

James Audley Has a Cold*

***and definitely not consumption(?)**

Note: To Have and to Hoax takes place in July 1817; this bonus scene is set seven months later, in February 1818 (during To Swoon and To Spar, for those who like to keep track of timelines). Happy reading!

James Audley had a cold.

It was February, so this seemed like a fairly unremarkable occurrence. He'd probably caught it on one of his morning rides in Hyde Park—a small price to pay for the sanity those rides granted him, the way he returned home pleasantly weary, his cheeks cold, and (if he timed it perfectly) could shed his riding clothes and crawl back beneath the sheets into the bed where Violet still slumbered. She was warm and soft and sleepy, her dark hair a riot of curls that she refused to sensibly plait before bed, her mouth curved slightly down at the edges. He would strip down to his smalls and curl his body around her warmth, which often enough prompted a sleepy protest from her once his cold skin met hers. Sometimes she'd roll over, tucking herself against him, sharing her warmth as she drifted back off to sleep; others, she'd come fully awake, and she'd share her warmth with him in another way entirely.

These pleasant reminiscences were interrupted by a violent sneeze, one he only just managed to stifle in a handkerchief. He blinked down at himself in disgust; he was sitting in an armchair before the fire in the sitting room just beyond his bedchamber, wearing his warmest dressing gown over a nightshirt. He felt like an ailing grandfather; he was considering fetching a blanket for his lap, but wasn't sure his dignity could tolerate this.

At this precise moment, Violet entered the room, giving every appearance of such good health that James could not help but be a bit offended by it. She was wearing a gown of grey wool, her hair simply dressed, and yet—despite his current misery—it still made his chest ache to look at her. She was so lovely, no matter what she was wearing. (He preferred it, of course, when she was wearing nothing at all, but that was generally frowned on beyond the confines of the bedroom, he supposed.)

“How are you feeling?” she asked, drawing him from the inappropriate—albeit enjoyable—detour his thoughts had taken.

“Fine,” he said stoically, which prompted an eye roll from his would-be nurse. She reached out to press a hand to his forehead, her skin cool against his.

“You’ve a fever!” she exclaimed, and he resisted the urge to draw his dressing gown up to his chin. He was, as a matter of fact, feeling a bit . . . fuzzy. It was disconcerting. When he tried to express this sentiment to Violet in what he thought was perfectly plain language, her expression morphed into that of a sane person trying to appease a lunatic.

“I think I’ll call for Dr. Worth,” she said.

“Why not merely summon Belfry?” he suggested, his thoughts momentarily lucid enough to muster a bit of resistance. “He’s quite experienced at making diagnoses, as I recall.”

“If you begin displaying signs of consumption, I will,” she said angelically.

Which was when James suddenly had what, to his fever-addled mind, seemed like a Very Good Idea.

Violet was reading in the library when there was a faint tap at the door and Dr. Worth poked his kind, lined face into the room.

“Dr. Worth,” she said, dropping the volume of poetry she’d been perusing and rising, “thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“Not at all, Lady James,” he said with a smile. He had been the Audley family physician for many years now, and had always been fond of James, Violet knew. “Wooton took the liberty of showing me directly to Lord James, and I’ve conducted a brief examination.” He was frowning slightly as he spoke, and Violet felt a brief pang of worry; she had not truthfully thought James very ill—it seemed like an ordinary winter cold to her—and had mainly summoned Dr. Worth to annoy her husband. But the doctor’s frown now gave her pause. If James was truly ill . . .

“It is my opinion,” Dr. Worth continued, “Lord James is not badly ill, and will be fine after a couple of days of rest. But he was very insistent that he is gravely unwell.”

Violet went still. “*Was* he,” she said slowly.

Dr. Worth nodded solemnly. “He was doing an awful lot of dramatic coughing into a handkerchief, my lady—though his lungs sounded perfectly fine to me—and he even went so far as to mention that he might have the same malady that ailed you last summer, which I thought was odd, since I do not recall treating you for an illness last summer . . .”

Though Dr. Worth was still speaking, his words faded in the face of the buzzing of Violet’s own thoughts.

A cough indeed, she thought, suppressing an incredulous snort with some difficulty. He would be *wishing* he had a consumptive cough by the time she was through with him.

“Lady James” Dr. Worth asked, interrupting her thoughts and looking slightly alarmed by whatever expression was currently on her face. “Was there anything else I could advise you on?”

“No,” Violet said absently, her thoughts still whirling. “Only,” she added suddenly, gripped by a *brilliant* idea, “I don’t suppose you know where I can acquire a goat?”

James had just drifted into a doze when he heard the first “maa?”

His eyes shot open, and he elbowed himself up to a seated position in bed, where he’d retreated after Dr. Worth had departed.

“Is that . . . a goat?” he asked blankly.

“Oh, good, you’re awake!” Violet said brightly; James blinked, and realized that the bearded, inquisitive-looking fellow was on a rope lead that his dearly beloved wife had in a strong grip.

Was he hallucinating? Was his fever worse than he’d previously realized? Things still seemed a bit fuzzy, but he was relatively certain that there was, in fact, a real, live goat in his bedchamber.

“Violet,” he said, trying to inject a note of stern, matter-of-fact competence into his voice—and probably failing miserably, given that he sounded vaguely like a frog and badly needed to sneeze—“why is there a farm animal in my bedroom?”

“It’s for your consumption!” Violet said cheerfully; for a moment, words failed him, and the object of his affections took advantage of his silence to lead the goat a few feet closer.

“Maa?” inquired the goat.

James gazed at it suspiciously.

“Maa?” the goat asked again, a bit more uncertain this time.

“I thought we could name him Wolfgang,” Violet said affectionately. “To remind him of his alpine homeland.”

“Violet,” James said, with what he considered to be admirable patience, “what does a goat have to do with my—er—”

“Consumption?” Violet supplied innocently. “Because that *is* what you informed Dr. Worth you feared you were suffering from, is it not?”

“Indeed.” James let out a feeble cough.

Violet’s eyes narrowed.

James sniffled.

Violet smiled. “Well,” she said slowly, before breaking off with a sharp, “Wolfgang! No!” as their new companion tried to take a healthy bite of the counterpane. She tightened her grip on the lead and tugged him closer to her.

“If you will recall,” she continued, as if no interruption had occurred, “when *I* was ailing last summer, it was *you* who suggested that I might benefit from a sojourn at a Swiss sanatorium—there was something about all the goats helping me heal?”

This did, in fact, sound vaguely familiar, though there had been so much absolute nonsense that James had uttered at the time that he could not recall his specific words.

“That was very considerate of me,” he said, straight-faced. “However, since you seem to have managed a miraculous recovery without the intervention of any goats, I wonder if I might be permitted to attempt the same?”

Violet adopted a mournful look. “I don’t know,” she said slowly. “It seems your case has progressed so rapidly—you were fine at breakfast yesterday, and now, a day later, here you are. Consumptive and weak!” She flung a dramatic hand to her breast; the neckline of her gown was not particularly revealing, but James found this nevertheless distracting.

“Weak, am I?” he asked, shoving back the blankets and rising to his feet. He was clad only in a nightshirt, which gaped open a bit at the neck; he noted with satisfaction that Violet seemed momentarily distracted by the sight of a sliver of his bare chest, her gaze caught on that slice of visible skin.

He gradually stepped towards her, his steps slow, until he was close enough that he could use his height to his advantage, looming over her until she was forced to tip her head back to meet his eyes.

He reached out with his index finger and tilted her chin up—

“Maa?” asked Wolfgang.

At the same moment, James sneezed.

And Violet, of course, burst into laughter.

“Get back in bed,” she said, giggling helplessly as she pushed at his shoulder with one hand, tugging ineffectually at Wolfgang’s lead with the other.

“But my consumption,” he protested, reaching out to snake an arm around her waist and pull her closer. “How will I convene with Wolfgang and cure my consumption if I’m in bed?”

“You’re absurd,” Violet said, the last of her giggles fading as she tilted her head back to look at him, allowing her free hand to come to rest upon his shoulder.

But he *wasn’t* absurd—that was the thing. He so rarely allowed himself to be foolish, to joke—it was she who had brought this out in him, with her feigned consumption and her imposter doctor and her handkerchiefs and nightgowns.

She’d reminded him how to laugh.

“I love you,” he said quietly, tightening his arms around her waist.

The laughter faded from her face, replaced by something softer, more tender. “I love you, too,” she said. He leaned down to press a soft kiss first to her brow, then to her

mouth. She softened against him for a moment, her mouth parting under his, the tip of her tongue tracing his lips, but then, just as quickly, she drew back.

“But,” she continued, as though she hadn’t been interrupted, “right now, *you need to get in bed.*”

“Fine,” he sighed dramatically, and retreated to the cozy confines of his sheets. “I suppose I should pen a note of apology to Dr. Worth—he looked quite puzzled when I started rambling about consumption.”

“Tomorrow,” Violet said firmly; she looped Wolfgang’s lead around a bedpost, and leaned down to tuck James more tightly into his cocoon of blankets.

“In the meantime, I suppose I’d better return Wolfgang.” There was a faint note of regret to her voice.

“Wherever did you find him?” James asked curiously.

“I sent a footman to the market and told him to ask around, and spend whatever amount of money was necessary to procure a goat.” She sighed wistfully. “I’ve grown rather fond of him, you know.”

“Violet.” James fixed her with a stern look. “We cannot keep a goat. We live in *London.*”

She sighed again, more mournfully, then lunged forward to draw Wolfgang back from the brocade bench at the foot of the bed, of which he’d just taken a tentative nibble. As she straightened, however, a gleam came to her eye.

“Darling,” she said, “is West at his country house at the moment?”

A fortnight later, on a cold morning in Derbyshire, the Marquess of Weston appeared at the door of Rosemere, his country estate, in response to his butler’s summons. On his doorstep, he found a bemused-looking footman, a goat with a bell on a ribbon around its neck, and a note that said simply, in his brother’s hand, “His name is Wolfgang, and Violet has asked me to ensure that you do not have him killed.”

West blinked at the note, blinked again at the goat, and thought darkly—not for the first time, in the past year—that siblings were really entirely overrated.