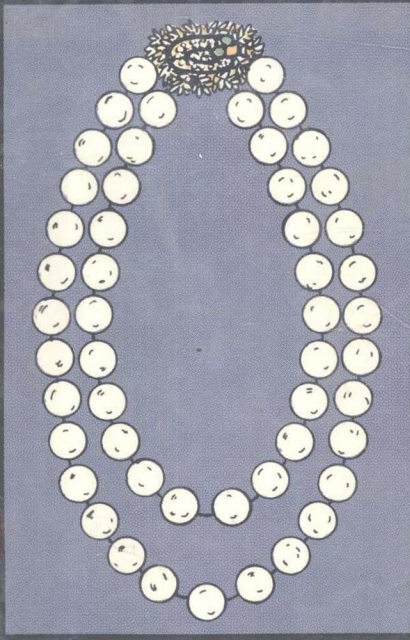
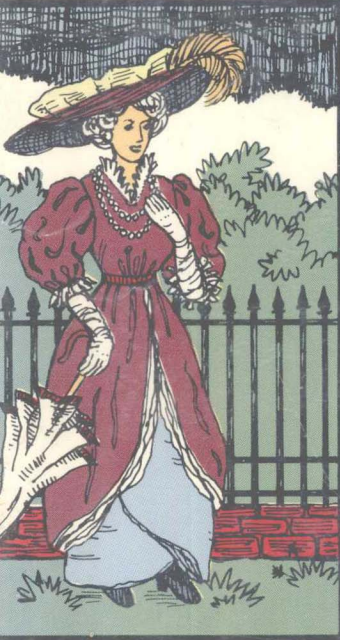


# The Spring of the Tiger



Victoria Holt

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# The English Scene



# Denton Square

Looking back over the sequence of events which brought me to that house of brooding mystery, of sinister undercurrents and disturbing echoes and an awareness of encroaching peril, I pause to marvel at the ingenuity of youth and inexperience, and how, as a girl in that other house, conveniently close to the theaters, it never entered my head to question the unconventional way of life into which I had been born.

I remember waiting at dusk, watching from my window, for the lamplighter to come and light the lamps in the square, and waking in the mornings to the street sounds — the clop clop of horses' hoofs on the road, the sudden laugh of a servant girl exchanging pleasantries with the milkman as the jugs were filled, the scrubbing of doorsteps and the polishing of brass, all of which had to be done quietly and discreetly so that the gentry could be led to believe — if they ever thought about it — that

that which was necessary to their comfort was brought about by magic.

It was imperative in our house in Denton Square that we were especially quiet in the mornings because of my mother. She rarely rose until noon and the reason was that she would not have gone to bed until the early hours of the morning. Her rest was important for she was the center of the household. Our existence depended upon her, and her moods determined the atmosphere of the house. When she was gay we were very very gay; and when she was morbid or depressed, as she sometimes was, we moved about on tiptoe, talking in whispers, apprehensive, rather like, I said to Meg Marlow, people living on the edge of a volcano waiting for the eruption. I was constantly reading and had just learned of the destruction of Pompeii.

Meg said: "We have to make allowances. It's her art." It was true that when she was not "resting" her art took her to the theater every night and some afternoons. It was those rest periods which I called times of threatened eruption — though it was not her anger we feared as much as her moody depression. One blessing was that none of her moods lasted long.

"I'll have you remember who she is." That was what Meg always said if any of us showed



a lessening of our adoration.

My mother was Irene Rushton — at least that was her professional name. She was in fact Irene Ashington, wife of Ralph Ashington, whom she had left when I was two years old.

Meg, my mother's dresser, lady's maid, part-time cook and devoted slave made me proud and happy when she told me how my mother had walked out. "She could stand it no more. The miracle is that she brought you with her. That was something, that was. A young child wasn't going to be much use to her career, was it? And she brought you with her!"

It became the catch phrase of my youth. "She brought you with her."

"Mind you," Meg once qualified, "it might have been better if she hadn't."

I was puzzled, wondering where I should have been if she had left me behind.

"Some outlandish place," Meg told me when I pestered her. "She should never have gone. No life for the likes of her, it wasn't. Hot . . . and not like England at all. Creepy crawlies everywhere. Spiders! Ugh!"

Meg had a horror of spiders. She had once stayed in the country when my mother was on tour and there had been a spider in her bed. Meg never tired of recounting the horror of that occasion. "Give me London," she always

finished up with, as though there was a law banning spiders from the capital.

“So she came home and brought you with her. Of course she was a name before she went away and there were managers who were ready to welcome her back.”

“And she brought me with her!”

“I knew that she never regretted it. She told me once: ‘I always like coming home and it *feels* like coming home while I’ve got my little Siddons to come home to.’ ” My name was in fact Sarah Siddons Ashington, for she had called me after that member of her profession whom she considered its greatest ornament: Sarah Siddons.

When she was in a good mood she called me Little Siddons. Sometimes that gave me a qualm of apprehension for I feared she planned to get me following her to the footlights, a profession for which, I was sure, I had no aptitude.

Meg could tell me little about my mother’s life during her marriage, for she was not with her then. Meg had been her dresser before her marriage and immediately resumed her old post when my mother came back to England. There had been a three-year interval.

“I said she should never have gone,” said Meg. “Marriage yes . . . but not that sort of marriage. I used to reckon it would be

someone with a mansion in the country and a nice town house and maybe a title to go with it. Now that would have been nice. But then she goes for this Ralph Ashington. . . . Good family, mind you. Big place in the country. No town house though . . . only this whatever it was in foreign parts. She don't talk about it much, and that's a sign. 'And this is Irene Rushton,' I said to myself. Well, when you think how it might have turned out . . . I wouldn't have been all that surprised at a duke . . . and then Mr. Ralph Ashington, if you please, planting tea or something in the back of beyond."

"He's my father."

"Oh, yes, he's your father all right." She looked at me distastefully. "And not a young man either. A widower. Well, how could she!"

"You saw him, Meg? You saw my father?"

"Twice. Once at the stage door, once in her dressing room. There was a regular retinue of them. He was the last I would have put my money on. But she made up her mind . . . quick . . . pronto . . . just like that. You know her. 'I'm going to,' she says. And there she is like a wild horse with the bit between her teeth . . . running on without looking where she's going."

"He must have been very attractive because

from all those dukes and things she chose him.”

“Never could understand it. Never could to this day. Well, she soon found her mistake, didn’t she. ‘No regrets,’ she always said. ‘After all he gave me Little Siddons.’ ”

I used to get Meg to tell me the story over and over again just to hear the last line.

The other member of our household was Janet, who was Meg’s sister. Janet would not have stayed if it had not been for Meg. She was the opposite of her sister — dour, but very efficient. She didn’t approve of the household. She had been used to good service, she reminded us, where they kept a butler, footman and a host of maids, besides their own carriage. One day, she maintained, she and Meg were going to live with their sister Ethel, who had a nice little place in the country where she kept fowls and sold fresh eggs, vegetables and fruit, and she wanted to run her house as a hostel for travelers. She needed her sisters to help her before she could start.

“Janet would be off like a shot,” said Meg, “but I could never bring myself to leave my lady and Janet can’t bring herself to leave me. So here we are.”

That was our household — just the four of us — Janet, Meg, my mother and myself.

There was, of course, Uncle Everard, but he did not exactly live with us. He stayed now and then; and he and my mother loved each other very much.

"They ought to be married," commented Meg, "and they would but for *him* and *her*."

*Him* was my father, who was still married to my mother, and *Her* was Everard's wife, to whom he was still married. These two vague figures stood between us and a regular household of which Janet would have approved, apart from the fact it would still have been too humble to please her entirely. Meg was less conventional.

"This is Irene Rushton," she said. "It's different with theater folk. You get to understand them . . . living in the theater."

My mother did not want me to go away to school. If I did she would have no Little Siddons to come home to. It was necessary, of course, that I should be educated so there was in a way another member of our household. This was Toby Mander, a young graduate just down from Oxford who would have been an actor if he had had any talent. "One of the multitude," my mother called him. "Dear Little Siddons, they are legion. They have a passion for the theater. They are the Not Quite brigade. They can almost act, but not quite. They can almost write plays, but not

quite. With the right sort of talent they might direct or produce, but they haven't got it . . . not quite." Toby was one of those. He was in love with my mother. "And that," commented Meg, "is a complaint as common as measles. They come too near and get infected, you might say. Not many people have it as strong as your mother."

"You mean the ability to infect."

"That's it. I never saw anyone with as much as your mother . . . and I've spent a lifetime in the theater."

"It could be said to be endemic to the theater," I said, for I had a passion for long words at this stage and was constantly reading the dictionary, discovering new ones and trying them out. "Like beriberi in Africa," I added.

"You and your long words," sniffed Meg. "I don't know where you get it from. Not from your mother anyway."

That was a term of reproach. Anything not inherited from my mother wasn't worth having.

So there was Toby — Tobias Mander — my mother's devoted slave. She had maneuvered one or two walk-on parts for him and he could not show his gratitude enough. One of his ways of doing so was to spend each morning teaching her daughter. Having this love of words, I was an apt pupil and I looked forward to our sessions together. We were a

pair of conspirators seeking to surprise my mother. We might have known that whatever academic heights I scaled she would not be impressed, for although she was completely poised and greatly sought after at the dinner tables of the elite, she was no scholar. What she really wanted Toby to do was to make me like her. She really was concerned about my welfare and I believe that I was more important to her than anyone — except Everard, of course, and sometimes I thought I was running level with him.

So the days in Denton Square passed pleasantly. It was a cozy world made comfortable by the companionship of Toby Mander and Meg Marlow, the efficiency of Janet and illuminated by the glittering presence of my mother.

There was the constant excitement of gathering information which I could prize from Meg. The past was like an immense jigsaw puzzle with great gaps in it which were vital to completing the picture.

There was Uncle Everard, a kindly hazy figure in the background, who was something important in the House, which in due course I learned was Parliament. From the topmost window of the attic we could see the face of Big Ben and we used to look to see if the light was on at the top, which meant that the House

was sitting and that Uncle Everard would be busy. He had a small house in Westminster and an estate in the country, I learned. He used to bring me boxes of chocolates tied up with many-colored ribbons. I was allowed to keep the ribbons but the chocolates were usually confiscated as being bad for my teeth.

I must have realized when I was about eight years old that there was a plot afoot to make me like my mother. My teeth, preserved, so my mother said, by a slice of apple to be eaten last thing at night, were encased in a brace because there was a danger of the front ones becoming too prominent. "We don't want Little Siddons to turn into a rabbit, do we?" said my mother, and for a while I was called Little Rabbit or simply Bunny. She was a great bestower of nicknames. I hated the brace. Then there was my hair. "Straight as a packet of candles," grumbled Meg. My mother's hung in rippling curls down her back and she could sit on it. Mine being so different offended my mother and during rest periods Meg would put it into rags before I went to bed. They rarely stayed in place and I would get irritated with them and pull them off so that in the morning I would present a strange spectacle, being half straight and half curly. "You'll never make a beauty," mourned Meg, to which I retorted that if it meant suffering



the nightly torture of lying on bundles of rags I would have to be plain, thank you.

“It’s nothing to thank anyone for,” said Meg ominously.

I was inclined to argue. It was due to Toby. He was a great believer in exercising the mind, and one of our lessons was to take a subject on which we did not agree and argue against what we really believed. One of his theories was that nothing was completely black or white. There were always many sides to every question so if you disagreed wholeheartedly with something you should try to see points in favor of it.

“Good for the soul,” said Toby.

He used to take me riding in the Row. My mother had said that I must learn to manage a horse, and I was sent to a local riding school where I used to go out on safe old hacks and be put through my paces with a group of young people about my age until I was considered safe. Then there were the rides with Toby. I enjoyed these very much. Toby was good fun when he stopped being broody about being not quite good enough for the stage. His panegyrics about my mother I accepted because I agreed with them.

The most peacefully happy times of those years were spent in Toby’s company.

We read a great deal together and if my