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The Fortune Hunter

Written by Daisy Goodwin

Published by Headline Review

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The FORTUNE HUNTER

DAISY GOODWIN

headline
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First published in 2014 by
HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7553 4809 1 (Hardback)
ISBN 978 0 7553 4810 7 (Trade Paperback)

Typeset in Adobe Caslon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc.

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable
and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform
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HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Part One

The Royal Menagerie

July 1875

WAS QUEEN VICTORIA A KITTEN OR A CODFISH? Charlotte hesitated. The monarch's chinless face did look remarkably similar to the glassy stare of the fish, but that would mean making the late Prince Consort a kitten, as that was the only animal she had left. It was hard to think of Prince Albert as feline, but now that she had superimposed the image of the fish onto his wife's face, it was undoubtable that the queen made the most magnificent kind of cod. She stepped back for a moment and looked at the overall composition, now that she had replaced each royal face with an animal head. The Prince of Wales was a satisfactory basset hound and Charlotte felt that she had done justice to Princess Alice's mournful demeanour by turning her into a calf. She dipped her brush into the pot of Indian ink at her side and began to shade around her work, blending the edges of the animal heads into the rest of the photograph. Later, depending on what time she could persuade Fred to bring her home from the ball, she would photograph her creation.

She sighed and stretched her folded fingers over her head. The sun had sunk beneath the rows of white stucco townhouses, throwing a warm glow into the room.

Charlotte would have her Royal Menagerie. She thought she would put it on the back wall of the drawing room at Kevill. Properly framed, it would look to the casual observer like any other family portrait; only the people who really looked would see that she had turned the Royal Family into a frock-coated and crinolined 300. It was possible that some of the starchier guests might be a little shocked, but as close observation of anything besides the lace on a visitor's gown seldom took place in the drawing room at Kevill, Charlotte did not feel she had much to worry about. The faint possibility of discovery might be enough to get her through those interminable afternoons spent at home entertaining lady callers. Charlotte hoped that the Bishop's wife, in particular, would look over her long, perpetually dripping nose and be so offended that she never called again.

The thought of the Bishop's wife and the way that she always referred to her as a 'poor motherless girl' was enough to make Charlotte's hand slip, and a drop of Indian ink fell onto one of the ivory silk flounces of her skirt. It was a very small drop of ink, but the silk was so absorbent that it quickly flowered into an unmistakeable stain. Charlotte was annoyed at her carelessness. The ink spot was barely visible, but she knew that her aunt would spot it immediately and would make it into a tragedy of epic proportions. 'What a calamity!' she would exclaim, the lace ribbons on her widow's cap fluttering. 'Your beautiful dress ruined and on the night of the Spencer ball too!' Charlotte's aunt Adelaide liked nothing better than a minor domestic mishap that she could turn into a drama worthy of Sophocles. She would feel it her duty to point out the blemish to everyone they met, and invite them to comment on the tragic twist of fate that had ruined her niece's exquisite dress. Charlotte was dreading the evening's entertainments quite enough without the added humiliation of her aunt's histrionics.

She thought for a moment, and then picked up her watercolour box. Perhaps there was some China White left. She took a clean brush, licked it thoroughly and started to paint over the stain. It wasn't perfect, but it covered the worst of it, and with any luck she might get through the evening without her aunt noticing. She was just giving it another coat when there was a perfunctory knock on the door and her brother Fred walked in wearing his dress uniform.

'Are you ready yet, Mitten? Aunt Adelaide is fretting about the horses and I want to be at the Opera early.'

He saw what she was doing and stopped. 'Why are you painting your dress?' He smirked. 'Is that the latest fashion, hand-decorating your ball gown?'

'Well, if it was the latest fashion, as you never stop pointing out to me, I would be the last one to know. I have spilt some ink on my dress and I am concealing it with paint.' Charlotte pointed at the blemish with her finger. 'There! Good as new.'

'But what on earth were you doing messing about with ink in a white ball gown? I thought girls had better things to do before a ball, like getting their hair arranged or choosing which jewels to wear.'

'If you look carefully, Fred, you will see that my hair has been arranged, and as for jewels, Aunt Adelaide thinks that diamonds are unsuitable for debutantes and so she is wearing Mamma's necklace. I thought I would occupy my time usefully while I waited for you all to get ready.'

Fred glanced over at the work table where the Royal Menagerie lay. He went over to have a closer look, and shook his head.

'You really are a rum one, Mitten.'

'Do you like it?'

'Like it! Of course I don't like it. It's peculiar, that's what it is. Why don't you have any normal accomplishments? Singin', piano

playing, needlework, that sort of thing. It's deuced odd for a girl of twenty to be squirrellin' around with cameras and chemicals all the time. You need to be careful that you don't get a reputation. Augusta is quite concerned about you. She says that after we are married, her first task will be to launch you properly. She thinks that with the right approach, you could be quite a success.'

Charlotte smiled. 'How very kind of her.'

Fred looked at her suspiciously, his blue eyes bulging as they always did when he was cross. 'Augusta will be a real advantage to you. She says that making the right sort of marriage is like pilotin' a ship into harbour. It needs a steady hand at the tiller.'

Charlotte thought, but did not say, that despite Lady Augusta Crewe's navigational skills, it had taken her four London seasons to land a proposal of marriage. She decided to change the subject.

'You look very handsome tonight, Fred. Augusta will be proud of you.'

Diverted, Fred pushed his chest out and brushed his hand down the gold braid on his jacket.

'Went to Bay Middleton's tailor. He swears by him, won't go anywhere else.'

'Bay Middleton is clearly very discerning.'

'Best dressed officer in the Guards. It's all about the cut. Had to have three fittings for this.'

'Only three fittings! I must have had ten at least for this frock, and I think your uniform fits you rather better and is altogether more flattering.'

'Nothing wrong with your dress, or at least there wasn't before you started coverin' it with ink.' He put his hand on her shoulder. 'When Augusta and I are married she will advise you. Daresay you could learn something from her. Always very nicely turned out, Augusta.'

Charlotte thought that she had heard enough about the superiority of Augusta Crewe to last a lifetime. Even if her future sister-in-law had been charming and generous, she might have tired of Fred constantly invoking her name, but as Charlotte found her affected and calculating, her presence in every conversation between brother and sister was a scalding irritation.

There was a cough from the doorway. Penge, Aunt Adelaide's butler, looked at them reproachfully.

'Her ladyship has asked to me to remind you that the carriage was ordered fifteen minutes ago.'

Fred became officious. 'Come along, Mitten, nothing you can do about the dress now. Captain Hartopp's not goin' to notice.' He was halfway down the curving staircase before he turned back to look at her. 'And you needn't worry about partners tonight. I know Hartopp will claim the first two, and Augusta has promised to find you some suitable young men.'

Charlotte was silent but thought that she would like nothing more than to dance with an *unsuitable* young man. Despite Fred's solicitude, she was not at all worried about finding partners: although she had only been to a handful of balls, her dance card was always full. Suitable young men and the odd unsuitable one had quickly learnt that although Charlotte was not perhaps the most striking looking girl in the room, she was undoubtedly one of the richest, as the sole heiress to the Lennox fortune, which would be hers when she was twenty-five. The money had not meant much to her growing up in the Borders, but since she had come to London, Charlotte had often heard the phrase 'the Lennox heiress' muttered in conversation or seen it mouthed silently by one new acquaintance to another. She had noticed too that the mutterings and the mouthings made Fred anxious. The money was hers alone – her mother, the original Lennox heiress, had been their late father's

second wife – but Fred was as proprietorial about her fortune as if it were his to bestow. Under the terms of her father's will, she could not marry without his consent until she reached her majority, and Fred was enjoying the privileges of this role immensely. There had been some young men in the Guards who had made Fred feel uncomfortable about his tailor or his taste in claret, but those feelings of unease had subsided now that he was the guardian of the Lennox fortune, and, of course, the fiancé of Lady Augusta Crewe.

It was not therefore the fear of being a wallflower that made Charlotte inch down the curving staircase after her brother, one reluctant step at a time. She was probably the only girl in London who dreaded a full dance card. Sitting out a dance was better than being whirled around the room by some pink-cheeked younger son doing his best to secure the Lennox Fortune. Did she hunt? No. Silence. Had she been presented? Not yet. Pause. Did she like croquet? Sometimes she would volunteer that she enjoyed photography. This would generally make Percy or Clarence look anxious, as if being asked a question in an exam that they hadn't prepped for. Then Algernon or Ralph would tell her the story of how he had his photograph taken, 'for Mamma, y'know', and complain about how long it had taken: 'The photographer chap wanted me to stand with my head in a vice, otherwise he said it would come out blurry.' Did they like the results? she would ask, and the young men would pause; sometimes a blush would stain their bewhiskered faces. Despite their confusion, she would persevere: did the photograph look the way they had imagined themselves? At that point her partner would mumble that he never really gave much thought to his appearance, but he supposed that the photographs were accurate enough. Generally after these exchanges the young man would not insist on another dance. Once when a more imaginative young man had asked Charlotte if she would take his photograph,

she had demurred, saying that he might not like the result. He did not ask a second time.

At the bottom step Charlotte tried to arrange herself so that her fan and reticule covered the ink stain on her gown. But it was clear that her concern was unnecessary, for Aunt Adelaide was much too preoccupied with her own appearance to give much thought to her niece. She was standing in front of the pier glass in the hallway, turning her head this way and that as the light caught the Lennox diamonds around her throat. Married late to an impecunious baronet who had died six months later, Aunt Adelaide had not had many diamonds in her life and she was enjoying her borrowed finery to the full. Charlotte could see that her aunt, who must be at least forty, was a good deal more excited about the evening ahead than she was.

'How well those pearl earrings go with your dress, dear. Just the right note of ornament without ostentation. I can't bear it when young girls cover themselves with jewels – do you remember Selina Fortescue at the Londonderry ball? She looked positively gaudy, such a shame with a fresh young complexion like that.' Aunt Adelaide looked at Charlotte as she said this but couldn't resist her twinkling reflection for long and turned back to the mirror.

Fred coughed. 'I notice, Aunt, that, unlike Charlotte, you have covered yourself in jewels. Is it quite the thing for you to be wearin' the Lennox necklace? The diamonds are Charlotte's property after all, and I think that as her guardian I should have been consulted.'

Underneath the diamonds, Charlotte saw the skin of her aunt's décolletage redden. She spoke quickly.

'Oh Fred, don't be so pompous. I would feel ridiculous wearing the necklace. It's much too grown up for me, and besides, it looks very becoming on Aunt Adelaide. I would much rather she wore it than for it to be locked up in a vault.'

Aunt Adelaide looked at her gratefully. Fred picked up his gloves and started to pull them down over his fingers, cracking each knuckle as he did so.

'I don't think it is pompous to express some concern about a valuable piece of property that belongs to my only sister. Perhaps you have forgotten the promise I made to Father to look after you, but I haven't. Everything that you do reflects on me. I don't want your future husband to accuse me of mismanagin' your affairs.'

'Well, I have no intention of marrying someone who would complain about me lending a necklace to a member of my family. I was going to offer it to Augusta to wear at your wedding, but if you feel so strongly about it, perhaps that would be a mistake.'

As Charlotte had intended, Fred's indignation subsided.

'Augusta did mention the necklace to me. I will, of course, make sure that she takes very good care of it, as I am sure that you will, Aunt. Now I suggest that we leave, or we will miss the first act.'

Charlotte smiled to herself. Fred's real anxiety was not that Aunt Adelaide was wearing the Lennox diamonds, but that Augusta would see her wearing them at the Spencer ball. Augusta was already planning to wear them to her wedding, and she would be unhappy if their magnificence was diluted by too many public outings on other necks than hers.

As her brother handed her into the carriage, she wondered how she would compose their wedding portrait. There would be the official one, of course, with the bride in white and orange blossom with the diamond collar round her not-quite-long enough neck with Fred standing stiffly behind her – Augusta would be seated as she was practically the same height as Fred. But in the unofficial one Charlotte thought that Augusta, with her flattish nose and wide apart eyes, would make a rather satisfactory Pekinese, and Fred, with his red face and his burgeoning chins, might pass for a turkey. It

would not be a picture that she could hang anywhere, of course, not even in the darkest corners of Kevill, but it would give her private satisfaction to look at it when she was being 'launched' by Augusta after the wedding. Unless she could find a husband in the run-up to their nuptials, she faced the prospect of living with the newlyweds. The current arrangement with Lady Lisle suited Fred while he was a bachelor, but when he was a married man he would naturally want his sister to live with him and his wife. Fred's £1,000 a year would not stretch to a house in town, but as Charlotte's guardian, he and Augusta would be able to take Lady Lisle's place as Charlotte's chaperone in Charles Street.

There was a tap at the carriage window. She looked out and saw the large, whiskered face of Captain 'Chicken' Hartopp, Fred's great friend and a devoted follower of the Lennox fortune. Fred was not actively encouraging Hartopp's suit, as he was hoping for a title for his sister, or at least an alliance with one of the older landed families, but as Hartopp's fortune was almost as great as Charlotte's he could not rule him out entirely.

'Miss Baird, I am so glad I caught you before you left. I wanted to give you these; I thought perhaps you might like to wear them tonight.'

He handed her a corsage of white rosebuds through the window and Charlotte gave him what she hoped was a delighted smile.

'Thank you so much, Captain Hartopp. How kind of you to think of me.'

'My pleasure, Miss Baird.' He tipped his hat to Fred and bowed to Aunt Adelaide. 'Good evening, Lady Lisle. What a magnificent necklace. Are those the famous Lennox diamonds, by any chance?'

Adelaide Lisle simpered. 'They are indeed. Dear Charlotte has been kind enough to let me wear them tonight. I hope I can do them justice.'

Hartopp paused just a second too long before saying, 'You can have no doubts on that score, Lady Lisle.'

Charlotte saw the way Hartopp's eyes glittered when he saw the necklace, and thought that even living with Fred and Augusta would be preferable to looking at his face every morning over the breakfast table. She had not yet acquired any photographs of aquatic mammals, but when she did, she was sure that Captain Hartopp, despite his feathery nickname, would make a perfectly splendid walrus.