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The Bath Novels of Lady A—™

It is a dull elf, indeed, who cannot fathom the pen that has crafted these works of delight, upon which the reader's eye shall grow ever more transfixed. If you cannot guess, then dwell no longer upon the identity of their author. As it was never her intention that these compositions be openly ascribed to her, indisputable proof in allaying public suspicion would only defeat such commendable discretion.

Yet, there *are* many questions that must follow so remarkable a discovery. *I* am authorised to answer but two of them: How they came to be so called, and how they came to be in the possession of a devoted friend and loyal ally.

To the first: Our 'Lady A—', as she was once laudably known by the fashionable set, began to work in earnest on these unknown novels while residing in Bath; only one other before me was privy to this private industry. There, the formative plans for the expanded narratives of three manuscript novels quietly took root in a mind searching for its steady habits in unsettled circumstances. These concealed drafts, which eventually became *seven* in number, were worked upon and completed through the whole period that followed this term of residence in Bath, right up until the author's premature and much-lamented demise.

To the second question, I can only confess that it belongs to a considerably longer and wholly confidential deposition. Notwithstanding such impediment, this advertisement and the publication of these most rare acquisitions are the sanctioned result of an exacting charge. In preserving anonymity through equivocation, I have respected united wishes; in publishing undisclosed creations, I have realised unacknowledged desires.

So much had this lady to give, yet so little time was given her to complete the quest. Indeed it is upon this consideration that I am compelled to share this extraordinary collection—a unique representation, if you will, of the most animating conspiracies of her prodigious imagination. Surely to do any less, would be to deprive the literary world its true share of one of its *brightest* ornaments.

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CHAPTER II

Lady Myriam Rostings, widow of the late Sir Thomas Rostings, was the sole guardian of Miss Katherine Jane Huntley. She was the child of Lady Myriam's late sister, Lady Louisa, and one Colonel Huntley, who died victoriously in battle shortly after his wife's premature passing. This conjugal association, which endured but a few years, left only an infant daughter to mark the union and the Rostingses had rapidly and willingly rallied to bring the little girl into better fortune, to love her from that time, as if she were their own.

Katherine grew naturally into a handsome, intelligent and truly generous young woman, drawing from her aunt's strength of character—and her late uncle's sorry lack of it. This guileless mix of quality and fault created a being whose character exhibited all the virtuous candor of youthful naiveté. And like any person of one-and-twenty, blessed with a good deal of sense and emotion, Katherine pursued life with a measured curiosity that artlessly sought greater experience. This unaffected desire for wisdom and enlightenment was further encouraged by a love of reading, and such passion was, in turn, regulated by a sound education that dwelt neither upon indoctrination nor sententious instruction.

This small but valuable history included a confidante; more a sister than friend, Miss Edwina Westwood was a most desirable companion. Both girls having lived in London all of their lives, and being of compatible age, had formed close ties through their families' association in town. Each was afforded an equal measure of indulgence, tempered with that degree of moderation, which must always be acceptable—even to the fresh-faced, the eager and the silly. This sterner philosophy served to remind the young ladies that their existence was a privileged one, and therefore they should be grateful for such remarkable advantage. Neither girl was proud, especially Katherine, who possessed all of the qualities and blessings of nature, which were truly becoming to one so unspoiled by prosperity. To be sure, that young Miss Huntley was justly adored by family and friends alike was neither a surprise nor in any way unwarranted.

Indeed such warm affiliations and feelings, invested in and extended out from such a sparkling creature, only multiplied upon the marriage of Edwina's sensible eldest sister, Eleanor, to Lady Myriam's son. Thomas Rostings was a plain steadfast gentleman who was genuinely fond of his discerning wife. She, being equally propelled by money and connections—well, it followed that nothing had stood in the way of their uneventful, and assured, felicity amongst such friends as loved Katherine.

All scenes of a veritable picture of harmony and with very little out of the common way to disturb such tranquility. Certainly there was nothing to test its eligibility in ease—nothing if it were not for something that Lady Myriam ventured to the contrary one evening—and much to her domestic audience's extreme shock and surprise.

“Katherine, I trow you will agree that it is high time we took ourselves off to retire in some pretty pile in the country. London is so very harmful for an old lady, and even more unwholesome for such an unspoiled young thing as yourself.” Remarking her ward's look of dissenting horror, “We simply must breathe fresh air, my dear—we simply must!”

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“With all due respect ma’am, how can you want for change?” inquired Katherine in a pitch that did nothing to disguise her alarm. “London has fine air enough—and what of its many diversions—and all of our dearest acquaintances who reside here? I do not think you should like us to remove to some out-of-the-way country village with no society at all, and where it is very likely we shall be absolutely forgot!”

Lady Myriam did not care to respond.

“Perhaps her ladyship wishes only to test the delights of the country for a time?” interposed Mrs. Masters, an astute and loyal woman who had been in Lady Myriam’s service for many years, serving first as Katherine’s governess and then as a companion of quality to both her ladyship and her niece.

“Upon my word Masters, your reasoning is sound!” declared Lady Myriam, relieved that some answer had been given her. “London can do very well without us for a season or two, and even though Miss Huntley is sure to be cast into fits of melancholy, it is not as if we are interminably turning our backs on the metropolis in favor of Mother Nature.”

There followed a very voluble squeal of exasperation from across the room.

In this final pronouncement Lady Myriam had resisted divulging the true motivation inspiring her escape to the country, and it went far beyond any desire for cleaner air. As Katherine’s only remaining guardian, she flattered herself she had reached her vintage years with no small measure of good health, vigor and lucidity of mind. She was nevertheless not ignorant of the need to seek out a successor, for she knew she was never to grow younger, notwithstanding her achievement of hale longevity. Katherine had now come of age, and her ladyship desired that the person who must best succeed and replace her should be her niece’s prospective husband. London had become too complacent an arena for her vivacious protégée in this regard and she saw very little activity, not on the part of the aspirant lovers, but in Katherine herself, who had grown too used to the attentions of town society. To break with London was to break with apathy. Her niece must be settled in a new environment—one that afforded gentlemen of a feudal tone, living out their affluent and solitary lives on lonely estates—gentlemen from the aristocracy or the gentry. Anyone from the upper or lower nobility desperately searching for proper wives to perfect their idylls would do. This was her ladyship’s true vision, and she intended to see it to fruition, or forever remain uneasy about the credentials of the would-be usurper, who, owing to the mishap of her untimely demise, she might never have the opportunity to properly inspect.

Miss Westwood was sure to hear of the frightful details of the insufferable plan at almost first light of the next day. Katherine very soon came to offer every objection that was formerly unobjectionable before her guardian to her friend.

“It will not do, Edwina! I can think of nothing more insupportable than being removed from my dear friends and family in such a way. What is life without London—why it is not living at all! Are we to run off into the savage wilderness as hermits—to claim some dilapidated folly—with nothing but deer and welsh cows to count?”

“It is very surprising news to be sure, but you know as well as I, Lady Myriam will brook no opposition on such matters. You might as well give in to the plan as not, Katherine, and make the most of it.”

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“But what should I do without your precious company—and that of Thomas and Eleanor? Our influence is not so great that we can cast off all of our friends for new elsewhere.”

“I am sure you are seeing the very worst of it. There is nothing in London that cannot be done without for a time, and you will find much in the country to distract you from regretting anyone or anything here. At any rate, I shall definitely visit with you as often as you will have me.” On observing her friend’s still-troubled countenance, Edwina reassured her further. “Katherine, indeed we shall not be inconsolable; this change must allow for welcome diversion.”

It was settled. Having resolved on their being apart for a tolerably short time (until Katherine was comfortably resigned to exile), it remained only for the friends to establish just where it was that Miss Huntley was likely to be forgot and when such a disagreeable event was to take place. Lady Myriam was very obliging in providing such information and it was merely a matter of weeks before the household, in its entirety, was ready to be dispatched to *Hampshire*.

Hastings Park, near Basingstoke, was one of the oldest and finest estates in the country. It afforded formal views of expansive turf and terraces, parterres, bowers, and principal walks in every direction, as far as the eye could see—until the straight avenues of spruce firs and clipped yew prohibited it—with pond and fountain gardens, and the dense woodlands beyond, to complete the scene. The house was as vastly spacious as it was commodious, with every room fitted to an old-fashioned perfection. This kindly neglect boasted a music room, two libraries—one immense, one smaller—to tempt even the most unreflective of minds, and numerous reception and gathering rooms that seemed designed to accommodate balls, assemblies and parties of every description. This was the hermit’s ‘folly’ that was to become Katherine’s new home, and it had been unearthed through the kind favor of Lady Myriam’s son. Ever in need of a break from town, Thomas had journeyed into Hampshire, from whence he returned not two weeks later congratulating himself that he had secured the very best of homes that his mother’s purse could acquire.

The Park was let to Lady Myriam by a member of the aristocracy eager to pursue the delights of town for more than one season. Happy to find a family with almost equal claims to wealth, privilege and diversion, Lord Hollingbrook closed the deal directly.

“Mr. Rostings, I am exceedingly glad to be leaving Hastings Park in such capable jurisdiction. I trust your mother and her party will be well pleased with the country. Our community here is small and unvarying.” He then stopped to add, “But our manners are every bit as polished as those in town.”

“I have no doubt of it, sir. I am sure I could recommend no better place for my mother and fair cousin to reside.”

“Fair cousin?” Lord Hollingbrook’s genial countenance lit up in a glow. “Do you bring young female blood into our small genteel circle? Pray, what is this lovely creature’s name?”

“Katherine—Katherine Huntley, she is one-and-twenty and I’ll wager she is the most pleasing girl your society will meet in a long while.”

“Well then, sir, your mother will have to contend with some very dashing neighbors. Mr. William Halford will be her nearest; he is master of Halford Manor, a capital estate, some three miles away—it is the closest seat to Hastings Park.”

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Thomas related this information to his family when he returned to London, with every consideration of making his relatives feel at ease about the society in which they were to mingle—and with no intention of nurturing his lovely cousin’s romantic hopes. These rather frivolous details, however, did not escape his mother’s notice, and they were interesting enough even to capture Katherine’s interest. She was mildly curious. Although she was not desperately in want of a husband or adventure, the thought of dashing male company was not wholly uninviting, and, as it was to come in the persons of close neighbors and new acquaintances, her removal to the country was beginning to appear almost an inviting prospect.

The party left London past the onset of spring, surpassing the first quarter of the promising year 1814 by nearly one month, allowing a portion of the countryside’s pleasures to manifest themselves, to the united delight of the travelers. Lady Myriam was naturally eager for her niece to see Hampshire at its best, so that the adjustment to a new way of life and a new home would hold fewer evils. In truth, this premeditation did nothing to disappoint. Katherine was in raptures. She could not thank her aunt enough for bringing them into the country that, in her newly altered opinion, had been too long overlooked by an unfair preference for town.

Remarkably, very little else was said about London from that time on and, as the party drew nearer to their destination, it was more remarkable still how few were the thoughts of what Miss Huntley had so recently left behind.

When at last they were within some ten miles of Basingstoke, they broke their journey one more time to bait their horses, exercise Lady Myriam’s companion dogs and to take nuncheon at an indifferent inn. It was here that Katherine noticed a grand carriage with liveried servants and very fine horses draw up behind theirs; from this exalted equipage alighted a fashionable gentleman and two richly adorned ladies.

The strangers seemed surprised to find an equally cultivated chariot stationed ahead of them at such a common house. The gentleman appeared to be very affable; he immediately introduced himself and his party to Lady Myriam and her entourage. The supercilious smaller woman at his side was his wife, Mrs. James Falstead, and the taller, rather more conceited and ostentatious lady, was a Miss Maria Beckett.

Lady Myriam was well pleased to discover such distinguished company, before having reached their journey’s end. After making the necessary introductions for her traveling party in return, she declared with gusto, “We are so delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Falstead! We are shamefully new to Hampshire and to meet with fellow pilgrims—well, it is high luck indeed! We are just come down from town, you know. Are you at all familiar with this part of the country?”

“I am indeed, ma’am,” replied the friendly gentleman. “What brings your ladyship to the Empire’s finest county?”

“I have very recently taken over Hastings Park, near Basingstoke. We are to stay on there for the remainder of the year and we hope we shall have much to anticipate.”

“Upon my word this is a fine coincidence, for we are just en route to visit my wife’s brother. His home is Halford Manor; its grounds are within walking distance of Hastings Park. You will

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be very pleased you have secured the Hastings estate, for one could not imagine a finer or nobler home.”

Katherine realized during the course of this conversation that she was in the presence of at least two of her dashing neighbor’s relations, although she could not make out who the imposing Miss Beckett was. Whatever that lady’s identity, it seemed inevitable that the new residents of Hastings Park and those residing at Halford Manor were destined to meet, for surely, after such a chance encounter, how could it be otherwise?

At length, the two parties took leave of one another with the utmost civility, and with a mutual wish for one to visit with the other, although this was expressed far more sincerely by Mr. Falstead, than it was by either of his gentle companions.

As the carriages moved off Katherine’s thoughts, upon her journey thus far, flew about a single suspicion—that the country was steadily becoming a very intriguing place. Certainly the expectation of finding her new home less agreeable than the last was very soon dismissed. The possibility of settling happily, and with abandon, into a novel country lifestyle, did not now appear to be a notion that was in any way far-fetched.

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