

THE NOVELS OF
GEORGETTE
HEYER

April Lady



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APRIL LADY

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APRIL LADY

The moonlight glinted on the pistol, and the hand that held it. Letty cried: "Don't, don't!" and tried with feverish haste to unclasp the single row of pearls from round her throat.

"Not you!" said the highwayman, even more ferociously. "*You!*"

The pistol was now pointing straight at Nell, but instead of shrinking away, or making haste (as Letty quaveringly implored her to do) to strip off her bracelets and rings and the large pendant that flashed on her breast, she was sitting bolt upright, her incredulous gaze fixed at first on the hand that grasped the pistol, and then lifting to the masked face.

"Quick!" commanded the highwayman harshly. "If you don't want me to put a bullet through you!"

"Dysart!"

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CHAPTER I

THERE was silence in the book-room, not the silence of intimacy but a silence fraught with tension. My lady's blue eyes, staring across the desk into my lord's cool gray ones, dropped to the pile of bills under his hand. Her fair head was hung, and her nervous hands clasped one another tightly. In spite of a modish (and very expensive) morning-dress of twilled French silk, and the smart crop achieved for her golden curls by the most fashionable coiffeur in London, she looked absurdly youthful, like a schoolgirl caught out in mischief. She was, in fact, not yet nineteen years old, and she had been married for nearly a year to the gentleman standing on the other side of the desk, and so steadily regarding her.

"Well?"

She swallowed rather convulsively. The Earl had spoken quite gently, but her ears were quick to catch the note of implacability in his voice. She stole a scared look up at him, and dropped her eyes again, colouring. He was not frowning, but there was no doubt that he meant to obtain an answer to the quite unanswerable question he had put to his erring bride.

Another silence fell, broken only by the ticking of the large clock on the mantelpiece. My lady gripped her fingers so tightly together that they whitened.

"I asked you, Nell, why all these tradesmen——" the Earl lifted the bills and let them fall again—"have found it necessary to apply to me for the settlement of their accounts?"

"I am very sorry!" faltered the Countess.

"But that doesn't answer my question," he said dryly.

"Well—well, I expect it was because I—because I forgot to pay them myself!"

"Forgot?"

Lower sank her golden head; she swallowed again.

"Under the hatches yet again, Nell?"

She nodded guiltily, her colour deepening.

His expression was inscrutable, and for a moment he said nothing. His gaze seemed to consider her, but what thoughts were running in his head it would have been impossible to have guessed. "I appear to make you a very inadequate allowance," he observed.

The knowledge that the allowance he made her was a very handsome one caused her to cast an imploring glance up at him and to stammer: "Oh, no, no!"

"Then why are you in debt?"

"I have bought things which perhaps I should not," she said desperately. "This—this gown, for instance! Indeed, I am sorry. I won't do so any more!"

"May I see your paid bills?"

This was said more gently still, but it effectively drove the flush from her cheeks. They became as white as they had before been red. To be sure, she had any number of receipted bills, but none knew better than she that their total, staggering though it might seem to the daughter of an impoverished peer, did not account for half of that handsome allowance which was paid quarterly to her bankers. At any moment now my lord would ask the question she dreaded, and dared not answer truthfully.

It came. "Three months ago, Nell," said the Earl, in a measured tone, "I forbade you most straitly to pay any more of your brother's debts. You gave me your word that you would not. *Have* you done so?"

She shook her head. It was dreadful to lie to him, but what else was to be done when he looked so stern, and had shown himself so unsympathetic to poor Dysart? It was true that Dysart's recurring difficulties were all due to his shocking luck; and it seemed that Cardross couldn't understand how

unjust it was to blame Dysart for his inability to abandon gaming and racing. That Fatal Tendency, said Mama, with resignation, ran in the family: Grandpapa had died under a cloud of debt; and Papa, with the hopeful intention of restoring the fortunes of his house, had still more heavily mortgaged his estates. That was why Papa had been so overjoyed when Cardross had offered for her hand. For Cardross was as well-born as he was wealthy, and Papa had previously been obliged to face the horrid necessity of giving his eldest daughter to the highest bidder, even (dreadful thought!) if this should prove to be a rich merchant with social aspirations. He had done so with great fortitude, and he had had his reward: in her very first season—indeed, before she had been out a month—Cardross has not only seen the Lady Helen Irvine, but had apparently decided that she was the bride for whom he had so long waited. Such a piece of good fortune had never even occurred to Lord Pevensey. It was certainly to be supposed that Cardross, past thirty, and with no nearer relation than a cousin to succeed him, must be contemplating marriage in the not too distant future, but such was his consequence that he might have had the pick of all the damsels faithfully presented by their mamas at the Queen's Drawing-rooms, and thereafter exhibited by them at Almack's Assembly Rooms, and all the ton parties. Moreover, to judge by the style of the lady who was pretty generally known to be his mistress, his taste was for something older and by far more sophisticated than a child fresh from the schoolroom. Never had Papa thought to see his little Nell do so well for the family! In the event, her success, and Cardross's generosity proved to be rather too much for him: hardly had he led his child to the altar than he suffered a stroke. The doctors assured his lady that he had many years of life before him, but the visitation had rendered him so far incapable that he had had to abandon his usual pursuits, and to retire to the

seclusion of his ancestral home in Devonshire, where, it was the earnest if unexpressed hope of his wife and son-in-law, he would be obliged to remain.

Nell did not know just what Cardross had done to earn her parents' gratitude. It all came under the vague title of Settlements, and she was not to bother her pretty head over it, but to take care always to conduct herself with dignity and discretion. Mama, declaring herself to be deeply thankful, had made quite plain to her what her duty henceforward would be. It included such things as always showing my lord an amiable countenance, and never embarrassing him by asking ill-bred questions, or appearing to be aware of it if (perhaps) he was found to have formed a Connection outside the walls of that splendid house of his in Grosvenor Square. "*One* thing I am sure of," had said Mama, fondly patting Nell's hand, "and that is that he will treat you with the greatest consideration! His manners, too, are so particularly good that I am persuaded you will never have cause to complain of the sort of neglect, or—or indifferent civility, which is the lot of so many females in your situation. I assure you, my love, there is nothing more mortifying than to be married to a man who lets it be seen that his affections are elsewhere engaged."

Mama should have known, for this had been her fate. What Mama did not know, and no one must ever guess, was that her carefully instructed daughter had tumbled headlong into love with my lord at their very first meeting, when Lady Jersey, one of the Patronesses of Almack's, had brought him across the room to be introduced to her, and she had looked up into his eyes, and had seen them smiling down at her. No, Mama had no suspicion of that. Mama was all sensibility, but she knew that marriage had nothing to do with romance. It had been her dread, she confided, that Nell would be married to a man whom she could not like, but she was quite sure that Nell must like so charming and so handsome a

gentleman as Cardross. And, what was more, there could be little doubt that he was disposed to hold his bride in considerable affection. He had actually desired Lady Jersey to present him to her, on that memorable evening; and what he had said later to Papa, when he had made his offer, had quite soothed a mother's anxiety. Nell would meet with nothing but courtesy and consideration at his hands.

It hadn't seemed possible to Nell, lost in love, that Cardross could have proposed to her only because she was pretty, and well-born, and rather more pleasing to him than any of the other young ladies who met his critical eye, but Mama had been right. When Nell had met my lord's half-sister and ward, a vivid brunette, not then out, but hopeful of being presented by her sister-in-law, that impetuous damsel had exclaimed, warmly embracing her: "Oh, how pretty you are! Prettier by far than Giles's mistress! How famous if you were to put her nose out of joint!"

It had been a dreadful shock, but Nell had not betrayed herself, which was some small consolation; and she was thankful to have been made aware of the truth before she could render herself ridiculous by showing her heart to the world, or have become a tiresome bore to my lord by hanging on him in the doting way which one short season had taught her was considered by the modish to be not at all the thing. As for putting Lady Orsett's nose out of joint—it had not taken her long to discover the identity of my lord's mistress—that ambition probably belonged, like her earlier dreams, to the realm of make-believe, and certainly seemed very far from achievement today, when my lord was commanding her to account for her debts.

"Tell me the truth, Nell!"

His voice, quite kind, but unmistakably imperative, recalled her from her hurrying, jumbled thoughts. But it was impossible to tell him the truth, because even if he forgave

her for having disobeyed him he was very unlikely to forgive Dysart, for whom, in his eyes, there could be no excuse at all. And if he refused to rescue Dysart from his difficulties any more, and made it impossible for her to do so either, what would become of Dy, or, for that matter, of poor Papa? Not so long ago he had said, a trifle grimly, that the best turn he could render Dysart would be to buy him a pair of colours, and pack him off to join Lord Wellington's army in the Peninsula; and it was all too probable that this was precisely what he would do if this fresh disaster came to his ears. Nor was there much doubt that Dysart would jump at the offer, because he had always hankered after a military career. Only Papa, with his next son a schoolboy still at Harrow, had refused even to discuss the matter; and Mama, at the mere thought of exposing her beloved eldest-born to the dangers and discomforts of a military campaign, had suffered a series of distressing spasms.

No, the truth could not be told, but how did one account for three hundred pounds with never a bill to show? There was no need for Lord Pevensey's daughter to cudgel her brains for more than a very few moments over that problem: few knew better than an Irvine how money could vanish without leaving a trace behind. "It wasn't Dysart!" she said quickly. "I am afraid it was me!" She saw his face change, an arrested look in his eyes, a hardening of the lines about his mouth, and she felt suddenly frightened. "Pray don't be angry!" she begged rather breathlessly. "I promise I will never do so any more!"

"Are you telling me you lost it at play?"

She hung her head again. After a pause he said: "I suppose I should have known that it would be in your blood too."

"No, no, *indeed* it isn't!" she cried, with passionate sincerity. "Only it seemed stupid and prudish not to play, when everyone else did so, and then I lost, and I thought that

perhaps the luck would change, but it didn't, and——"

"You need say no more!" he interrupted. "There was never yet a gamester who didn't think the luck must change!" He looked frowningly at her, and added in a level tone: "I should be very reluctant, Nell, to take such steps as must put it wholly out of your power to play anything but silver-loo, or a pool at commerce, but I give you fair warning I will not permit my wife to become one of faro's daughters."

"Well, I am not perfectly sure what that is," she said naïvely, "but indeed I won't do it again, so *pray* don't do anything horrid!"

"Very well," he replied. He glanced down at the bills on his desk. "I'll settle these, and any others that you may have. Will you bring them to me, please?"

"Now?" she faltered, uneasily aware of a drawer stuffed with bills.

"Yes, now." He added, with a smile: "You will be much more comfortable, you know, when you have made a clean breast of the whole."

She agreed to this, but when she presently rendered up a collection of crumpled bills she did not feel at all comfortable. There could be no denying that she had been woefully extravagant. The allowance Cardross made her had seemed so enormous to a girl who had never had anything to spend beyond the small sum bestowed on her with the utmost reluctance by her papa for pin-money that she had bought things quite recklessly, feeling her resources to be limitless. But now, as she watched my lord glance through the appalling sheaf, she thought she must have been mad to have spent so much and so heedlessly.

For some moments he read with an unmoved countenance, but presently his brows knit, and he said: "A two-colour gold snuffbox with grisaille paintings?"

"For Dysart!" she explained apprehensively.

"Oh!" He resumed his study of the incriminating bills. With a sinking heart, she saw him pick up a document headed, in elegant scroll-work, by the name of her favourite dressmaker. He said nothing, however, and she was able to breathe again. But an instant later he read aloud: "Singing-bird, with box embellished turquoise-blue enamelled panels—What the *devil*—?"

"It was a music-box," she explained, her voice jumping. "For the children—my sisters!"

"Ah, I see!" he said, laying the bill aside.

Her spirits rose, only to sink again an instant later when the Earl exclaimed: "Good God!" Peeping in great trepidation to see what had provoked this startled ejaculation, she perceived that he was holding another scrolled sheet. "Forty guineas for one hat?" he said incredulously.

"I am afraid it *was* a little dear," she owned. "It—it has three *very* fine ostrich plumes, you see. You—you said you liked it!" she added desperately.

"Your taste is always impeccable, my love. Did I like the other eight hats you have purchased, or haven't I seen them yet?"

Horried, she stammered: "N-not *eight*, Giles, *surely*?"

He laughed. "Eight! Oh, don't look so dismayed! I dare say they were all quite necessary. To be sure, forty guineas seems a trifle extortionate, but it is certainly a charming confection, and becomes you delightfully." She smiled gratefully at him, and he took her chin in his hand, and pinched it. "Yes, very well, ma'am, but that is only the sop that goes before the scold! You've been drawing the bustle disgracefully, my dear. You seem not to have the smallest notion of management, and I should doubt whether you have ever kept an account in your life. Now, I am going to settle all these bills of yours and I am also going to place a further hundred pounds to your account. That should—indeed, it

must!—keep you in reasonably comfortable circumstances until the quarter.”

She exclaimed: “Oh, thank you! How *very* kind you are! I will take the greatest care, I promise!”

“I trust you won’t find it necessary to exercise any very stringent economies,” he said, with a touch of irony. “But if you have any more bills laid by, give them to me now! I won’t scold, but I warn you, Nell, it won’t do to keep your money safely in Childe’s while you run up debts all over town! There are to be no bills outstanding at the quarter, so if you are concealing any from me now, make a clean breast of them! If I found that you had deceived me, then, indeed, I should be angry with you, and do much more than scold!”

“What—what would you do, if—if I did happen to owe any money at the quarter?” she asked, looking frightened.

“Give you only enough money for such trifling expenses as must occur from day to day, and arrange that all your bills are sent to me for payment,” he replied.

“Oh, no!” she cried, flushing.

“I assure you I should dislike it as much as you, and feel as much humiliated. But I have seen something of what such reckless spending as you appear to delight in may lead to, and I am determined it shall not happen in my household. Now, think, Nell! Have you given me all your bills?”

The consciousness of having already deceived him, as much as his threat, coupled as it was by a certain look of inflexibility in his face, almost overpowered her. In suppressed agitation, which rendered calm reflection impossible, she said hurriedly: “Yes—oh, yes!”

“Very well. We shan’t speak of this again, then.”

The flurry of her heart subsided; she said in a subdued voice: “Thank you! Indeed, I am very much obliged to you! I did not mean to be such an extravagant wife.”

"Nor I such a tyrannical husband. We could deal better than this, Nell."

"No, no! I mean, I never thought you so! You are most kind—I beg your pardon for being so troublesome: pray forgive me!"

"Nell!"

His hand was outstretched to her, but she did not take it, only smiling nervously, and saying again: "Thank you! You are very good! Oh, how late it is! M-may I go now?"

His hand fell; he said in quite a different voice: "I am not a schoolmaster! Certainly go, if that is your wish!"

She murmured something, in disjointed phrases, about his sister, and Almack's and fled out of the room. That gesture, coming as it did at the end of a scene during which he had indeed seemed to be more schoolmaster than husband, seemed to her rather the expression of kindness than of any warmer emotion, and, with her nerves already overset, she had not been able to respond to it as, in general, she had forced herself to respond to any advance made by him. That her retreat might offend him she knew; that it could wound him she had no suspicion, having, from the start of her married life, seen in his love-making only a chivalrous determination not to betray to her that although he had bestowed his name on her his heart belonged to another.

As for Cardross, he was left with some rather bitter reflections to bear him company, and the growing suspicion that all the well-wishers who had begged him not to marry Nell had been right after all: no good could come of an alliance with an Irvine. One of his cousins, that Pink of the Ton, Mr. Felix Hethersett, had put the matter to him with brutal frankness. "Nothing to say against the girl, dear old boy, but I don't like the stable," had said Mr. Hethersett.

Well, he had not liked the stable either. Nothing had been further from his intention than marriage with an Irvine; and

nothing had seemed more improbable than a love-match. It was his duty to marry, but for some years he had enjoyed an agreeable connection with a fashionable lady of easy morals and skilful discretion, and that he should succumb to a pair of blue eyes and a mischievous dimple had been an event quite outside his calculations. But so it had been. He had first seen his Nell in a ballroom, and he had instantly been struck, not so much by her undeniable beauty as by the sweetness in her face, and the innocence of her enquiring gaze. Before he well knew what had happened, his heart was lost, and every prudent consideration thrown to the winds. She sprang from a line of expensive profligates, but he had been ready to swear, looking into her eyes, that she had miraculously escaped the Irvine taint.

She had been less than eighteen when he had married her, fourteen years younger than he, and when he found himself with a shy, elusive bride he handled her very gently, believing that tenderness and forbearance would win for him the loving, vital creature he was so sure lived behind the nervous child.

He had caught glimpses of that creature—or so he thought—but he had never won her; and the fear that he had deceived himself was beginning to grow on him. She was dutiful, even submissive; sometimes an entrancing companion, always a well-mannered one; but although she never repulsed his advances she never courted them, or gave any sign that she could not be perfectly happy out of his company. Once installed in Grosvenor Square she entered with apparent zest into every fashionable amusement, took her young sister-in-law into society, rapidly acquired a court of her own, and was by no means the sort of wife who constantly demanded her husband's escort. She was extravagant; he had today discovered that, like the rest of her family, she was a gamester; and what affection she had she appeared to lavish on her

little sisters, and on her scapegrace of a brother. There had been plenty of people to tell Cardross that Nell had accepted him for the sake of his wealth. He had not believed them, but he was beginning to wonder. In her precipitate retreat from his book-room he saw only a spoilt child's desire to escape from a disagreeable schoolmaster, and never dreamed that she had fled because her feelings threatened to overcome her.

She made for the shelter of her own apartments, hoping, since she needed a little time in which to compose herself, that she would not find her dresser already there. She did not. She found her sister-in-law instead, blithely engaged in trying on one of those eight—no, *nine!*—modish hats.

The young Countess's apartments consisted of a spacious bedchamber, and an adjoining room, known to the household as her dressing-room, but partaking more of the nature of a boudoir. My lord had had both rooms redecorated on the occasion of his marriage, nesting his bride in a tent-bed with rose-silk curtains upheld by Cupids and garlands, and hanging her dressing-room with blue and silver brocade. In this frivolous bower, of which she was frankly envious, the Lady Letitia Merion was parading between various mirrors, very well-pleased with her appearance, but unable to decide on the precise tilt at which the hat should be worn. She hailed her sister-in-law light-heartedly, saying: "Oh, I am glad you are come! I have been waiting for ever! Nell, I do think this is a *ravishing* hat, only how should one wear it? Like this, or like *this?*"

"Oh, don't!" begged Nell involuntarily, unable to bear the sight of what had contributed to her late discomfiture.

"Good gracious, what's the matter?" demanded Letty.

"Nothing, nothing! I have the headache a little, that is all!" She saw that Letty was staring at her, and tried to smile. "Pray don't be concerned! It is only—I only——" She