting to rest any speculation involving you.”

Her eyes widened at the thought of her thwarted elopement being discussed among the servants, Mattie giggling, Bainbridge snickering, old Forbes with that horrible leering smile of his while Mary, the cook, talked on and on.

Her stubborn will power, often leading her into various scrapes, now proved her mainstay, preventing her from immediately giving way to tears. She would not betray her emotions before this man who was watching her so closely. “I trust that...that your man will have little difficulty, that...that the talk will not be so wide as you indicate,” she said stiffly. “Now, I must retire, or we will add new fuel to the gossips. I cannot imagine why Father was so thoughtless to leave me alone with you for such a long time.”

“There is the new foal. I believe it is from his favorite mare.”

“Of course. Fine Lady. He will not have noticed how long he was gone.” She moved to the door with a dignified tread, her back straight, and her chin a bit higher than normal.

Quickly, he preceded her, saying, “I beg you will show me the finer points of your shrubbery after dinner. Mr. Carstares said that is your particular interest.”

She hesitated, then answered woodenly, without looking at him. “Yes. Of course, if you wish. My, my pleasure.”

“I truly hope so,” he replied, opening the door for her with a flourishing bow.

In her room, after dismissing Mattie, Grace sank to the floor, in a heap of mauve silk and lace. With fingernails digging unheeded into her palms and tears streaming down her cheeks, she panted for breath and fought to hold herself from the frightening chaos of an uncontrolled tantrum. Fearing a passing servant would hear and come to offer unwanted comfort, she choked back her screams and whispered her protests against the vile fate bringing this unwanted man into her life at this most inopportune time. One day later. Just one day would have made all the difference. Now she would never know the passionate delights Edmund hinted at so temptingly. No longer a romantic heroine, she was cast in the role of a tragic victim. Why? Why? Why!

At length, wearied from her sleepless night, she hitched up the back of her hoops and threw herself across her bed. She could still refuse. But to what purpose? After last night's humiliating disaster, Edmund surely would not seek her out. Possibly, he had already left. In fairness, she had to admit that it was true. His embarrassment was of his own doing. Had he kept their plans to himself as she had expected, he would have suffered no loss of dignity. And, as Lord Buryhill had pointed out, their plans might have succeeded.

Buryhill. What of this man, Lord Buryhill? Tall he was, especially beside her father who barely topped her. Certainly, his father had been a gentleman of the first order. His kind manner at Petworth was most gracious to a young girl barely out of the schoolroom. The son seemed to take after his father.

Technically, she could refuse. But her past experience indicated that would accomplish little. Once he took it into his mind that something was good for her, her father was immovable, untouched by tears or logic. All her protests would be dismissed in the resolute belief that of all people in the world, he knew what was best for her. Never could she complain of a lack of love but, rather, of too much, preventing her from living with the freedom she desired.

Impotently bound to a bleak future not of her choosing, she drifted into a restless doze.

Lord Buryhill watched Grace slowly mount the stairs from the entry hall. Her father may be only a wealthy tradesman, but she bore herself well with dignity and control, despite what must have been a shocking revelation on their meeting. Truly, her straight nose, delicate, arched brows, and fine features were as those of a princess of the blood. And those eyes, those soft, brown eyes. What he would give to see them sparkle with joy! To look on him with... Later, perhaps. Now it was too soon for that. While her attempted elopement was deplorable, it also revealed spirit. This was no meek, docile miss, but a young woman with a strong will.

On his way to join her father and admire the new foal, he wondered if she could truly be so innocent of the implications of her beauty and her father's business success. Buryhill had no urgent need of the large dowry that must surely accompany her marriage. However, many young men she would meet in London would have greater interest in that than in this intriguing young woman. Probably her talkative footman was among them.

More than ever, he regretted the necessity of delaying his visit to Greystairs. Had he come sooner, her affections might not have become engaged to that foolish footman. Was it irrevocable? She was quite young. Certainly, the revelation of the man's boastful chatter among the servants had upset her. Perhaps, with careful attention, he could blot out his image in her mind and replace it with his own – a pleasant task.

And what of himself? He took pride in his integrity and honesty. Had he misspoken when he said he expected to love her even before they were engaged? It would not be difficult to love her. Harder not to love her. He had long given up finding a woman sharing his beliefs and commitment. However, her father's comments last month regarding Oxford's Holy Club had renewed

his hopes. Was she the woman he so urgently longed for as his life and soul mate?

As he joined Adam Carstares, Buryhill concluded that this morning he had encountered a young woman with engaging facets in her character. It solidified his intent to make her his bride, even as his father wished.

Grace revived hearing Mattie softly calling her to prepare for dinner. As Mattie removed Grace's gown, she clucked reprovingly at its crumpled state. She pressed some cool pads on Grace's eyes to repair the ravages of weeping and dashed a bit of rose water here and there.

Grace selected a soft green, rather ordinary gown unlike the elaborate mauve one. She would not attempt to impress his lordship. Mattie's frown signaled her disapproval of Grace's choice, although she said nothing.

At first, Grace thought to wear no jewelry. Then, she chose a single strand of pearls to fill the rectangular space above her white stomacher. Her mother's pearls always infused a warm confidence into her, a confidence she especially needed this day. In some ways, it seemed that the older she became, the more she missed being able to talk with her mother. She felt she needed her support more than ever.

Descending to the dining room, Grace sadly reflected on her plight. Knowing her father, she decided her only escape would be finding some blatant flaw in her suitor. Only then might she convince her father to change his mind. But there would not be a flaw. Her careful father would have checked for that, thoroughly, long ago.

During the meal, resentful at her helpless position, she limited her remarks to monosyllables. Neither her father's genial chatter nor Lord Buryhill's polite efforts on her behalf elicited a greater response. However, her reticence did not dissuade her determined

suitor from renewing his request to be shown their shrubbery.

With her father's beaming approval, she led his lordship into their gardens. As they descended the long flight of ancient grey stone steps giving the manor its name, she set up a verbal shield of lengthy descriptions of the monks, nuns, or other ancient peoples who may have worn the depressions into the steps.

Early spring blooms brightened the side garden. As dryly and indifferently as she could, she pointed out the plants and gave a bit of their history. But, since this was a special love of hers, she could not resist being drawn out by his interested queries. Soon she warmed to her subject, telling far more than her original intent. Anticipating but a meager half hour, gradually her anxiety lessened, she relaxed, and the time extended.

At the far end of a path flanked with budding rose bushes, he commented politely, "Your father mentioned that you have a private garden. Would you mind showing it to me? He said it was out of the ordinary."

"Did he?" Grace frowned. Automatically, she fingered the strand of pearls. That place was so private she did not like exposing it to anyone. Her father's mention of it to this man was almost in the way of violating a confidence.

Edmund's deplorable response some weeks previously, convinced her that no one would understand what she tried to do on that abandoned hillside. His disdain at a lady soiling her hands with the earth was most disheartening. To be fair, it still wore winter's shroud and did not show to advantage. She had not been back since then. "Yes, it is different," she admitted reluctantly. "You probably would not like it."

"Perhaps. He said no one else had anything to do with it besides yourself." Buryhill added solemnly, "If I find it too offensive, it could be grounds for me to cry off, and you would be saved from a hideous fate."

Startled, she glanced at his face. The twinkle in his eyes and

quiver of one eyebrow betrayed humor behind his sober expression, completely throwing her off balance. Airily, she replied, "Then I have nothing to lose, do I?"

"Nothing," he agreed, "and possibly much to gain."

A surge of recklessness prompted her to say, "We must go through this wall."

"By secret passage or magic?"

"By the green door over there." Briskly, she walked to the stone wall, mellowed by centuries, and the small door, which he opened for her. It was necessary for him to stoop a little to pass through it, emphasizing his height.

As they emerged on a gently sloping bank, Grace felt a swell of pleasure at the color before them. Wild strawberries carpeted the ground with dots of white blossoms. Clumps of daffodils were beginning to show around the rocks she personally had carried or rolled up the hill from the stream feeding the moat. Bluebells and violets clustered here and there with ferns. Thick with buds, the camellias and azaleas stood before a background of oleanders against the wall. Bright green tufts of new leaves festooned bare tree branches. The energy of spring fairly pulsed in every direction.

Anxiously, she awaited his judgment, rolling a pearl between her fingers and staring at a small nearby group of purple violets.

His slight sigh caught her attention. Sadly, he shook his head, saying, "I regret I find not the least fault in this. Rather it seems you have a sensitive feel for the land, for natural beauty. Was it all like that?" He waved to the unruly brush and bracken beyond the line of berry bushes edging her plot.

"Yes, it was." Slowly, she looked up at him with narrowed eyes and asked with deep suspicion, "Do you *truly* like it?"

"Yes. Very much. You must have worked hard to clear that and plant all this."

Unable to discern the least trace of insincerity in his voice, she answered honestly, "It was difficult. But I enjoyed it. For years, as

a young girl, I would come here daily and do a little. At first I was hiding from Miss Hodges' lessons. She was my governess. Then it became a joy in itself. I was determined to make something special, unique, unlike the other gardens."

"Something in tune with nature. Something that Mr. Brown, 'Capability' Brown, would approve. Within a fortnight, it should be magnificent. I am sorry to disappoint you, but I really find it very much to my liking. Perhaps some day you would enjoy visiting the east side of Westwood. I have convinced the gardeners to let it flourish unaided. But it could do with some sensitive direction."

"Oh." To her annoyance, she felt her cheeks flush in pleasure at his appreciation of her work. Why did it have to be him and not Edmund who saw her work as having merit instead of being foolishness?

Lord Buryhill commented, "I am very gratified to discover that an attractive young woman is able to engage in worthwhile activities that may even require labor."

"You do not think ladies should not dig in the dirt, or dirty their hands?"

"On the contrary, if it gives them pleasure, I commend them."

With a frown she asked, "Do you think ladies are lazy?"

"Yes. And totally absorbed in their own affairs," he added. With a smile, he softened his response with, "At least the few I've known have been like that. Ah, you have another way of escape. If you prove yourself such a woman, I shall most certainly find some excuse to cry off."

"That is all I must do?"

"Yes. However, I am convinced that to do so would be a betrayal of your true self."

Puzzled by this man, she looked away. He was as elusive as a sunbeam. Did he want to marry her or was he playing with her? He was not behaving the way she had imagined a suitor would. Cautiously, she looked at him from the corner of her eyes. This

was the man her father wanted her to marry. What desirable characteristics did he perceive in this man that she did not?

To recover her poise, she suggested, "Perhaps we should go back. My father might become concerned at my being gone so long."

"Without doubt, you are correct." He bowed her through the door and offered his arm as they strolled leisurely back through the walks and up the stairs to the house. Although she accepted his arm simply as the merest civility, several times she found the need to lean on him when a pebble or in a slight depression in the path threw her off balance. She sensed a reassuring dependability and strength through his steady support.

After climbing to the top terrace, they paused to survey the Downs rolling away on all sides. She thrilled to their brilliant green covering of new grass. Above, dark clouds covered part of the blue skies, promising another imminent shower. She filled her lungs with the sweet, cooling air.

"Westwood offers a different view," his lordship commented. "Toward the south, it is of the sea. On the north, its park is quite commendable. Beyond that, we see the Downs, but at a distance. Perhaps, at the close of the Season, you will honor me with a visit."

"At the close of the Season?" Grace blinked her eyes. In her agitation over Edmund, she had forgotten. How was that possible? Last year she had been presented to King George and his grandson, Prince George. She had enjoyed a famous round of parties, plays, drives, and new friends. Since her father in his wisdom had rejected her many offers, this Season should be even more exciting for having gained what they called "*ton** bronze."

During the autumn and dull wintry months, Edmund had joined the staff and began wooing her. All thoughts of the Season

* "*ton*" is a term commonly used to refer to Britain's high society during the Georgian era. It comes from the French word meaning "taste" or "everything that is fashionable" and is pronounced the same way as *tone*. The full phrase is *le bon ton*, meaning "good manners" or "in the fashionable mode," characteristics held as ideal by the British *ton*.

became inconsequential since she expected to be elsewhere in blissful and disgraceful isolation from her father's anger. Now all was changed.

"It would be unthinkable for you to miss it, would it not?" Buryhill asked. "You made a deep impression last year. You must confirm it this year." He directed their steps so casually toward the house that she hardly realized they were entering until they mounted the steps to the side door.

"Yes, I was quite looking forward to it," she assented, amending silently, until Edmund's pledge of love distracted me.

"May I expect your visit at Westwood in the summer?"

"That is too far in the future now. Let us decide that later."

His ready acceptance of her indecisive postponement caused her an uneasy twinge. If he was serious in paying his addresses, would he not press his invitation? What sort of person was he?

About the Author



Leonora Pruner was born in Dubuque, Iowa, but has lived most of her life in California. Writing has been an important activity since junior high. She graduated from Westmont College in 1953 and earned an MBA from Pepperdine University in 1981.

Fascination with a possible eighteenth-century English character led to five years of extensive research, which resulted in the 1981 and 1987 publication of two period novels. That time remains of great interest to the author, and she continues to use eighteenth-century England as a setting for her work.

Leonora married in 1953, and her family has expanded from two children to thirteen grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

She lived in the Republic of Maldives from 1987 to 1997, where she collected folklore and taught economics and computer science. While there she wrote the first drafts of this book.

Other books by Leonora Pruner include *Love's Secret Storm* and *Love's Silent Gift*. Her next novel, *The Aerie of the Wolf*, is due to be released soon.

The Publisher's Word

HOOORAY TO LEONORA PRUNER for her third romance period novel (mid-1700s in England.) When our mutual friend, Roger Nelson, who is famous for his one-man acts depicting heroes of the faith John Wesley and Saint Patrick, recommended Leonora and her book to us, I was reluctant to deviate from our path of publishing theological books. But now we are pleased and proud to add to our Noble Novels the publication of our first period Christian romance fiction. We congratulate the author on her story.

From the beginning, God created man and woman for each other. Genesis 2:24 states that man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be one flesh. Our Creator perfectly made husband and wife to love one another romantically and in all self-sacrificing ways, this within the joys of God's first ordained institution: marriage!

The roots of "modern romance" harken back to the mid-eighteenth century (the time of the setting for this novel) in England.* Much of the storytelling of romanticism since that time has sprung from self-centered thinking. In stark contrast, godly imagination in storytelling, such as in the great classics of the past and in *Close to His Heart*, produces the best of creative thinking and writing. Leonora Pruner's love story is based on honor, faithfulness, and forgiveness.

Novels are read not so much for information as for a vicarious experience. Often fiction displays truths with an added emotional dimension that especially impact our understanding. Faithful marriages can be used as models for God's people. Without a doubt, God created people with the emotional capacity to love each other and Him. God's unconditional love, as reflected in His children,

* William Vaughn Moody and Robert Morss Lovett, *A History of English Literature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 237, 246.

The Publisher's Word

can bring powerful healing into a relationship with the application of forgiveness. Such a vicarious experience through uplifting fiction may encourage readers to seek healing for themselves and their own relationships and marriages.

A well-governed, godly imagination for the way things ought to be in Christ is a fundamental means by which we fulfill our calling to love God and our neighbor, the two greatest Commandments proclaimed by Jesus.

Nordskog Publishing desires to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. By faith through inspired authors like Mrs. Pruner with this story of love and forgiveness, we wish to contribute to the redemption, in the hands of the redeemed, of every human endeavor – including period romance novels. We pray that every reader will pursue wisdom, remaining mindful of Paul the Apostle's admonition, which is also our Noble Novels Biblical focus:

“...whatever things are true, whatever things are *noble*, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things.”

(Philippians 4:8, NKJV, *emphasis added.*)

Loving with a pure and undefiled heart is only fully developed through the indwelling of The Holy Spirit upon being sealed as a disciple of Jesus Christ as we embrace our Lord's grace, and are empowered from within by the Spirit of God. When we love our Heavenly Father through His Son, He enables us to express true love to others and, thus, godly romanticism toward our betrothed.

It is with this in mind that we present Leonora Pruner's novel, *Close to His Heart*.

— Gerald Christian Nordskog
Publisher, Noble Novels
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