

VICTORIA HOLT

The book cover features a woman with dark hair, wearing a red off-the-shoulder dress with a white fur collar, looking down. In the background, a full moon is visible in a dark sky, and a bird is shown in flight. The overall color palette is dominated by reds, blues, and browns.

Bestselling author of DAUGHTER OF DECEIT

“One of the best
romantic-suspense
novelists writing
today.”

ASSOCIATED PRESS

THE TIME OF THE HUNTER'S MOON

FAWCETT
CREST

20511-8/U.S. \$5.99

*THE TIME
OF THE
HUNTER'S
MOON*

Victoria Holt

Sale of this book without a front cover may be unauthorized. If this book is coverless, it may have been reported to the publisher as "unsold or destroyed" and neither the author nor the publisher may have received payment for it.

A Fawcett Crest Book
Published by Ballantine Books
Copyright © 1983 by Victoria Holt

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 83-9046

ISBN 0-449-20511-8

This edition published by arrangement with Doubleday and Company, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books Edition: January 1985
Twelfth Printing: December 1992

“An Extravaganza . . .

Holt gives her many fans another entrancing saga.”
Publishers Weekly

“This book is a delight because of the Victoria Holt touch: her masterful writing skills, her attention to details, and her descriptive backdrops where romance and intrigue are played out. It all adds up to another success by the mistress of romance and suspense.”

The Arizona Daily Star

“Devoted readers of fiction come to expect quality storytelling from certain writers. Victoria Holt is one of those who never disappoints her fans, and this book upholds her wide reputation as a consummate writer of romantic-suspense novels.”

Nashville Banner

“Victoria Holt’s romantic mysteries are among the best of the genre. She’s done it again in *THE TIME OF THE HUNTER’S MOON*. . . . Intricately plotted . . . Enjoyable.”

Minneapolis Star & Tribune

“First-rate Holt . . . Nobody does it better.”
Library Journal



Also by Victoria Holt

Published by Fawcett Crest Books:

MISTRESS OF MELLYN
KIRKLAND REVELS
BRIDE OF PENDORRIC
MENFREYA IN THE MORNING
THE KING OF THE CASTLE
THE QUEEN'S CONFESSION
THE SHIVERING SANDS
THE SECRET WOMAN
THE SHADOW OF THE LYNX
ON THE NIGHT OF THE SEVENTH MOON
THE CURSE OF THE KINGS
THE HOUSE OF A THOUSAND LANTERNS
THE LEGEND OF THE SEVENTH VIRGIN
THE PRIDE OF THE PEACOCK
THE DEVIL ON HORSEBACK
MY ENEMY THE QUEEN
THE SPRING OF THE TIGER
THE MASK OF THE ENCHANTRESS
LORD OF THE FAR ISLAND
THE DEMON LOVER
THE JUDAS KISS
LANDOWER LEGACY
THE ROAD TO PARADISE ISLAND
SECRET FOR A NIGHTINGALE
THE SILK VENDETTA
THE INDIA FAN
THE CAPTIVE
SNARE OF THE SERPENTS
DAUGHTER OF DECEIT

CONTENTS

PART ONE

<i>THE FOREST FANTASY</i>	3
<i>THE ABBEY</i>	62
<i>MARCIA</i>	101
<i>A SUMMER INTERLUDE</i>	146
<i>ROOKS' REST</i>	160

PART TWO

<i>THE RUBY EARRING</i>	191
<i>IN THE DEVIL'S DEN</i>	221
<i>MIDSUMMER MOON</i>	251
<i>A VISITOR IN THE COUNTRY</i>	296
<i>THE ALARMING DISCOVERY</i>	316
<i>THE MEETING IN THE MOUNTAINS</i>	351
<i>REVELATION</i>	369



PART
ONE



THE FOREST FANTASY

I WAS NINETEEN WHEN WHAT I CAME TO THINK OF AS THE FOREST Fantasy occurred. Looking back it used to seem mystic, like something which happened in a dream. Indeed there were many times when I almost convinced myself that it had not happened outside my imagination. Yet from an early age I had been a realist, a practical person, not given overmuch to dreaming; but at that time I was inexperienced, not really out of the schoolroom and only in the last stages of my prolonged girlhood.

It happened one late October afternoon in woods in Switzerland not far from the German border. I was in my last year at one of the most exclusive schools in Europe to which Aunt Patty had decided I must go to "finish me off" as she put it.

"Two years should do it," she said. "It's not so much what it does for you, but what people believe it to have done. If parents know that one of us went through the polishing process at Schaffenbrucken they will be determined to send their girls to us."

Aunt Patty was the proprietress of a school for girls, and the plan was that when I was ready I should join in the enterprise. Consequently I must have the very best of qualifications to fit me for the task and the additional polish was intended to

make me irresistible bait for those parents who wanted their daughters to share in the reflected glow which came from that glory which was Schaffenbrucken.

"Snobbery," said Aunt Patty. "Sheer unadulterated snobbery. But who are we to complain if it helps to keep Patience Grant's exclusive Academy for Young Ladies a profitable concern?"

Aunt Patty was rather like a batrel to look at, being short and very plump. "I like my food," she used to say, "so why shouldn't I enjoy it. I believe it to be the bounden duty of everyone on Earth to enjoy the good things which the Lord has bestowed on us and when roast beef and chocolate pudding were invented they were made to be eaten."

The food was very good at Patience Grant's Academy for Young Ladies—very different I believed from that which was served in many similar establishments.

Aunt Patty was unmarried "for the simple reason," she would say, "that nobody ever asked me. Whether I should have accepted is another matter, but as the problem never presented itself neither I nor anyone else need be concerned with it."

She enlarged on the subject to me. "I was the perennial wallflower of the ball. Mind you, I could climb a tree in those days before I was so incommoded by avoirdupois, and if any boy dared pull my pigtails he had to move fast to avoid battle, from which, my dear Cordelia, I invariably emerged the victor."

I could believe it, and I often thought how stupid men were because none of them had had the good sense to ask Aunt Patty to marry him. She would have made an excellent wife; as it was she made me an excellent mother.

My parents were missionaries in Africa. They were dedicated—saints, they were called; but like so many saints they were so concerned with bringing good into the world at large that they did not seem to care so very much for the problems of their small daughter. I can only vaguely remember them—for I was only seven years old when I was sent home to England—looking at me sometimes, faces shining with zeal and virtue, as though they were not quite sure who I was. I

wondered later how in their lives of good deeds they had ever found the time or inclination to beget me.

However—it must have been to their immense relief—it was decided that life in the African jungle was no place for a child. I should be sent home, and to whom should I be sent but to my father's sister Patience.

I was taken home by someone from the mission who was travelling back for a short stay. The long journey seems very vague to me but what I shall always remember was the rotund figure of Aunt Patty waiting for me when I disembarked. Her hat caught my attention first of all for it was a glorious affair with a blue feather perched on the top. Aunt Patty had a weakness for hats which almost rivalled that of food. Sometimes she even wore them indoors. And there she was—her eyes magnified behind pebble glasses, her face like a full moon shining with soap and water and *joie de vivre* under that magnificent hat with the feather wobbling as she took me to her enormous lavender-scented bosom.

"Well, here you are," she said. "Alan's girl . . . come home."

And in those first moments she convinced me that I had.

It must have been about two years after my arrival when my father died of dysentery, and my mother a few weeks later of the same disease.

Aunt Patty showed me the paragraphs in the religious papers. "They gave their lives in God's service," it was said.

I am afraid I did not grieve very much. I had forgotten their existence and only remembered them very rarely. I was completely absorbed in the life of Grantley Manor, the old Elizabethan house which Aunt Patty had bought with what she called her patrimony two years before I was born.

We had great conversations—she and I. She never seemed to hold anything back. Afterwards I often reflected that most people seem to have secrets in their lives. It was never like that with Aunt Patty. Words flowed from her and there was never any restraint.

"When I was away at school," she said, "I had lots of fun but never enough to eat. They watered down the broth. Soup, they called it on Monday. That wasn't bad. A little weaker on

Tuesday, getting so feeble on Wednesday that I used to wonder how much longer it could totter on before it was revealed as plain H₂O. The bread always seemed stale. I think that school made me into the gourmand I am for I vowed when I left it I would indulge and indulge. If I had a school, I said to myself, it should be different. Then when I came into money I said, 'Why not?' 'It's a gamble,' said old Lucas. He was the solicitor. 'What of it?' I said. 'I like a gamble.' And the more he was against it the more I was for it. I am a little like that. Tell me 'No, you can't' and as sure as I'm sitting here I'll soon be saying, 'Oh yes you can.' So I found the Manor . . . going cheap with things having to be done to it. Just the place for a school. I called it Grantley Manor. Grant, you see. A little bit of the old snobbery creeping in. Miss Grant of Grantley. Well, you would think she had been living there all through the centuries, wouldn't you? And you wouldn't ask; you'd just think it. Good for the girls that is. I planned to make Grantley's Academy into the most exclusive establishment in the country, like that place Schaffenbrucken in Switzerland."

That was the first time I had heard of Schaffenbrucken.

She explained to me. "It is all very carefully thought out. Schaffenbrucken selects its pupils with care so that it is not easy to get in. 'I'm afraid we have no room for your Amelia, Madame Smith. Try again next term. Who knows you might be lucky. We are full up now and have a waiting list.' A waiting list! That is the most magic phrase in the vocabulary of a school proprietress. It is what we all hope to achieve . . . people fighting to thrust their daughters into your school, not as the case usually is with your trying to wheedle them into doing so."

"Schaffenbrucken is expensive," she said on another occasion, "but I think it is worth every penny. You can learn French and German from the people who speak it as it should be spoken because it's their own language; you can learn how to dance and curtsy and walk round a room with a book balanced on your head. Yes, you say. You can learn that at thousands of schools. True, but you won't be seen as you will be if you have the Schaffenbrucken glow on you."

Her conversation was always punctuated by laughter.

"So it is a little Schaffenbrucken bloom for you, my dear," she said. "Then you will come back here and when we let it be known where you have been, mothers will be fighting to send their daughters to us. 'Miss Cordelia Grant is in charge of deportment. She was at Schaffenbrucken, you know.' Oh, my dear, we shall be telling them we have a waiting list of young ladies clamouring to be coached in the social niceties by Miss Cordelia Grant of Schaffenbrucken fame."

It had always been accepted that I, when "finished," should join Aunt Patty in her school.

"One day," she said, "it will be yours, Cordelia."

I knew she meant when she died and I could not imagine a world without her. She was the centre of my life with her shining face, her spurts of laughter, her racy conversation, her excessive appetite and her hats.

And when I was seventeen she said it was time I went to Schaffenbrucken.

Once again I was put in charge of travellers—this time three ladies who were going to Switzerland. At Basle I should be met by someone from the school who would conduct me the rest of the way. The journey was interesting and I recalled the long voyage home from Africa. This was very different. I was older now; I knew where I was going; and I lacked that fearful apprehension of a very small girl on a journey to the unknown.

The ladies who conducted me across Europe were determined to look after me and it was with some relief, I imagined, that they handed me over to Fräulein Mainz who taught German at Schaffenbrucken. She was a middle-aged woman, rather colourless, who was glad to hear that I had learned a little German. She told me my accent was atrocious but that would be rectified; and she refused to speak anything but her native tongue for the rest of the journey.

She talked about the glories of Schaffenbrucken and how fortunate I was to be chosen to join this very selective group of young ladies. It was the old Schaffenbrucken story and I thought Fräulein Mainz the most humourless person I had ever met. I suppose I was comparing her with Aunt Patty.

Schaffenbrucken itself was not impressive. The setting was, though. We were a mile or so from the town and surrounded by woods and mountains. Madame de Guérin, French-Swiss, was a middle-aged lady of quiet authority with what I can only call a "presence." I could see how important she was to the Schaffenbrucken legend. She did not have a great deal to do with us girls. We were left to the care of the mistresses. There was dancing, drama, French, German, and what they called social awareness. We were meant to emerge from Schaffenbrucken fit to enter into the highest society.

I soon settled into the life and found the girls interesting. They were of various nationalities and naturally I became friendly with the English. Two girls shared a room and it was always arranged that nationalities should be mixed. I had a German girl for my first year and a French one for the second. It was a good idea for it did help us to perfect our languages.

Discipline was not strict. We were not exactly children. Girls usually came between sixteen and seventeen and stayed until nineteen or twenty. We were not there to be fundamentally educated but each of us must be formed into a *femme comme il faut*, as Madame de Guérin said. It was more important to dance well and converse gracefully than to have a knowledge of literature and mathematics. Most of the girls would go straight from Schaffenbrucken to their debut into society. There were one or two of them like myself who were destined for something different. Most of them were pleasant and looked upon their stay at Schaffenbrucken as an essential part of their upbringing—ephemeral but to be enjoyed as much as possible while it lasted.

Although life in the various classrooms was easy-going there was a certain strict surveillance kept on us and I was sure that if any girl came near to being involved in a scandal she would be sent packing at once, for there would always be some ambitious parent eager to put a daughter into the vacant place.

I went home for Christmas and summer holidays and Aunt Patty and I would have a hilarious time discussing Schaffenbrucken.

"We must do that," Aunt Patty would say. "I tell you that

when you come home from Schaffenbrucken we'll have the finest finishing school in the country. We'll make Daisy Hetherington green with envy."

That was the first time I heard Daisy Hetherington's name. I asked idly who she was and received the information that she had a school in Devonshire which was almost as good as Daisy thought it was, and that was saying a good deal.

I wished I'd asked more later. But naturally then it did not occur to me that it might be important.

I came to what was to be my last term at Schaffenbrucken. It was late October—wonderful weather for the time of year. We got a lot of sun at Schaffenbrucken and that made the summer seem to last a long time. It would be so hot in the day and suddenly, as soon as the sun disappeared, one would realize what time of the year it was. Then we would huddle round the common room fire and talk.

My best friends at that time were Monique Delorme, who shared my room, and an English girl, Lydia Markham, and her room-mate Frieda Schmidt. The four of us were always together. We talked constantly and used to make excursions into the town together. Sometimes we would walk and if the wagonette was going into town, a few of us would go in that. We took walks in the woods, which were allowed in parties of six—or at least four. There was a certain amount of freedom and we did not feel in the least restricted.

Lydia said that being at Schaffenbrucken was like being in a railway station waiting for the train that would carry you to a place where you would be a properly grown-up person. I knew what she meant. This was merely a stopping place in our lives—a stepping-stone to some other place.

We talked about ourselves. Monique was the daughter of a noble house and would be whisked almost immediately into a suitable marriage. Frieda's father had made his fortune out of pottery and was a businessman of many interests. Lydia belonged to a banking family. I was a little older and as I should be leaving at Christmas felt very much the senior.

We noticed Elsa almost as soon as she joined the establishment. She was a small pretty girl with fair curly hair and blue

eyes; she was vivacious and had a certain elfin look. She was unlike any of the other servants and she was engaged on short notice because one of the maids had eloped with a man from the town and Madame de Guérin must have thought she would give Elsa a trial until the end of the term.

I was sure that if Madame de Guérin had really known Elsa she would not have allowed her to stay even until the end of the term. She was not at all respectful and did not seem to be in the least in awe of Schaffenbrucken or anyone in it. She had an air of camaraderie which implied that she was one of us. Some of the girls resented it; my own intimate quartette was rather amused by it; perhaps that was why she was always turning up in our rooms.

She would come in sometimes when the four of us were together and somehow sidle herself into the conversation.

She liked to hear about our homes and asked a good many questions. "Oh, I'd like to go to England," she said. "Or France . . . or Germany . . ." She would lure us to talk and she looked so pleased to hear about our backgrounds that we couldn't help going along with her.

She herself had come down in the world, she said. She was not really a serving maid. Oh no! She had thought she was set for a comfortable future. Her father had been, well . . . not exactly rich, but not wanting anything. She was to have been launched into society. "Not like you young ladies, of course, but in a more modest way. Then my father died. Hey Presto!" She waved her arms and raised her eyes to the ceiling. "That was the end of little Elsa's glory. No money. Elsa on her own. There was nothing for me to do but work. And what could I do? What had I been trained for?"

"Not as a housemaid," said Monique with good French logic.

At which we all laughed, including Elsa.

We couldn't help liking her and we used to encourage her to come and talk to us. She was amusing and very knowledgeable about the legends of the German forests where she said she had spent her early childhood before her father brought her to England where she had lived for a while before coming to Switzerland.

"I like to think of all those trolls hiding underground," she said. "Used to make my flesh creep. There were nice stories too about knights in armour coming along and carrying off maidens to Valhalla . . . or somewhere."

"That was where they went when they died," I reminded her.

"Well, to some nice place where there was feasting and banquets."

She took to joining us most afternoons.

"What would Madame de Guérin say if she knew?" asked Lydia.

"We'd probably be expelled," added Monique.

"What luck for all those on the waiting list. Four at one go."

Elsa would sit on the edge of a chair laughing at us.

"Tell me about your father's *château*," she would say to Monique.

And Monique told her about the formality of her home and how she was more or less betrothed to Henri de la Creseuse who owned the estate adjoining her father's.

Then Frieda told of her stern father who would certainly find a baron at least for her to marry. Lydia spoke of her two brothers who would be bankers like her father.

"Tell me about Cordelia," said Elsa.

"Cordelia is the luckiest of the lot," cried Lydia. "She has the most wonderful aunt who lets her do just what she likes. I love to hear about Aunt Patty. I am sure she'll never try to make Cordelia marry some baron or old man because he has a title and money. Cordelia will marry just whom she pleases."

"And she'll be rich in her own right. She'll have that lovely old Manor House. It'll all be yours one day, Cordelia, and you won't have to marry someone to get it."

"I shan't want it because it means Aunt Patty would have to die first."

"But it will all be yours one day. You'll be rich and independent."

Elsa wanted to know about Grantley Manor and I gave a glowing description. I wondered if I exaggerated a little, stressing the splendours of Grantley. I certainly did not in describing