

**THE
DIVINE LADY**

A Romance of Nelson and Emma Hamilton

BY

E. BARRINGTON

PREFACE

As I sat, years ago, in the Admiral's cabin of Nelson's flag-ship, the *Foudroyant*, the thought of this romance came to me, for this ship was the sea-shrine of that great but errant passion. She is a wreck now, her stranded ribs are green with weed, her bones are broken in the wash of the tide. A grave at sea amidst the answering thunder and flash of guns would have been a nobler ending.

But the story, with all its love, cruelty and heroism, remains alike beyond oblivion, condemnation or pardon. It is. It has its niche beside the other great passions which have moulded the world's history. For if Nelson knew himself when he declared that Emma was part and parcel of the fire breaking out of him, without her inspiration Trafalgar might not have been.

I have treated it imaginatively, yet have not, as I think, departed from the essential truth which I have sought in many famous biographies such as Mahan's, Sichel's, Laughton's and others.

Yet the best biographies of Emma are the lovely portraits Romney left of his Divine Lady, and of Nelson the best is the sea-cathedral, the *Victory*, at rest in the last home port he sailed from to his splendid doom. From these all the rest of the story might well be reconstructed.

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PART I

CHAPTER I

HOW GREVILLE MET HER

SHE sat by the window and sang, and as she sang the children on the green outside clustered under the elms in little groups to listen to the delicious voice, for she sang carelessly glad, like a thrush alone in a leafy bower. Clear resonant notes pouring from a pillared throat magnificently strung for its work and behind it a passionate vitality that sent the crystal stream welling from the hidden springs of the heart.

Should he upbraid
I'll own that he prevail,
And sing as sweetly as the nightingale.
Say that he frown, I'll say his looks I view
As morning roses newly dipped in dew.

She trilled and rippled, and put her head aside to see the hat she was trimming with flowers, and paused to consider, and trilled again, and looped the chain of notes in the purest soprano half unconsciously, more occupied with the hat than with the song, and stopped—the hat became engrossing. A little head appeared at the window.

“Do it again, lady. ’Tis so pretty!”

Even that audience was not despicable. She put the hat down, leaned her bare arms on the sill and put her heart into the singing. The woman in the next house thrust a sour face out at the window.

“You run along to your play, you brats! Wasting time listening to the like of that!” Then, as they helter-skeltered off, to herself:

“That Mrs. Hart; any one to look at her can see what *she* is!”—and flung the window to. The song stopped abruptly. She turned in a fury as if to fling back defiance, then stopped, flushing scarlet, and stood stiff in the middle of the floor; the hat at her feet, the day spoiled for good and all.

“ ’Tis a pitiful, wicked, brutal shame,” she cried, “that do what I will, go where I will, I can never get rid of it. And ’tisin’t as if ’twas my fault. If those misses yonder had had my upbringing, had lived as I did, slept where I did, they’d have done the same, I warrant, for all they step along so cool and genteel now.” She flung out a tragic arm toward the window. Two young ladies, full-skirted, large-hatted, with muslin fichus, crossed discreetly over chaste bosoms in the mode of 1782, were pacing sedately over the pleasant green common, past the wall of the churchyard. Lest they should need a more stringent guard than their own modesty, a well-fed footman with full-blossomed calves followed them, his gilt-headed staff and the gold lace on his livery gleaming in June sunshine, his high-fed face turned with a furtive air towards the curtains that hid the fair fury. The young ladies themselves shot a veiled glance apiece under drooping brims in that direction, for there was much healthy curiosity afloat on and about Paddington Green concerning that modest establishment.

Who could be surprised there should be? Take a placid suburb near to and yet remote from the scandals of London, place about its drowsy green the small respectable houses of Edgware Row chiefly inhabited by faded spinsters and decorous widows living out their declining days under the guidance of the church bells, and in the one vacant house of this Row set suddenly a handsome youngish man whose studied simplicity of dress cannot hide his fashion and consequence, and a young girl so beautiful that in a

country where beauty itself partakes of the nature of sin, she must at once be found guilty until proved innocent—and mark what happens.

Of course it happened. Emma made a few timid advances when first she was set up as housekeeper. She spoke to the next door Mrs. Armitage across the paling of the little garden, and offered a loaf of bread when that lady was loudly regretting that the baker had forgotten his call. It was refused with a thorny precision which conveyed that bread from such hands was poison. When little Jemmy Barrett fell and grazed his knees, she stanchd the wounds, filled his hands with sugar biscuits and led the howling culprit tenderly to the Barrett home among its syringa bushes across the Green. The first suspicious glance of Mrs. Barrett supposed her guilty of the howls, and explanation only produced a frosty, “Very obliging in you, I’m sure. Jemmy, if you don’t stop that noise—” and Emma, eyeing the child wistfully (for reasons), turned and walked away, followed by looks of greedy curiosity that drew heads from several windows. The clergyman’s wife called, but did not repeat the visit. “My dear, I have discovered that the servant, the cook, is her own mother,” cried the lady in the study of that divine, “and sure one knows what to think in such cases. Do pray make enquiry about Mr. Greville. ’Tis a name that bespeaks nobility, and the girl, for all her looks—”

Her looks! Here comes the difficulty, for how describe, how convey in any words, the beauty that nature bestows but once or twice in a century. There was not a great artist but later tried to give it living and glowing on his canvas, and not one of them but would own that, his best done, there was still the Unattainable laughing or sighing forever beyond his reach. Perhaps that most unbishop-like prelate, the Bishop of Derry, summed her up best

when he cried, “God was in a glorious mood when he made Emma”—and yet that too needs detail if you are at all to picture her fascinations. Item: two lips indifferent red, in Shakespeare’s fashion? No, no, that may do for an Olivia but will not serve such a paragon as Emma. Let us essay the impossible and at least fall in good company, for all tried, and every man of them failed.

She was the perfect height, long-limbed, full-bosomed for a girl of her age, the hands and feet not delicate, and conveying the notion of physical strength and power as did also the fine throat and marble moulded arms. For her figure alone she was noticeable—it was to be seen slender, melting, flowing within her draperies, and every movement as full of ease as a cat’s that need never stop to consider its swiftness or slow subsidence into a luxurious coil for sleep or blinking at the fire. Coming up behind this girl, you must needs take note of her grace, the slow turn of the head on the long throat, the rhythm of curving arms and pleading hands (for she had many and uncommon gestures), the lovely length from hip to heel. Her body spoke for her and promised abundantly for her face.

Indeed, she was a wave of the ocean of beauty tossed by the breeze of youth. Should she be described? See how Romney has given her as a Bacchante, arch chin turned over her shoulder, eyes and mirthful mouth laughing deliciously to each other and to the happy fauns supposed out of sight. She will lead the dance in the woods, and sit beneath the black shade dappled with moonlight, wooing and wooed, in the clasp of strong arms with a hot cheek pressed to hers. Yet again—Circe, grave with a ruined passion, standing in noble height with down-pointing rod of enchantments, reversing her spell on her man-souled beasts; or a reading Magdalen, pensive, robed from head to knee in streaming auburn hair curling into gold at the tendrilled ends. Ah, but such hair as that, though it may be

for Magdalens, is not for such as retire to caves and bury themselves in theology! Far otherwise.

Yet no picture of them all was as lovely as herself. The large limpid eyes of violet-grey might be hinted on canvas, no more, and what artist could give that signature of a freakish planet—a brown spot swimming in the liquid deeps of one. She owned that she herself considered it an absurdity, but, veiled in delicious lashes, or flashed at you in glittering laughter, it won hearts. Her mouth was divine—the sweet upward curves, the full lower lip with its twin cherries—and even that was not its charm of charms, for the changing expressiveness of it was beauty's self, and after that point no man could any more inventorize, but was tangled hand and foot in the blue glance that netted him, the sweet smile that completed his ruin.

And hers—for what should be the fate of a girl like this born to a village blacksmith in an English village where dull days repeated dull days in everlasting sequence? Surely nature was ironic in locking such a bird in such a cage—a bird made for the wild woods and wild mating—a star dancing in the laughing dark. London beckoned the country lass along a road paved with hope and ignorance, and dropped her like ripe fruit hung on a stem too slender, into the mud, where the flies crowd and buzz over the crushed and muddied sweetness. For after a few half-hearted attempts at domestic service comes a darkness. Ugly rumours hang about it. Its implications were not perhaps quite clear to herself—but be it as it may, a girl of fifteen may plead for pity. Let us take her own account of it to Romney, who befriended as well as immortalized her: “Oh, my dear friend, for a time I own, through distress, my virtue was vanquished, but my sense of virtue was not overcome.”

Let us leave the darkness then and make no attempt to turn light upon the obscene figures that move through it about this child. She must have yearned, did yearn, for some position where the day could bring security and not violent and terrible change. Could one hope to find it in the arms of a King's officer of the Navy, a light-hearted fool who is the first clear figure in the patchwork pictures of her life?—a man, it must be said, with no eye for the amazing woman hid in the immature girl as the conquering Aphrodite sleeps in the rough block of marble. He saw her beautiful, as many Susans and Pollys please a sailor's fancy; snatched at the beauty and bruised it in the snatching, and passed on. So a black hoof may bruise the meadow-sweet, and tramp on knowing nothing. He found no more in this wonder than two months would exhaust, and sailed away to his destiny, leaving the way dimly open through many turns and obstacles to a mightier sailor than he who was to call the castaway "the most precious jewel that God ever sent on earth."

But the man bruised her—broke some sincerity, some wide-eyed trust in her soul that life could never restore. And again she was flung on her pitiful resources and again comes a hiatus which there is no accurate knowledge to fill.

Again she struggled for some security. Could it be found this time with a gay, fox-hunting, rollicking young squire of Sussex, easy alike in his cups and amours, Sir Harry Fetherstonchaugh?—"Fetherstone," his cup-companions called him. He needed a pretty "whoman," as poor Emma spelt it, to sit at his table when the company was not too drunk to appreciate feminine charm—and was proud of her astonishing beauty much after the manner of King Ahasuerus, who also hoped to dazzle his sycophants and

create envy by disclosing the charms of Queen Vashti at his banquets.

But Vashti proudly declined to be an exhibit, and so did not Emma. She did her best to please. She smiled, and could not tell for the life of her how to hit the mean between friendly reception and familiarity with these men who were equally ready to tally-ho with Sir Harry in the field, and make love to his lovely mistress after dinner. She shared their sport, riding with the best of them, wild bright hair streaming from her velvet cap as she galloped furiously over the swelling Sussex Downs with the blue sea below. Never a man could outride her; and not one of them but wondered at the brilliant beauty, the brilliant cheeks and eyes, the rushing vitality of this lovely creature Sir Harry had picked up, God knows where, to be the envy of half a county. She sat behind her tray of tea in the old drawing-room, where the ghostly crucifix is reflected from nowhere in a great mirror and none can tell how, and tried to put on the modest graces of a Lady Fetherstonehaugh when some bold arm was thrust about her waist, and must for all her efforts subside into the kitchen giggle and the scuffle and escape.

She did not, however, always escape, for Destiny, whom beauty must draw like a lover, was at her heels again with the ironic smile that is no lover's, God knows!

The Honourable Charles Greville, younger son of the Earl of Warwick, conferred his honourable company upon Sir Harry, merely for a shooting party—no long visit, for the brainlessness of these masculine gatherings had no attraction for him. One went, because in his world men shot or hunted and could not take their proper place in it if they did not, but it was impossible that a man of real attainments could please himself long in the company of a

mere man of sport and fashion and his boon companions crowding foolishly about him.

Mr. Greville did not drink, save in a gentlemanly moderation. He shot in moderation; in moderation he hunted; and the amours of an uncelibate life were also in moderation, governed by a due regard to expenditure. But he was an amateur, a dilettante of beauty, for all that—beauty in woman, but still more in chaste Greek statuary, in noble Etruscan vases with figures dancing upon them in a long-dead joy; in strange crystals, coins, and all the fascinating stuff that Time picks up on the seashore of Eternity and drops from his pack as he goes on to the next adventure, forgetting the last. And not only for himself must he collect (and indeed could do little enough because of this limited income), but also for his uncle, Sir William Hamilton, who was Ambassador in Naples; a very distinguished virtuoso indeed and all but final authority on the art of Greece and Rome.

So, armed with all his well-born graces and a prudence beyond his years, Mr. Greville came down to Up Park, his latest sacrifice on the altar of fashion. There might be a pretty maid-servant to chuck under the chin; there would certainly be the glorious champagne of the air on the wild Downs, not to mention Sir Harry's cellars, and—Lord, he had forgotten that!—there would be Sir Harry's new mistress to ridicule when he returned to the clubs. The last had been a common enough little slut; indeed, a man of birth might well wonder how another might amuse himself with such poor company when ladies of family were by no means unapproachable and less costly in more ways than one if discreetly wooed.

Mr. Greville was never to forget, however, in the course of a long and virtuous life, how he first saw the new charmer.

When he arrived at Up Park, it was a gay autumn afternoon, a light air crisping the dry leaves of the great copper beeches ere it tossed them to the earth, the late dahlias flaunting in the gardens, and the chrysanthemums in rows. Sir Harry was at the great hall-door with two grooms, both doing their utmost to control as magnificent a horse as Greville had ever clapt eyes on, a great bony bay thoroughbred, plunging and trembling, mad with nerves and spirits, quivering and sweating. A lady's saddle was on his back, and a girl in riding dress and feathered hat stood on the steps of the portico, watching him so keenly that she never noted Greville winding up the garden from the park. Sir Harry was swearing like a trooper. I spare my readers the greater part of his oaths, since they are out of fashion and therefore useless. One rests familiar, however.

“I tell you, Emily, you shall not. And what's more, I'm damned if I don't flog you instead of the horse if you attempt it. That beast must be broken—if they break every bone of him, before man or woman can master him. How dare you order him round, you damned hussy!—”

And so forth, and so forth, the grooms with an eye apiece on the horse and another on the lady. Greville stopped to watch the contest. Her face he could not see for she was sideways on to him, but the figure in her habit was pleasing.

Not a word did she say. She stood leaning against a pillar, watching.

“Take him away!” shouts Sir Harry, “and if you, damned etc., sons of etc., bring him round again before I tell you myself, I'll,” again etc.

A flute-like voice from the lady: “Suppose you’d permitted me, Sir Harry, what would you have betted I couldn’t master him?”

“Suppose I’d been fool enough to permit it, I’d have bet you fifty guineas you’d be a broken heap of bones in five minutes, and serve you right!” growls Sir Harry, turning to lounge in. The grooms turned also, she still watching—a statue in marble repose. Then, a most astonishing thing. While they were yet but a few steps away, she flew down the steps like a lapwing, and, with the horse held as it was on either side, she got one hand on a groom’s shoulder, the other on the pommel, made a wild scramble for the stirrup and was on his back before you could say Knife. She could not get her leg over the pommel in the hurry, but had her wits about her, her foot fast in the stirrup and a smart cut with her whip for either groom that sent them back smarting and swearing, and so off and away like a whirlwind—her right leg settled into safety at last, and Sir Harry stamping and screaming in the portico.

“Lord save us!” says Greville, and stopped dead to see the end of it.

She could not control the beast at first, and they tore madly over the flower-beds, cutting down the dahlias and wreaking ruin among the rose-bushes. The grass flew behind the pounding hoofs, the wild eyes shot flame, and the raging north wind might have been his sire, as he tossed the girl on his mighty back.

“The nymph and the centaur!” says Greville, watching coolly. “I’ll back the nymph, however!”

He did right, though it was even betting as yet, and Sir Harry made matters the worse for her by running yelling down the wide path, the pale grooms at his heels. She did a little more work in the garden for which the gardeners would bless her next day and then

she lifted him magnificently over against the great laurel hedge at the bottom. Would he give in to her? Not he, if he knew it! He swerved sharp, and all but tossed her into the green level on the top, then up the garden again. Greville caught Sir Harry's arm: "You fool, you! Be still, or you'll kill the woman."

Down the garden they thundered once more, she riding gloriously, teeth clenched and wild hair flying, and put him at it again, and over, over like a bird in flight, not brushing the topmost leaf with flying hoof.

"Stand clear! I've got him!" she screamed, and so off and away in the park, where if she could stick on she could ride him silly, and so they lost sight of her, riding hell for leather.

The two gentlemen met in a condition that forbade formal welcome between host and guest.

"Did you see that—madwoman?" cries Sir Harry, his eyes glaring over purple cheeks.

"By the Lord, yes!" says Greville, even his cool blood beating fast. "And a finer sight I never saw—woman and horse alike."

"You'll see her brought home on a shutter as sure as I stand here. Go down the park, Bates, and be ready."

"I back the lady!" Greville turned and ran sharp for the paling above the ha-ha that commanded the park, Sir Harry pounding in the rear. "I back the horse!" he got out between his gasps, and fixed the bet at fifty guineas with what breath was left. Greville took him.

She grazed a chestnut and stooped her head on the beast's neck to avoid the sweeping branches, and Greville quaked for his guineas. They swept round the lake, and now she got her whip ready and cut him mercilessly till he went like the devil. She put him at the long steep slope and flogged him up it, and, to make a long story short, wit conquered wind and it was not too long before he knew he was beat. And still she did not spare him. Down the slope, but turned and up again, until he stopped dead, dropping his ears, running with sweat, a conquered brute.

So she let him stand awhile, herself now drooping on the saddle, languid from the fierce struggle, and there they stood like weariness itself on the green sward with the trees above him. At last, she turned him towards home and walked him very slowly back to where the two men were waiting.

It may be supposed Sir Harry was not in the best of tempers—a hundred guineas to pay for an afternoon's contradiction sweetens no man's blood—but he had found time to say the needful about Greville's visit before the wearied pair came up to them, and Greville time to think himself lucky his excitement had stood him fifty guineas to the good. He was curious to see the girl's face. Of course Sir Harry's oaths and the general course of events had taught him the lady's situation.

“Mrs. Hart, I conclude?” he questioned.

“The same, and a man deserves what he gets for saddling himself with a—. If he spent his whole substance on a jilt like that, he'd get nothing for his pains but ingratitude and worry to drive him mad.”

“My dear sir, let us at least thank her for an exhibition of the finest tussle I ever saw between man and brute. You certainly have

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