

Chapter Prudence

Formerly Chapter Seven of *The Secrets of Dr. John Welles*

The unexpected pregnancy ten years after what Josiah and Mary Welles believed would be their only child surprised them with *joy incomparable*. As they were not overly demonstrative people, they expressed their elation by simply not disrupting their usual daily routines.

As far as the Welleses were concerned, children, born to perpetuate the family line and carry on the good family name, were an inherent part of life that didn't require an excess of celebration. If offspring could have been acquired and invested in like quality antiques or stocks, the Welleses might not have felt so indifferent toward their children.

Mother Welles enjoyed a sedate confinement and spent her days entertaining the notion of crocheting baby garments that never quite materialized. Father Welles made a brief yet tactful mention concerning the blessed event to take place after an enjoyable evening spent among friends at his club. Brother John frequently forgot that a new sibling was about to descend upon his world forever changing the landscape of their self-segregated family existence. He was far more interested in inventing new ways to sneak sips of sherry his father kept for medicinal purposes.

Pregnancy became even more laborious when Mary missed a long awaited trip to Paris for an extended holiday. Her swollen figure also forced that she decline participation in all the gay spring and summer social engagements. Josiah hired a nurse to tend his ever-complaining wife then wished he could trade duties when the orchestration of John's care fell to him. Instead of solitary evenings attending summer concerts or days spent leisurely strolling through museums and galleries, Josiah found himself dragged to farm meet-ups and agricultural lectures.

At dinner one night, Josiah commented on how he spent his day. He kindly waited until John had been excused from the table.

"Your son is insistent upon becoming a farmer. I don't know how he developed such a ridiculous notion. Please don't encourage him, Mary."

To which she responded without looking up, "The nurse may have to take tomorrow afternoon off. My legs will need to be massaged to keep the swelling down."

Josiah and John attended a fair the next afternoon where the father learned more about animal husbandry than he thought morally decent.

Upon her arrival, baby Prudence announced her presence deep from within her abundantly healthy lungs. It was only the beginning of her efforts to make her rigid family aware of how fully she intended to live life.

"She's awfully noisy," her older brother commented sourly one morning at breakfast.

"Your mother is pleased, and that's all that matters," rebuked their father.

"When will mother rejoin us? Surely having a baby can't be *that* difficult."

The boy's father ignored the baiting comment and feigned curiosity in his son's interests. "What are you looking at, John?"

"Agriculture magazines."

"Why on earth are you looking at those?"

"Because, as I told you, I'm going to become a farmer and raise a big family to help me work it."

The conversation deteriorated into an argument between John and his father that brought the weary mother from upstairs just as the son had hoped. Fortunately, baby Prudence had been left in the care of her nanny.

The Welles' passive delight began to wane when by her tenth birthday Prudence proved to be extremely strong willed. They had already lost John to his whims of farming and fathering a brood of children, so they heavily concentrated their efforts toward grooming their beautiful daughter.

An initial effort had been made by Mary to engage her daughter in activities that might draw them closer. Mother Welles would attempt to arrange Prudence's chestnut tresses, under the tutelage of a ladies maid, and then dress her in clothing ordered from Paris. Even the young girl's shoes were handmade in Italy. They never lasted long once Prudence took to climbing trees and chasing after the boys who pulled her hair ribbons. Her mother eventually lost interest and slowly drifted toward resuming her own self-satisfying pursuits.

Her austere parents also decided that only private tutors would do for a young lady of Prudence's social standing. Unbeknownst to the elder Welleses, their daughter made a game of seeing how quickly she could reduce her instructors to tears. In addition to working her way through all of the highly recommended teachers in Baltimore, she scared off a great many of the exceptionally referenced governesses.

"I will not be responsible for a young lady of ill-repute," complained one such former employee when she discovered teenaged Prudence smoking in the garden.

"Prudence is just testing her boundaries," Mother Welles explained with much hand-wringing.

The adamant woman stalked off the premises under Prudence's unrepentant gaze and a halo of cigarette smoke blown down from her bedroom window.

The next venture Prudence undertook was to locate a cowboy for the purposes of matrimony. She was determined to slip the noose of marriage to a stuffy banker like her father by whatever means

possible. She cleverly used Roosevelt's Rough Riders and American success during the war with Spain to further her cause.

"We're still a young nation expanding our horizons, and I intend to grow right along with our blessed country," she gushed with hands clasped to her breast.

The farthest expansion her parents were willing to allow was The Women's College of Baltimore City where she would pursue a degree in Home Economics. At first, she was delighted because the school required a study abroad experience which more than interested her.

Of course, Prudence would also entertain conversion to Judaism upon meeting her new friend Sarah Landau. This fact alone terrified her religiously narrow-minded parents into reconsidering where their daughter attended school. They shipped Prudence to Rhode Island to attend Pembroke College. With a sigh of relief, and not an ounce of regret, Josiah and Mary resumed their separate lives sans children.

Their daughter grudgingly boarded with family friends who lived near the school. Her generous landlords soon learned that Prudence came with many unexpected qualities employed while carrying out her unscripted shenanigans.

Her first bout of mischief included a hidden batch of stray kittens born atop one of the wife's fur coats in Prudence's closet. The particularly fertile feline bore no less than nine squirming babies who mistook the coat for their own mother thus clawing and sucking at the lifeless object until it was a disgusting mess.

The second injury borne upon the family was an attempt at hair cutting performed on her host's three homely daughters. Prudence had originally proposed just a trim, however, was unable to keep the ends even which resulted in an increasingly shortened hairstyle until the girls' locks were above their ears. Much crying on the part of the little girls and shouting by their mother put a nix on Prudence's willingness to become involved with their beautification. She deemed them beyond her help.

For a while, Prudence stayed out of trouble with her parents' friends who, without informing her, had doubled the rate of boarding such an unruly young woman. Her poor father gladly paid to keep his wayward daughter in Providence.

Her third and most disastrous episode while living semi-abroad involved the ruination of an expensive piece of beef. She charred the roast beyond recognition in a culinary endeavor to feed her fellow *Arrowers*, members of the ladies archery team. The pan in which Prudence scorched the meat had to be thrown out as did the smoke drenched kitchen curtains and not a few blackened hand towels used to put out the fire. By this time, Prudence stood on shaky ground with her parents' friends.

To make matters worse, she was also dangerously close to being expelled from school. Prudence insisted on riding a secondhand bicycle to the college every day, a fact which thoroughly embarrassed her hosts but one point on which they were willing to compromise. When she decided to

convert an old skirt into a pair of makeshift trousers to keep the hem from catching in the gears, they pronounced Prudence nigh unto insane. The college administrators wholeheartedly agreed.

The situation came to its pinnacle when she not only wore her *pants* while riding the bicycle but proceed to cruise the contraption straight into her journalism class and park it next to the teacher's desk.

"I don't want the rain to further rust my trusty steed," she explained to the fuming woman. Her classmates snickered demurely behind delicate hands.

Her next impropriety involved the wearing of her gym outfit without stockings which scandalized even those closest to Prudence, who were few and far between to begin with.

"I burned them in the backyard last night," she proudly admitted. "They went up like dry tinder during a drought." Her defiant laughter caused her few remaining chums to edge away from her nervously.

Prudence believed herself unfairly condemned for what would be her final insult. How unprogressive could one college be toward the open-mindedness of art? Her free spirit led her to pose naked for an artist from France who only wished to capture her lovely form in the guise of a beguiling mermaid. She thought the whole affair was truly tasteful. The college did not.

"I will pose you here in the studio, yes, and then paint the—how do you say—back...ground—later," Sebastien explained in his broken English. The older man's innocent smile drove Prudence to madness; for the first time in her life, she fell in love.

She reclined on a chaise longue amidst flowing silk draped to resemble water. Strands of pearls were strategically placed about her alabaster décolletage, and she slowly combed her undressed hair while gazing into a gilt-handled mirror. The appreciatively leering Sebastien neared completion of the masterpiece when they were discovered.

Prudence never knew who turned them in and didn't have the opportunity to find out. After two policemen escorted her back to the college, her parents promptly arrived to take her home. There would be no degree bestowed upon the college's most notorious young lady to ever attend the school. Prudence couldn't have cared less. What rightly infuriated her was the fact that her likeness would never hang in the Louvre.

"You will never see this man again," her father screamed at her.

Both parents decided to take a stricter approach to Prudence's social life. They set upon a course of finding a suitable husband especially after they discovered that a particularly difficult menstrual cycle was actually the loss of Sebastien's child.

Their daughter had other plans for her life and horrified them by taking up with ladies of questionable morals who campaigned for women's suffrage. It was also about this time that Prudence

began sneaking off on trips to unknown locations. She claimed to be visiting her brother and his half-breed wife, but the Welleses were skeptical because she usually had another suffragist in tow. They decided that ignorance was blissful concerning their daughter as long as she didn't get in trouble with the law. How close she came to doing so would have mortified them.

"Prudence," her father mentioned one night during dinner, "we've been contacted by a sheriff from Harford County regarding your presence there. Do you have any idea why they would be questioning us on this?"

"Have you forgotten that my brother and his wife live in Harford County," she countered.

"I wish you wouldn't call her that," simpered her mother.

"What, *wife*? That's what Lyla is to John and the mother of his children," Prudence spat. "Of course, if they were to stop at the two boys, it would be best for everyone."

"Finally we agree on something," her father sighed. "Why that boy saw fit to further humiliate us by marrying an Indian has completely baffled me for years."

"Speaking of marriage," her mother continued, "Wallace Mayfield asked after you again, Prudence, dear."

"No, mother. He's old and a widower. Not exactly the type I'm looking for."

"What type are you looking for, dear?"

"Someone who wants to have fun, not sit in a rocking chair all day with a blanket across his lap."

"Oh, I think you'll find Mr. Mayfield a very adventurous sort of fellow. He has a sailing boat and a lovely home in the country with a stable full of horses, not to mention a townhouse in New York. I understand he likes to go hiking and camping and even mountain climbing."

"Oh, really? I suppose I could entertain him for an evening, if you and Father would be willing to chaperone."

Her parents secretly smiled at each other across the table, believing they had finally tamed their wild daughter. It was exactly what she wanted them to think. She didn't care to fall madly in love with anyone, not since Sebastian, however, a secure means of income would provide for all of the fabulous escapades she had planned.

A whirlwind courtship and hasty marriage ensured that Prudence would no longer be the Welles' responsibility. They believed touring Europe for a month-long honeymoon would surely settle her down for life as a wife and mother. Much to their dismay, when Prudence lost Wallace's child six months into their marriage, a divide erupted between the couple that seemed to widen with each passing year.

She and Wallace tried several more times, but Prudence never seemed to be able to carry a child to term. "I'm being punished," she mumbled listlessly after losing a little boy in her seventh month. Her parents had no idea to what she referred and chose to remain willfully ignorant on the subject. Too much knowledge where Prudence was concerned could be detrimental to one's peace of mind.

Fate determined to spare the Wellesees any further knowledge into the lives of either of their children. Obliviousness came in the form of death when they were struck and killed in an automobile accident. The pleasant evening they spent dining with friends was marred when they were forced to drive home in a torrential downpour. Road conditions and visibility had deteriorated considerably making the usual trip home dangerous. Had Prudence's father not already been impaired from a deluge of sherry, he still would have had difficulty navigating the route home. All things conspired to work against them culminating in a wrong turn taken into the path of an oncoming truck.

They would never know their hard-hearted son refused to attend the funeral of parents who rejected their daughter-in-law and grandchildren; Prudence alone made their funeral arrangements. As a reward, she inherited her parents' entire estate. Josiah and Mary would remain forever ignorant as Prudence and John made disasters of their lives, affecting many of those around them they claimed to love.

Not guilty of being a bad example in the department of human kindness and compassion was one charge the parents would not escape.