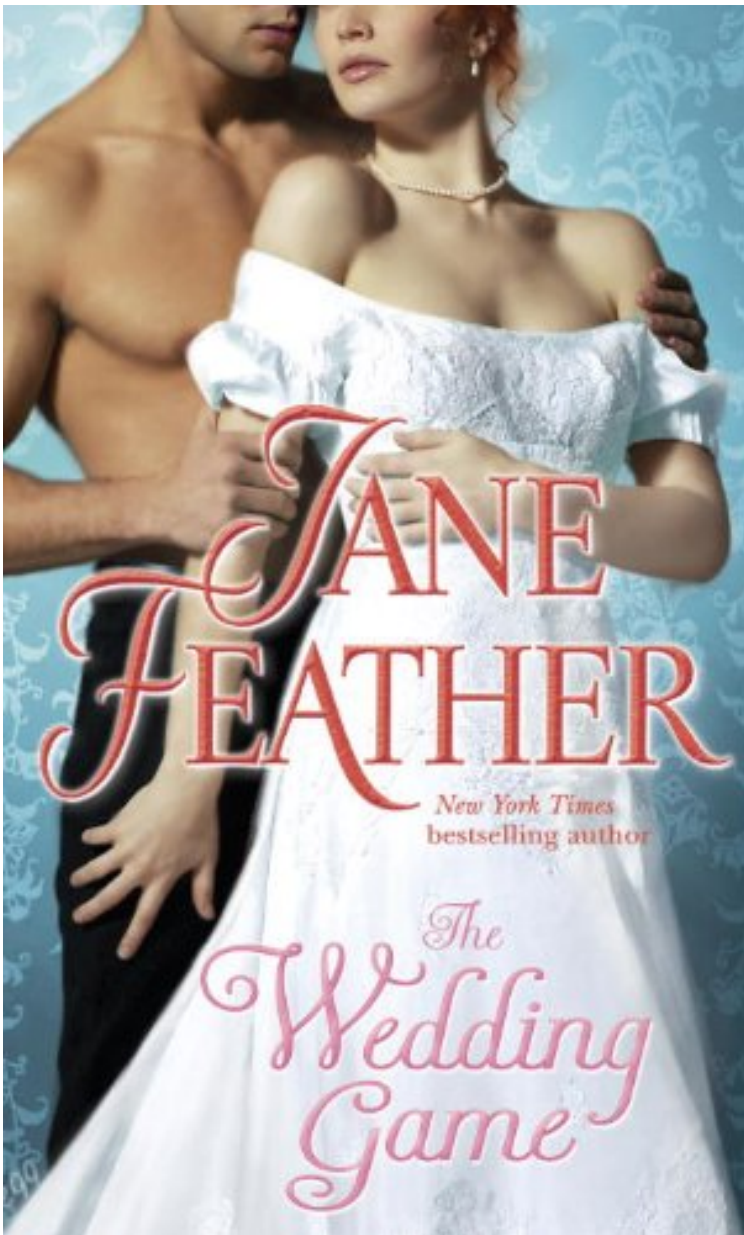


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The Wedding Game



Par Jane Feather
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn this captivating romance about the inimitable Duncan sisters and their clandestine matchmaking service, a handsome new client throws youngest sister Chastity into an unexpected quandary. Chastity listens to Dr. Douglas Farrells distressingly unromantic requirements for a wife: wealth and social status. Her instinct is to refuse service to the tall, muscular, dark-eyed physician, but she cant turn away a paying client. Yet the doctor conceals a secret. Hes prepared to sacrifice his bachelorhood for his true passion: caring for the poorest of Londons poor. Of course, his dream requires capital. For that, he is

convinced he needs a well-to-do, well-connected wife. Little does Chastity know that if she ever learned the selfless truth, the handsome doctor just might steal her heart. And if Douglas ever lifted the veil that covers this mysterious woman, he might discover his perfect match.

From the Paperback edition. Extrait

Chapter 1

The gentleman standing at the top of the steps of the National Gallery closely scrutinized the assumed art lovers ascending towards the great doors of the art museum at his back. He held a prominently displayed copy of the broadsheet *The Mayfair Lady*. He was looking for someone flourishing a similar article. A cloud of pigeons rose in a flurry from Trafalgar Square as a figure hastened across the square, scattering corn to the birds as she came. She crossed the street directly below the museum and paused at the bottom step, crushing the paper bag that had held the corn in her hand as she gazed upwards. She held a rolled-up newspaper in her free hand. The man made a tentative movement with his own broadsheet and the figure tossed the scrunched bag into a litter bin and hurried up the steps towards him. That the figure was small and female was about all the gentleman could discern. She was swathed in a loose alpaca dust coat of the kind that ladies wore when motoring, and wore a broad-brimmed felt hat, her face obscured by an opaque chiffon veil. "Bonjour, m'sieur," she greeted him. "I think we are to meet, n'est-ce pas?" She waved her copy of *The Mayfair Lady*. "You are Dr. Douglas Farrell, is it not so?" "The very same, madam," he said with a small bow. "And you are . . . ?" "I am ze *Mayfair Lady*, of course," she responded, her veil fluttering with each breath. With the phoniest French accent he'd ever heard, Dr. Farrell reflected with some amusement. He decided not to call her on it just yet. "The *Mayfair Lady* in person?" he questioned curiously. "The representative of ze publication, m'sieur," she responded with a note of reproof. "Ah." He nodded. "And the Go-Between?" "One and the same, sir," the lady said with a decisive nod. "And as I understand it, sir, it is ze Go-Between that can be of service to you." This damnable French accent always made her want to laugh, reflected the Honorable Chastity Duncan. Whether she or one of her sisters was using it, they all agreed they sounded like French maids in a Feydeau farce. But it was a very useful device for disguising voices. "I had expected to meet in an office," the doctor said, glancing around at their rather public surroundings. A chill December wind was blowing across the square, ruffling the pigeons' feathers. "Our office premises are not open to ze public, m'sieur," she said simply. "I suggest we go inside, zere are many places in ze museum where we can talk." She moved towards the doors and her companion hastened to open them for her. The folds of her alpaca dust coat brushed against him as she billowed past into the cavernous atrium of the museum. "Let us go to the Rubens room, m'sieur," she suggested, gesturing towards the stairs with her newspaper. "Zere is a circular seat where we may talk without drawing attention." She moved authoritatively ahead of him towards the staircase to the central hall. Dr. Farrell followed obediently, both intrigued and amused by this performance. Halfway up the stairs she turned aside, hurrying through a succession of rooms hung with massive Renaissance canvases of atrocious martyrdoms, piet's, and crucifixions. She cast not so much as a sideways glance at these cultural icons, stopping only when they emerged into a circular chamber, graced with a circular sofa in its center. The room was hung most notably with two of Rubens's canvases of the Judgment of Paris. With quiet amusement, the Duncan sisters had chosen this location for meetings with prospective Go-Between clients. The three buxom, naked renditions of Venus, Juno, and Minerva had somehow struck them as rather appropriate to the business at hand. "Ere it is quiet and we may be private," she declared, settling herself on the sofa, gathering her skirts close to her to give him room to sit beside her. Douglas glanced around with interest. It wasn't so much private, he reflected. There were other people in the chamber moving from painting to painting, conversing in undertones, but the circular sofa, although publicly situated, somehow provided an oasis where two people could sit close together and talk without drawing attention to themselves. He sat down beside her, aware of her perfume, a light flowery fragrance that seemed to waft from beneath the veil. Chastity turned her veiled head towards him. She had the advantage on Dr. Douglas Farrell in that she had seen him once before, when he had visited Mrs. Beedle's corner shop to buy a copy of *The Mayfair Lady* and Chastity had watched the transaction unobserved. He was as she remembered him, a very big man, certainly not easily forgotten. Both tall and broad, with the muscular heft of a sporting man. A boxer or a wrestler, she thought. The prominent bump on a once-broken nose seemed to support the guess. His features were strong and uneven, his mouth wide, his jaw of the lantern variety. His eyes were the color of charcoal beneath thick black eyebrows that met over the bridge of his nose. His hair was as black, rather curly, but cut short and businesslike. Everything about him indicated someone who cared little for the nuances of appearances. He wore an unexceptional greatcoat, buttoned to the neck, with muffler and gloves, and he held a plain trilby hat on his lap. She became suddenly aware of the length of the silence that had accompanied her assessment of her companion and said quickly, "Now, 'ow

exactly can ze Go-Between 'elp you, m'sieur?"He cast another slightly baffled glance around the gallery.

"So, this is the office of The Mayfair Lady?"She detected the faint Scottish lilt to his voice that she had noticed when she'd first observed him at Mrs. Beedle's. "Non, but we do not see clients in our office," she informed him firmly. Chastity kept to herself the reflection that their office was either the tearoom at Fortnum and Mason or the upstairs parlor of her father's house, which had been the Duncan sisters' mother's sanctum. Neither space was conducive to official client interviews."Why is that?" he inquired."It is necessary for ze Mayfair Lady to be anonymous," she stated. "Could we proceed with business, m'sieur?" "Yes, of course. But I confess, madam Mayfair Lady, that I am curious. Why is this anonymity necessary?"Chastity sighed. " 'Ave you read ze publication, m'sieur?" "Yes, of course. I would not have known to seek the services of the Go-Between otherwise." "You can read advertisements without reading the articles," she pointed out, forgetting her accent for a second."I have read the articles."She gave a very Gallic shrug. "Zen surely you must see that the opinions expressed are controversial. Ze editors prefer to remain anonymous." "I see." He thought he did. "Of course, creating a sense of mystery must add to the publication's appeal." "That is true," she conceded.He nodded. "As I recall, there was a libel case several months ago. The Mayfair Lady was sued for libel by . . ." He frowned, then his brow cleared. "By the earl of Barclay, I believe." "A suit that was dismissed," Chastity stated."Yes." He nodded. "So I remember. I also remember that the publication was represented by an anonymous person in the witness box. Is that not so?" "It is so." "Intriguing," he said. "I'm sure you saw the volume of your sales increase considerably after that." "Maybe so," she said vaguely. "But it is not for zat reason that we choose to conceal our identities.

Now, to business, m'sieur."Douglas, fascinated and curious though he remained, accepted that for the present, question time was over. "As I explained in my letter, I am in need of a wife."She took the letter in question from her handbag. "That is all you say, 'owever. We would need to know more details of your situation and the kind of wife you are looking for before we can know whether we can 'elp you in your search." "Yes, of course," he agreed. "As it happens, there are only two essential qualities I require in a wife." He drew off his gloves as he spoke, thrusting them into his pockets. "I am hoping in your registry you will have someone who would serve my purpose. Apart from the two essential issues, I am not unduly particular." His voice was very cool and matter-of-fact as he laid out the situation for her, tapping off the points with a finger on his palm as he made them."As I mentioned in my letter, I am a member of the medical profession. I have recently arrived in London from Edinburgh, where I received my medical degree and where I practiced for some years. I am in the process of opening a surgery on Harley Street, one that I trust will generate considerable income once I have become well enough known in London society."Chastity made no response, merely clasped her gloved hands in her lap and regarded him through her veil. She was beginning to get a bad feeling about this interview, and her intuition rarely failed her.The doctor unwrapped his muffler. He seemed to find it too warm in the round chamber despite the inadequate heating. Chastity, who was still chilled by her walk in the cold December wind, envied him. She reflected that perhaps such a large man generated extra body heat."Anyway," he continued, "I must find myself a wife who is first and foremost rich."And at that point Chastity realized that her intuition had indeed been absolutely correct. But again she made no response, merely stiffened slightly."As you will appreciate," he continued in the same detached tone, "it's an expensive business setting up such a practice. Harley Street rents are very high, and wealthy patients expect to be treated in surroundings that reassure them they are receiving the best of care from a practitioner who treats only people who expect and can afford the best."Chastity thought she could detect just a hint of sarcasm in his voice. She said distantly, "In my experience doctors who practice on Harley Street generally do very well for themselves. Well enough to support a wife, I would assume."He shrugged. "Yes, once they're established, they do. But I am not as yet established and I intend to become so. To do that, I need some help. You understand me?" "I am not generally considered obtuse," she said.If her frigid tone disconcerted the doctor, he gave no sign of it. He continued as calmly as before. "I need a wife who can bring to the marriage a certain financial stability in addition to having the social graces and connections that would enable her to advance my practice. A lady, in short, who would be able to persuade the . . ." He paused as if looking for the right word. His lip had curled slightly. "The ladies with megriems, with the imaginary ailments that arise from having nothing to think about, nothing sensible to do with their lives, and the gentlemen with gout and the other ailments that arise from a lazy and overindulged existence. I need a wife to fish for those patients for me and to instill them with utter confidence in her husband's medical skill." "In short, m'sieur, what you require is not so much a wife as a banker and a procuress," Chastity stated. She wondered for a minute if she had been a little too offensive in expressing her outrage,

but she need not have feared. "Precisely," he agreed equably. "You understand the situation exactly. I prefer to call a spade a spade." He peered at her. "Is it possible to see your face, madam?" "Absolument pas, m'sieur. Absolutely not." He shrugged. "As you wish, of course. But apart from the fact that I prefer to do business with someone whose identity is known to me, this mystery seems a trifle unnecessary. Could you at least drop the fake accent?" Chastity bit her lip behind her veil. She hadn't expected him to believe in it for a minute, but she also knew that it successfully disguised her voice, and when the time came for her to meet him face-to-face, as it would if they took him as a client, he must not link the lady from the National Gallery with the Honorable Chastity Duncan. She chose to ignore the question and asked coldly, "Is ze Go-Between to assume, then, that you 'ave no interest in a marriage where affection or respect are of any importance? It is only money and social status zat matter to you?" This time he couldn't fail to hear the asperity in her tone. He slapped his gloves into the palm of one hand. "They are my priorities," he said. "Is it any business of the Go-Between to question those priorities? You are an agency that provides a service." Chastity could feel her cheeks grow hot beneath her veil. "In order to serve you, m'sieur, we must ask the questions we consider necessary." He frowned, then shrugged again as if in acceptance. "I would prefer to say that my choice of a wife is a simple matter of practicality." He regarded her now with a measure of frustration. What had seemed simple enough to him was becoming difficult for some reason, and made all the more so when he had no visual clues to work with. Chastity watched him through her veil. She could see him quite clearly and could read his mind with some accuracy. Her instinct was to refuse the man as a client without further ado. Her finer feelings, of which she had more than her fair share, were revolted by the idea of simply finding some blatantly mercenary individual a rich wife. But she couldn't make such a decision without consultation with her sisters and she knew that they would scoff at such fine principles. They ran a business and could not afford to turn away a paying client, however much they despised him. Chastity knew she had to listen to Prudence's coolly pragmatic voice rather than her own immediate emotional response. And she could hear too how Constance, whatever she might think of the good doctor, would say that a paying client was a paying client. And there were women desperate enough for a husband who would probably find such a proposal convenient. Constance would say that such women needed to be educated to a degree of self-reliance, but until they were, one had to deal with them on their own terms. And both Prudence and Constance would be right. The Mayfair Lady and the Go-Between ensured the independence of the Duncan sisters, and kept their father in relative comfort. While Prudence and Constance now had husbands well able to take care of them financially, neither woman was prepared to give up that independence. At the thought of her father, Chastity gave an involuntary sigh. One that her companion heard, even as he saw the slight puff of her veil. "Is something the matter?" "No," she said. "Our business for today is concluded, I believe, m'sieur. I will go back to my office and consult with my si--my colleagues. You will 'ear from us by letter within ze week." She stood up, holding out her gloved hand.

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