A Profound Secret

Josceline Dimbleby

CHAPTER ONE

ROMANCE IN OXFORD

in 1840, two young irish sisters left their strict protestant home in County Down for the first time. Their father, Captain Samuel Hill, was agent to Lord Roden's estates. Lord Roden was a staunch Orangeman, who had been made Grand Master of the Orange Order in 1837. Helen and Emma Hill crossed the Irish Sea and arrived in Oxford by coach to stay for six months with their uncle, who was a don at the university. They were unsophisticated but very pretty girls, sweet natured and musical. With well-trained, beautiful voices, they used to sing traditional Irish duets together. Both girls were petite, with delicate features; but Emma, the younger sister, had a striking combination of rich brown hair and eyes of the palest blue, made even more remarkable by a dark-blue rim round the pupils. Her complexion was creamy smooth, her neck graceful, and her pretty figure and tiny feet were envied by other women, and admired by men.

It was not long before the Hill sisters were noticed in Oxford. One day their uncle took his nieces to a commemorative ceremony in one of the college halls. The girls wore new blue bonnets, which their mother had given them before they left Ireland. While they waited for the ceremony to begin, the rumbustious undergraduates in the upper gallery called out the names of young women they recognized in the hall below and then cheered or blew kisses as they felt inclined. Finally, a voice from the gallery called out 'The two blue bonnets,' which prompted a storm of applause. From then on the pair of sisters captivated many hearts in Oxford.

Decades later, this story was told to my great-grandmother, May Gaskell, by her mother, who had been the young Emma Hill. Emma had blushed as she remembered it. Shortly after the incident in the college hall, Emma told her daughter, she was taken to see the gardens of Worcester College.

'Look,' said her companion, 'there is Long Melville rolling down the walk.'

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Emma saw an extremely tall, thin man coming towards her, with dark-brown, wavy hair, a high, strong brow and clear-cut features. 'Who is Long Melville?' she asked.

'One of the most agreeable, charming and clever men in Oxford,' was the reply.

As he came nearer, Emma noticed Long Melville's large grey eyes with heavy lids within deep eye sockets, and his distinguished aquiline nose. She remarked that his hands were 'most beautiful', and that though his mouth was mobile, his chin remained firm when he talked. She would later tell May that he had 'a brilliant and ever-changing expression'. His remarkably mellifluous voice made him all the more mesmerizing. Emma soon learnt that David Melville was already known in Oxford as a stimulating speaker, with an entertaining and satirical view on men and events.

This notable man was to become May's father.

David Melville had studied theology at Oxford on a scholarship to Brasenose College. After graduating, penniless due to his father's bankruptcy, he was ordained as a clergyman and became a don at the university. He was tutor, among others, to Lord Ward, the young heir to the immense wealth of the industrialist Dudley family; it was said years later in an obituary of David Melville that Lord Ward had been 'erratic, clever, wild and fascinating'. William Humble Ward was charmed by his scintillating tutor and an intimate and lifelong friendship ensued between the two men. Later, as David Melville's patron, William was to shape his life. And when David Melville's first son was born, he named him William Ward.

During her time in Oxford, Emma Hill saw Long Melville regularly. They used to walk together through the historic streets and along the river. They must have looked an unlikely couple; at six foot three, Melville would, in those days, have seemed like a giant, and tiny Emma was barely five foot tall. To Emma, who had been brought up to be deeply religious, the fact that such a handsome, clever man was also an ordained clergyman must have made him irresistible. Apart from being attracted by Emma's prettiness and gentle nature, David Melville was clearly struck by her 'intellectual turn of mind' and wit, as May Gaskell recorded later when she wrote about her mother. But even after many weeks of friendship he had 'said no words of love' to Emma.

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Eventually, back in Ireland, Captain and Mrs Hill heard reports of their daughters' social success in Oxford. Anxious about the possibility of influences they would not approve of, they recalled them at once. So on a cold March morning the two Irish girls, who had made such an impression on the university circle, left Oxford by coach. David Melville was there to say goodbye, and wrapped little Emma Hill up in a fine tartan rug he had thoughtfully brought for her.

At first I had no photograph of Emma, so it was from May's writings that I learnt about her appearance: the delicacy of her features, the smoothness of her brown hair, and those clear eyes of baby blue with their dark outer rim. Then one day my brother produced four small, flat leather boxes which had been left to him. They were lined on one side with soft red velvet. On the opposite side, within a gold embossed mount, was a daguerreotype portrait. The Frenchman Louis Daguerre had perfected his secret process of taking photographic portraits in 1839. They were achieved by projecting light through a camera lens onto iodized silver plates. Colour was added by scratching in powdered pigment and gold leaf.

Decades later, May Gaskell had inserted labels into the leather boxes, naming the sitters for future generations. There was Samuel Hill, Emma's father, with a very stern expression; there was her sister Helen, who had travelled with her to Oxford; and there was a strong-looking dark beauty called Isabella Melville, who May told us was married to David Melville's brother Beresford, a devastatingly handsome hero of the first Afghan War.

But one name was missing. 'Do you know who this one is?' my brother Ben asked me, handing me the fourth leather box. The fragile-looking woman was at once familiar; and when I looked at her through a magnifying glass I was certain. There were the neat features, the sleek brown hair and the creamy skin; but above all, there were those pale, clear-blue eyes with their dark-blue rim, painted on the metal with unbelievable precision. The gold of her necklace stood out in raised gold leaf and the pearls set on it were a glowing white. In this early mixture of photography and art, the young Emma Hill, as she was when David Melville fell in love with her, came alive for me.

Although no love had been declared, it was not long before David Melville set out for Bryansford, set in a beautiful mountainous area in the south of County Down, where the Hill family lived. A friend of Melville, another Oxford don, who had fallen in love with Emma's older sister Helen, accompanied him.

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The purpose of David Melville's visit was to ask Captain and Mrs Hill for the hand of their daughter Emma in marriage. But he was to be disappointed. I learnt from May's writings that the two young dons found that the Hills believed in 'the narrowest evangelical form of religion'. They disliked what they called the 'worldly surroundings' of Oxford. They particularly distrusted the 'brilliant, broadminded Mr Melville', with his intellect and life of strenuous work. They told him that although he was a clergyman, according to their beliefs 'they could not look upon him as a converted Christian'. When he asked for Emma's hand, they refused.

David Melville was a clear-thinking, fair man; he would never have followed Emma to Ireland if he had not been sure that it was the right thing to do. He was to be described in an obituary as a man of 'exceedingly wise judgement'. Deeply wounded by the Hills' reaction to his request, David Melville returned at once to Oxford and dropped all contact. Poor little Emma was 'left to weep'.

Before long, a parcel arrived in Oxford addressed to David Melville. In it was the tartan rug he had given Emma when she left Oxford on that cold March morning. There was also a note; Emma wrote that she would 'pray for his conversion' - which in modern terms would probably mean becoming 'born again' - so that he could 'cherish her devoted love'.

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