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Opening Extract from...

Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey

The Lost Legacy of Highclere Castle

Written by the Countess of Carnarvon

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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LADY ALMINA
AND THE REAL
DOWNTON ABBEY
THE LOST LEGACY OF
HIGHCLERE CASTLE

BY
THE COUNTESS OF
CARNARVON

H
HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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*For my husband and son, who I adore,
and my beloved sisters*

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Prologue

This is a book about an extraordinary woman called Almina Carnarvon, the family into which she married, the Castle that became her home, the people who worked there, and the transformation of the Castle when it became a hospital for wounded soldiers during the First World War.

It is not a history, although it is set against the exuberance of the Edwardian period, the sombre gravity of the Great War and the early years of recovery after the conflict.

It is neither a biography nor a work of fiction, but places characters in historical settings, as identified from letters, diaries, visitor books and household accounts written at the time.

Almina Carnarvon was an enormously wealthy heiress, the illegitimate daughter of Alfred de Rothschild. She was contracted in marriage to the 5th Earl of Carnarvon, a key player in Edwardian society in Britain. His interests were many and eclectic. He loved books and travel and pursued every opportunity to explore the technologies that were transforming his age. Most famously he discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun with Howard Carter.

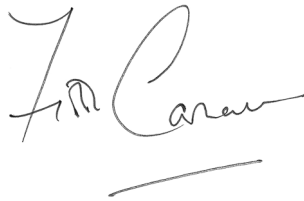
Almina was an unbelievably generous woman in spirit and with her money. She was a guest at some of the greatest royal pageants, until – as it did for so many people – the

First World War transformed her life, involving her in running hospitals instead of great house parties and showing her to be an adept nurse and skilled healer.

Highclere Castle is still home to the Earls of Carnarvon. Via its television alter ego, Downton Abbey, it is known to millions of people as the setting for a drama that has thrilled viewers in more than a hundred countries around the world.

Living here for the past twelve years, I have come to know the bones and stones of the Castle. My research has revealed some of the stories of the fascinating people who lived here, but there is so much more. My journey has just started.

The Countess of Carnarvon

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Almina Carnarvon'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Below the main signature, there is a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line that serves as a decorative flourish or underline.



I

Pomp and Circumstance

On Wednesday 26 June 1895, Miss Almina Victoria Marie Alexandra Wombwell, a startlingly pretty nineteen-year-old of somewhat dubious social standing, married George Edward Stanhope Molyneux Herbert, the 5th Earl of Carnarvon, at St Margaret's, Westminster.

It was a lovely day, and the thousand-year-old white stone church was crowded with people and overflowing with gorgeous flowers. Some of the congregation on the groom's side might perhaps have remarked that the decorations were a little ostentatious. The nave had been filled with tall potted palm trees whilst ferns spilled from the recesses. The chancel and sanctuary were adorned with white lilies, orchids, peonies and roses. There was a distinct touch of the exotic,

combined with the heady scents of English summer flowers. It was an unusual spectacle, but then everything about this wedding was unusual. Almina's name, the circumstances of her birth and most of all her exceptional wealth, all contributed to the fact that this was no typical Society wedding.

The Earl was getting married on his twenty-ninth birthday. His family and title were distinguished and he was slim and charming, if somewhat reserved. He owned houses in London, Hampshire, Somerset, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. His estates were grand; the houses were filled with paintings by the Old Masters, objects brought back from trips to the East and beautiful French furniture. Naturally he was received in every drawing room in the country and invited to every party in London, especially where there was an eligible daughter or niece for him to meet. Though they would doubtless have been gracious on such a special occasion, there must have been some inwardly disappointed ladies in the congregation that day.

He arrived with his best man, Prince Victor Duleep Singh, a friend from Eton and then Cambridge. The Prince was the son of the ex-Maharaja of Punjab, who had owned the Koh-i-Noor diamond before it was confiscated by the British for inclusion in the Crown Jewels of Queen Victoria, Empress of India.

The sun poured through the new stained-glass windows, which depicted English heroes across the centuries. The ancient church, which stands next to Westminster Abbey, had recently been refurbished by Sir George Gilbert Scott, the pre-eminent Victorian architect. The church was, in fact, a quintessentially Victorian blend of the traditional and

the modern. It was the perfect setting for this marriage of people who came from such different sections of society, but who were each in possession of something the other needed.

As the organist, Mr Baines, struck up the opening chords of the hymn 'The Voice That Breathed o'er Eden', Almina, who had been waiting in the entrance porch, took her first steps. She walked slowly and with as much calm and dignity as she could muster with all those eyes upon her, her gloved hand resting lightly on that of her uncle, Sir George Wombwell. There must have been nerves, but she was excited, too. Her soon-to-be-husband's brother-in-law, Lord Burghclere, had remarked that she was something of a 'naïve damsel', but also that she appeared to be 'head over ears in love' and could barely contain herself in the weeks and days leading up to her wedding day.

Perhaps she took some comfort from the knowledge that she looked exquisite. She was tiny, just over five foot tall, with blue eyes and a straight nose framed by glossy brown hair elegantly styled high on her head. Her future sister-in-law, Winifred Burghclere, described her as 'very pretty, with an immaculate figure and tiny waist.' In the language of the time, she was a veritable 'Pocket Venus'.

She wore a small wreath of orange blossoms under a veil of fine silk tulle. Her dress was by the House of Worth, of Paris. Charles Worth was the most fashionable couturier of the age and was known for his use of lavish fabrics and trimmings. Almina's dress was made of the richest *duchesse* satin with a full court train and draped in a veil of lace caught up on one shoulder. The skirts were threaded with real orange flowers and Almina was wearing a gift from the

bridegroom: a piece of very old and extremely rare French lace that had been incorporated into the dress.

The whole ensemble announced Almina's show-stopping arrival on the public stage. She had in fact been presented at Court by her aunt, Lady Julia Wombwell, in May 1893, so she had made her debut, but she had not been invited to the highly exclusive, carefully policed social occasions that followed. Almina's paternity was the subject of a great deal of rumour, and no amount of fine clothes or immaculate manners could gain her access to the salons of the grand ladies who quietly ruled Society. So Almina had not attended all the crucial balls of her debut season, occasions that were designed to allow a young lady to attract the attentions of an eligible gentleman. Despite this, Almina had nonetheless secured a husband-to-be of the highest order, and she was dressed as befitted a woman who was making her ascent into the highest ranks of the aristocracy.

Eight bridesmaids and two pages followed Almina: her cousin, Miss Wombwell, her fiancé's two younger sisters, Lady Margaret and Lady Victoria Herbert, Lady Kathleen Cuffe, Princess Kathleen Singh and Princess Sophie Singh, Miss Evelyn Jenkins and Miss Davies. All the bridesmaids wore cream silk muslin over white satin skirts trimmed with pale blue ribbons. The large cream straw hats trimmed with silk muslin, feathers and ribbons completed a charming picture. The Hon. Mervyn Herbert and Lord Arthur Hay followed, dressed in Louis XV court costumes of white and silver, with hats to match.

Almina had known her bridegroom for nearly a year and a half. They had never spent any time alone, but had met on half a dozen occasions at social gatherings. It was almost

certainly not enough time for Almina to realise that the frock coat the Earl had been persuaded to wear on his wedding day was quite different from his usual casual style.

As the young couple stood in front of the altar, the massed family and friends behind them represented a glittering cross-section of the great and the powerful, as well as a smattering of the rather suspect. On the right-hand side sat the bridegroom's family: his stepmother, the Dowager Countess of Carnarvon and his half-brother the Hon. Aubrey Herbert, the Howards, the Earl of Pembroke, the Earls and Countesses of Portsmouth, Bathurst and Cadogan; friends such as Lord Ashburton, Lord de Grey, the Marquess and Marchioness of Bristol. The Duchesses of Marlborough and Devonshire were in attendance, as were Lord and Lady Charteris and the greater part of London Society.

Lord Rosebery, the ex-Prime Minister, was a guest. He had travelled to Windsor Castle just four days previously to give his resignation to the Queen, who then asked Lord Salisbury to form a government. Queen Victoria, who had been a recluse for many years, was not present, but she sent greetings to the young couple. Her connection with the Carnarvons was long-standing: she was godmother to the Earl's youngest sister.

The bride's family and friends were rather different. Almina's French mother, Marie Wombwell, was born Marie Boyer, the daughter of a Parisian banker. It would have been easy to conclude, observing the two, that Almina had inherited her vivacity and style from Marie. Sir George Wombwell, brother of Marie's late husband, had stepped in to give Almina away. The Wombwells were seated next to many representatives of the most influential and fabulously

wealthy of the newly ennobled mercantile classes. Here were Sir Alfred de Rothschild, Baron and Baroness de Worms, Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild, Baron Adolphe de Rothschild, Lady de Rothschild, Mr Reuben Sassoon, four other Sassoon cousins, Mr Wertheimer, Mr and Mrs Ephrusi, Baron and Baroness de Hirsch. Both Marie and Sir Alfred had a great many friends in the theatre and the celebrated prima donna, Adelina Patti, now Madame Nicolini was also a guest.

As Almina contemplated her destiny, standing in front of the group of illustrious churchmen who had been drafted in to officiate at her marriage, her hand in that of her new husband's, she might well have felt overawed or nervous at the thought of married life. Perhaps she caught her mother's eye and was reminded of just how far she had come. But then again, she must also have been conscious of the fact that with the marriage contract the Earl of Carnarvon had signed with Alfred de Rothschild, she was protected by a level of wealth so stupendous that it could buy respectability, social acceptance and access to one of the grandest and best-connected families in late-Victorian England. Almina went into St Margaret's the illegitimate daughter of a Jewish banker and his French kept woman, but she emerged, to the strains of Wagner's bridal march from *Lohengrin*, the 5th Countess of Carnarvon. Her transformation was complete.

This remarkable ascent up the social ladder had not been entirely trouble-free. Even Rothschild money couldn't atone for the fact that Mrs Marie Wombwell – widow of the heavy drinker and reckless gambler, Frederick Wombwell and, more importantly, the long-standing confidante of Sir Alfred – was not received in Society.

Almina's childhood was spent between Paris and London, her teenage years in 20 Bruton Street, W1, in the heart of Mayfair. There were also occasional visits to the Wombwells in Yorkshire. Sir George and Lady Julia remained very kind to Marie and her children even after her husband died. The address in Mayfair was excellent, but Marie Wombwell's credentials were not.

She had been a married woman, though estranged from her husband when she met Sir Alfred. Sir Alfred was a leading figure in public life; he had been a director of the Bank of England for twenty years, and was also a bachelor, an aesthete, and a confirmed man about town. He delighted in spending the vast family fortune on a lavish lifestyle that included 'adoration dinners', soirées for the pleasure of his gentlemen friends, at which they could meet the leading ladies of the day.

Marie may have been introduced to Sir Alfred by her father, who knew him through connections in the banking world, or by Sir George and Lady Julia, who spent weekends as his guests at Halton House in Buckinghamshire. Alfred and Marie shared a passion for the theatre and the opera and became close friends, and then lovers. Alfred was a generous companion who provided handsomely for Marie and her daughter. Since Alfred was prepared to settle a vast sum of money on her, Almina was a serious contender in the marriage market. But even Marie could surely never in her wildest dreams have imagined that her daughter would make the leap to the heart of the Establishment.

Apparently, this success rather went to Marie's head. She was quite insistent that the venue for the wedding breakfast should be sufficiently grand to do justice to the occasion,

but this presented considerable problems of etiquette. It was traditional for the celebrations to be given at the bride's family home, but that was impossible, since her mother was beyond the pale and her father was, for form's sake, referred to as her godfather. It was Rothschild money that was paying for the magnificent festivities, but they could not be held in a Rothschild house.

Elsie, the 5th Earl's stepmother and prime mover behind the wedding planning, had been fretting over this conundrum for weeks. As she wrote to the Countess of Portsmouth, the Earl's devoted aunt, 'We have a family difficulty. We have neither called upon her [Mrs Wombwell] nor received her, tho' Almina of course has been with us constantly.' With great delicacy, Elsie, who had an instinctive sweetness and had taken Almina under her wing, had been making enquiries amongst such family friends as Lord and Lady Stanhope, hoping to secure the use of a neutral but impressive venue for the wedding breakfast. Various houses were offered but not accepted before, in the end, Mr Astor offered the loan of Lansdowne House on the south side of Berkeley Square, and Marie agreed that this would do very well.

So, after the church service, the guests made their way to the Mayfair mansion. It was a stately house, designed by Robert Adam and built in 1763, with many elegant reception rooms. The entrance hall was filled with hydrangeas; then each room was themed with different flowers. As in St Margaret's, palms and ferns featured prominently in the saloon, where Gottlieb's celebrated orchestra, which had been brought over from Vienna, was playing the latest fashionable waltzes. Drinks were served in one room, the wedding breakfast, complete with a three-tiered cake, in

another. Mrs Wombwell greeted guests wearing a dark purple dress, while Elsie, the Dowager Countess of Carnarvon, whose rank naturally dictated that she be first in the receiving line, wore a dress of green and pink shot silk.

The wedding gifts to both bride and groom were carefully catalogued and displayed at the party. From Sir Alfred, Almina had received a magnificent emerald necklace and tiara, jewels befitting her new rank, to be worn when entertaining at Highclere or in town. She was given a vast quantity of beautiful things, from crystal vases to gold scent bottles and endless *objets de vertu*. The bridegroom was presented with equally charming bejewelled ornaments and adornments, from rings to cigarette cases.

After all the worries beforehand, the day passed off without a hitch. If there were mutterings at the elevation of Miss Wombwell, they were muted. Mrs Wombwell behaved impeccably and everyone maintained a discreet silence over the part played by Alfred de Rothschild. In fact, the spectacular wedding was judged to have been one of the most successful events of the Season.

Perhaps the real moment of anxiety for Almina came not when she stepped into the church or Lansdowne House, where she was after all surrounded by familiar faces, but when she was driven away from her old life, her girlhood, and began her journey to Highclere. She must have received some words of encouragement from her mother, surely a kiss and a blessing from her father. But now she was embarking on her first steps as a wife, in the company of a virtual stranger who had so far shown no real inclination to get to know her.

Leaving their guests during the afternoon, the newly married couple were driven by Lord Carnarvon's head coachman, Henry Brickell, across London to Paddington to catch a special train for the country. They were to spend the first part of their honeymoon at Highclere Castle in Hampshire, the grandest of the Carnarvon estates. They had both changed their clothes. The Earl shrugged off his long, formal coat at the earliest opportunity and was now wearing his favourite, much-darned blue jacket. Once out of town, he added a straw hat. Almina was wearing a charming pompadour gauze dress, diamonds and a hat by Verrot of Paris.

The train from Paddington was due to arrive at Highclere Station at 6.30 p.m. Lord and Lady Carnarvon alighted and took their seats in an open landau drawn by a pair of bay horses and driven by the under-coachman. A mile later, the carriage turned in to the lodge gates, winding through arching trees and dark rhododendron bushes. As they passed the Temple of Diana above Dunsmere Lake, a gun was fired from the tower of the Castle. Ten minutes later, the landau arrived at the crossroads in the park and the couple got down from the carriage. A processional arch studded with flowers had been set up over the driveway. The horses were unharnessed by heads of departments from the estate: Mr Hall, Mr Storie, Mr Lawrence and Mr Weigall. Ropes were attached by the farm foreman and the forester foreman, and the couple took their places once again. Twenty men then picked up the ropes to pull the landau beneath the archway and up the hill to the main door of the Castle, accompanied by a lively march from the Newbury Town Band, which had been paid seven guineas for its services.

The Mayor of Newbury was in attendance and would

shortly present His Lordship with a wedding gift on behalf of the people of the local town: an album containing their good wishes on the occasion of his marriage, exquisitely illuminated in the style of a medieval manuscript. It was illustrated with views of Newbury Corn Exchange and Highclere itself, and bound in cream calf's leather with the linked Carnarvon initial C's stamped on the front.

Some of the estate tenants were in the gardens to watch proceedings. They had all been entertained in a marquee by the band and there had also been a tea party given for 330 of the local children. The event had been threatened by thunderstorms, but luckily the weather had cleared in time for both the tea party and the arrival of the bride and groom. It was almost the longest day of the year, and the sun was still strong.

As well as the fee for the band, £1 11s 6d was paid for the attendance of five constables and a donation of £2 was made to the Burghclere bell-ringers, who had been sending out peals of bells from the local church spire ever since the Earl and Countess disembarked from the train.

The red and blue flag proudly displaying the colours of the family's coat of arms flew from the top of the tower, whose delicate turrets and stonework were interspersed with all manner of heraldic symbols and beasts, that seemed to survey the scene.

Drawing up at the heavy wooden door of the Castle, the Earl and his new Countess alighted once again from the carriage and were greeted by Mr Albert Streatfield, the house steward (a position more commonly referred to as that of butler) and Major James Rutherford (the agent who ran the estate) and his wife.

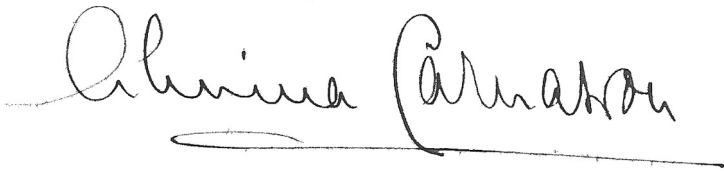
What must Almina have thought as she watched the men of Highclere labouring to haul her to her destination? What ran through her mind when she gazed upon this house as its new chatelaine? It was not her first sight of it. She had visited twice before, for the weekend, with her mother. But now she was the Countess of Carnarvon, expected to manage the running of the household and to perform her numerous duties. Everyone at Highclere, whether they worked above or below stairs, on the farm or in the kitchen, had a role to fulfil, and Almina was no different.

It must have felt exhilarating. Almina was an energetic and high-spirited girl, and marriage, motherhood and now service to the Carnarvon dynasty would have looked like a very agreeable destiny to most girls able to imagine themselves in her shoes. She was accustomed to living an indulged life, and had no reason to suspect that she would ever want for anything she desired. She was already very much in love with her new husband. But surely there must have been feelings of trepidation, too.

If she had been in any doubt beforehand, she needed only to glance at the press on the Saturday after her wedding to see that her life would henceforth be lived in public. Then, as now, the weddings of the aristocracy and the rich and famous were eagerly covered by the press. The 'World of Women' column in the *Penny Illustrated* paper carried a full-length portrait of Almina (although in a slip-up she was described as Miss Alice Wombwell in the caption) and described her gown in detail. Almina had passed from almost total obscurity to object of media scrutiny in a moment. With her new status came all sorts of pressures.

Almina wasn't given very long to wonder what lay in

store for her. Lord Carnarvon spent the next few days taking his bride around the park and neighbouring villages to meet the local families, in order that Almina could begin to explore alone and become familiar with her new home. They went to Highclere Church for morning service on the Sunday after they were married. Sir Gilbert Scott had been at work here, as in Westminster. He'd designed and built the church some twenty years previously, at the request of Lord Carnarvon's father, the 4th Earl. And then, business concluded, the couple left for the Continent and the second part of their honeymoon. It was a chance to get to know each other properly, in private, at last. They spent two weeks away before returning to Highclere, when normal life resumed. Except that, for Almina, nothing would ever be the same again.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Almina Carnarvon". The signature is written in dark ink on a plain background. The first name "Almina" is written in a fluid, connected style, and the second name "Carnarvon" is also in cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.