



The Wild Princess

by Mary Hart Perry

Osborne House, Isle of Wight

Wednesday, January 23, 1901

My dearest Edward,

I write to you with a grieving heart. My emotions are so a-jumble at this moment I can barely stop my hand from trembling long enough to put pen to paper. As all of London wakes to the sad news, you too must by now be aware that Victoria, Queen by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Defender of the Faith, Empress of India—my mother—has passed from this life. Last night I stood at her bedside along with my surviving sisters and brothers, the many grandchildren, and those most favored among her court. We bid our final good-byes, and she drifted away. Among us was the devoted Colonel the Lord

Edward Pelham-Clinton, who delivers this letter and accompanying documents, by hand, into your possession.

The doctors say it was a cerebral hemorrhage, not uncommon for a woman in her 80's, but I believe she was just tired and ready to rest after reigning these tumultuous sixty-four years, many of them without her beloved Prince Consort, Albert, my father, who died before you were born.

She was not a physically affectionate mother, demanded far more than she ever gave, often drove me to anger and tears, and very nearly destroyed my life...more than once. Yet I did, in my own way, love her.

The enclosed manuscript is my means for setting straight in my own mind the alarming events of several critical years in my life. But more than that, it will bring to you, although belatedly—and for that I apologize—*the truth*. Your mother, my dearest friend, wished to tell you of these matters long ago. Indeed, it was she who compiled most of the information herein, using her rare skills as an observer of human nature and, later in life, as a gifted investigative journalist. I have filled in the few facts she was unable to uncover on her own. For selfish reasons I begged her to keep our secrets a while longer...and a while longer. Then she too departed from this world for a better one, leaving no one to press me to reveal these most shameful deeds. Indeed, Edward dear, I would not even now strip bare the deceptions played out in my lifetime, had they not so intimately involved you.

Do these words shock you? If so, then you had best burn these pages and live the rest of your life in ignorance. But as I remember, you were a curious lad, and so I expect you will read on. However, before you go further, I must ask of you a solemn favor. What I am about to reveal is for your knowledge alone, that you might better understand both the gifts and the sins passed

along to you. To share this account with others would cause scandal so damaging that our government would surely topple. Therefore, I implore you to choose—either destroy the enclosed manuscript this instant without reading it, or do the same after reading in private.

Regardless of your decision, I pray you will ever think of me as your devoted godmother and friend, and not hate me for the things I have done to protect you or, on my own behalf, simply to survive.

Be assured of my love,

Princess Louise, duchess of Argyll

Chapter 1

March 21, 1871—Windsor Castle, St. George's Chapel

Under siege, that's what we are, Louise thought as she observed the mayhem beyond the church's massive oak doors. Indeed the week-long crush of boisterous visitors had become truly dangerous.

"There must be thousands of them," she murmured, more to herself than to any of her bridesmaids clustered around her.

Her brother Bertie gently closed the door, shutting out the cheers of the crowd. "It's all right. The guardsmen have things well in hand."

Scores of well-wishers from London and the surrounding countryside had arrived on foot and horseback, along with souvenir vendors, draysmen with cartloads of sightseers and hawkers of ale, roasted potatoes and meat pies. They clogged Berkshire's country roads, converging on Windsor, making virtual prisoners of the royal family and their guests within the great castle's walls.

Many travelers hadn't been content with a tourist's hasty view of Windsor in the days before the wedding. They'd set up crude campsites outside the walls, lit bonfires that blazed through the night. Toasts to the bride and groom turned into drunken revelry. Hundreds pressed against groaning castle gates, hoping for a chance glimpse of the royal couple. Crowd control, never before an issue at a royal wedding, became a necessity. A nervous Queen Victoria called up her Hussars and a fleet of local constables to reinforce the castle's guardsmen.

Louise stepped away from the chapel's doors, fingering the delicate Honiton lace of her gown. Strangely, she wasn't worried about being hurt by the mob of well wishers. What concerned her was what her mother's subjects might expect of her.

To do her duty as a princess, she supposed, whatever that might mean to them. Or simply to “be a good girl and don’t make trouble,” as her mother had so often scolded her since her earliest years.

Standing at the very foot of the church’s long nave, Louise tried to reassure herself that all the pomp and fuss over her marriage was of no consequence. It would pass with the end of this day. The mob would disperse. The groundsmen clear away the mountains of trash. The important thing was—she had agreed to wed the marquess of Lorne as her mother wished. She was doing the responsible thing for her family. Surely, all would be well.

Louise rested her fingertips lightly on Bertie’s arm. The Prince of Wales stood ready to escort her down the aisle. She desperately wished her father were still alive to give her away. On the other hand, Papa might have talked her mother into letting her wait a little longer to marry. But, of the six girls in their family, it was her turn. In the queen’s mind, Louise at 23 was already teetering on the slippery verge of spinsterhood. An unwed, childless daughter knocking about the palace was a waste of good breeding stock.

Louise felt Bertie step forward, cued by the exultant chords of organ music swelling to the strains of the Wedding March’s intricate harp obbligato. She matched his stride, moving slowly down the long rose petal-strewn quire toward her bridegroom.

Another trembling step closer to the altar, then another. Wedding night jitters? Was that the source of her edginess?

Definitely not. The panic swelling in her breast could have little to do with a bride’s fragile insecurity regarding her wifely duties in bed. Louise felt anything but fragile and more than a little eager for her husband’s touch. Nevertheless, she sensed that something about the day was disturbingly wrong. Sooner or later, she feared it would snap its head around and bite her.

She closed her eyes for a few seconds and drew three deep breaths while letting her feet keep their own pace with the music.

“Are you all right?” Her brother’s voice.

She forced a smile for his benefit. “Yes, Bertie.”

“He’s a good man.” The Prince had trimmed his dark mustache and looked elegantly regal, dressed in the uniform of their mother’s Hussars. He had initially stood against the marriage, believing his sister should hold out for a royal match. But now he seemed resigned and loath to spoil her day.

“I know. Of course he’s good.”

“You like him, don’t you?” Not *love* him. They both knew love didn’t enter into the equation for princesses. The daughters of British royals were bred to marry the heads of state, forge international alliances, produce the next generation to sit upon the thrones of Europe.

“I do like him.”

“Then you’ll be fine.”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “I will.” Somehow.

Three of her five bridesmaids—all in white, bedecked with garlands of hothouse lilies, rosebuds, and camellias—led the way down the long aisle, leaving the two youngest girls in Louise’s wake to control the heavy satin train behind her. The diamond coronet Lorne had given her as a wedding present held in place the lace veil she herself had designed.

She felt the swish of stiff petticoats against her limbs. The coolness of the air, captured within the church’s magnificent soaring Gothic arches, chilled her bare shoulders. Yards upon yards of precious hand-worked lace, seemed to weight her down, as though holding her back

from the altar. An icy clutch of jewels at her throat felt suddenly too tight, making it hard to breathe.

Her nose tingled at the sweet waxy scent of thousands of burning candles mixed with perfume as her guests rose to view the procession. The pulse of the organ's bass notes vibrated in her clenched stomach. Ladies of the Court, splendid in silks and brocades and jewels, the gentlemen in dignified black or charcoal grey frock coats, turned heads her way in anticipation—a dizzy blur of smiling, staring faces as she passed them by.

But a few stood out in sharp relief against the dazzling splendor: Her dear friend, Amanda Locock beside her handsome doctor-husband, their little boy wriggling in Amanda's arms. The always dour Prime Minister Gladstone. A grim-faced Napoleon III, badly reduced in health after his recent defeat by the Prussians. Her brothers and sisters: Affie, then Alice and Vicky with their noble spouses. A predictably bored looking Arthur, always solemn Lenchen and young, fidgety Leo. Bertie's lovely Danish wife Alix clasped a hand over each of their two little boys to keep them quiet.

Louise lifted her gaze to the raised box to her left where she knew her mother would be seated. Beatrice, youngest of Louise's eight siblings, sat close by the queen, gazing down wide-eyed at the ceremony. Victoria herself, a plump figure in black mourning muslin six years after her husband's death, her grim costume relieved only by the rubies and blues of the Order of the Garter star clipped over her left breast, looked down on the wedding party as though a goddess from Mount Olympus.

They'd all come to witness Louise's union with the striking young man waiting for her at the chapel's altar. The marquess of Lorne. John Douglas Sutherland Campbell. A stranger to her

in many ways, yet soon to be her wedded mate. Beside him stood his kinsmen in striking Campbell-green kilts, sword scabbards strapped to hips, hats cocked forward.

Louise felt an almost equal urge to rush into her intended's arms...and to turn around and run back out through the chapel doors. Into the fresh spring air, breaking through the crowd to escape down Windsor's famous Long Walk and into the countryside. To freedom.

But was that even a possibility now?

All of the country had lapped up news of her betrothal as eagerly as a cat does cream. Hadn't the newspapers been chock full of personal details for months? The chaperoned carriage rides through Hyde Park. The elaborate French menu for the wedding feast. Everything, from the details of her gown to advertisements placed by a London perfume manufacturer announcing their newest fragrance, *Love-Lorne*, had been gossiped about in and outside of the Court.

And then all of that fled her mind as Bertie deposited her before the archbishop and beside Lorne. Her husband-to-be stood breathtakingly handsome in his dark blue dress uniform of the Royal Argyllshire Artillery with its bits of gold braid, burnished buttons, and shining black leather boots that shaped his long legs to above the knees. A silver-hilted sword hung from the wide black patent belt that encircled his narrow waist. His hair, a glorious pale blond mane brushed back from his face, long enough to feather over his collar, looked slightly risqué and tempted her fingertips.

He took her hand in his. At his touch, she finally settled inside herself.

During the ceremony Louise was aware of her bridegroom's eyes turning frequently to her. She did her best to meet his gaze, to bring a little smile to her lips and hope that some of it slipped into her eyes for him. Like her, he had blue eyes. But, while hers were a soft shade, the mesmerizing sapphire brilliance of the young marquess's eyes never failed to startle people on

meeting him for the first time. He was a Scot, one of her mother's northern subjects. When his father passed, he would become the duke of Argyll. A minor title, but better than none at all in her mother's view. For Louise's part, titles were of no consequence. They marked a man as neither good nor bad, kind nor cruel, rich nor poor.

She had every reason to believe they'd get along well, even though they'd not once been left alone together. Still, their escorts had been discreet, allowing them to speak freely. Lorne had even shyly kissed her on the cheek, last night. In time, they might fall in love. She'd like that. And even if they didn't, he would give her the children she so longed for. Life was full of compromises.

The archbishop was speaking in that sing-song voice of his that was at once soft yet somehow carried to the very back of the grandest church. Louise let the words wash over her, a warm and calming stream. She daydreamed of her honeymoon—Lorne making tender love to her, his soft hands opening her gown to touch the places on her body that most longed for his caresses. And she would discover ways to please him.

The images in her mind brought a rush of heat to her cheeks. She raised her eyelashes shyly to glance up at him in anticipation.

Their gazes met.

He grinned and winked. Did he know what she was thinking?

It was at that moment something odd caught her eye. A motion off to her left and above. Startled, she turned her head just far enough to take in her mother's box.

John Brown, once a lowly ghillie in the queen's stables at Balmoral in Scotland, and now her personal attendant and self-appointed bodyguard, stood behind Victoria physically blocking a

man who seemed to be trying to force his way into queen's box. A frisson of alarm shot through Louise.

"Steady," Lorne whispered in her ear, grasping her hand. "Brown's handling it."

The archbishop, too, seemed to have noticed the disturbance, but he droned on, the ultimate performer under pressure.

Louise glimpsed Victoria waving off Brown. The stranger bent down as though to whisper something in the queen's ear. He wore rough riding clothes, a long dung-brown overcoat of a less than fashionable cut, in what appeared to be scuffed leather. He looked unshaven. As if he hadn't bothered to even run a comb through his spiky black hair. In one hand he held not a stove-pipe top hat that was the only acceptable headwear for a gentleman in London—but a strange wide-brimmed style of black felt hat she'd never seen on any head in all of England.

Louise turned back to face the bishop, fearful of missing the rest of her own wedding. The next time she glanced back, the stranger had gone.

Lorne squeezed her hand, as if to say, *All is well*.

Was it? She shivered but forced a smile in return.

Then all at once, the archbishop was giving them his blessing. A joyous "Hurrah!" rang out in the chapel. Her new husband kissed her sweetly on the lips, and every concern fled her mind at this excruciatingly joyful moment.

All she could think of was the night that lay before them—her first night as a married woman.

Chapter 2

Amanda Locock stood beside the dressing table in the bridal suite at Claremont House while Lady Caroline Barrington unpinned Louise's hair and brushed it into soft golden-brown waves down her back. "I'm so sorry about bringing Eddie with me to your wedding dinner and concert," Amanda said.

The music that followed the lavish meal at Windsor had been one formal event too many for a restless four year old. Amanda walked him up and down the great echo-y hallway outside the grand salon until he'd fallen asleep on her shoulder. She'd been able to bring him back inside in time for her to hear the lovely Bach violin solo, played so beautifully by Herr Joachim.

"You know how unpredictable my husband is. He promised to watch Eddie while I stayed for the reception and concert, but one of his patients was in urgent need of him."

Louise waved off her concern, reached up and ruffled the little boy's hair. No longer a toddler, Eddie still loved to be propped on his mother's hip. He buried his face shyly against her breast now, looking pink-eyed and exhausted by the day's activities.

"You know I love to see Eddie any chance I get." Louise opened the drawer in her dressing table and pulled out a tin of salt-water taffies. "What you need, my darling, is a little more energy to get you through the rest of the day."

"More sugar?" Amanda rolled her eyes. "Henry has this notion that my indulging the child with sweets keeps him up late at night." But she laughed as he selected with great concentration a single candy from the tin. "Here, love, let me unwrap that for you. Then you go sit on your favorite chair over there and suck on it while I talk to your godmother."

"He's growing so fast," Louise said, her eyes misting with affection as she watched the child stride away from them. "Soon he'll be all grown up."

"I know. That's why I'm particularly happy with the news I have to tell you." Amanda bounced on her toes and felt she might burst like an iridescent soap bubble with happiness.

"News?"

"I'm with child." She giggled at Louise's shriek of joy. "Henry says the baby will be here in August." They had tried for a brother or sister for Eddie for years, but after miscarrying two babies she'd nearly given up hope. "I didn't say anything to you sooner because of the other times, you know." The thought of her lost babes nearly undid her.

Louise shot to her feet, tears in her eyes, nearly knocking over Lady Car in her haste to reach Amanda and clasp her in her arms. "Oh, my dear, I'm so happy for you. Maybe a little girl then?"

"We'll see. Why so weepy? Are they tears of happiness for me?"

"Of course."

Amanda knew better. "You and Lorne will have your own brood in no time. You'll be tripping over little ones."

Louise laughed and wiped away her teardrops. "I'd love that. Truly."

"Your Royal Highness," Lady Car interrupted with a meaningful glance toward the door.

Louise smiled. "Yes, of course." She turned back to Amanda. "Speaking of Lorne."

Amanda gasped. "What a ninny I am, standing here gossiping with you while your new husband is waiting to take you off to bed." She laughed, thrilled for her friend. No matter what Louise might think, Amanda was sure that marriage would agree with her friend. Children meant so very much to her, and Lorne seemed such a stable counterpart to Louise's sometimes

impulsive nature. "Come, Eddie. Let's run along and let your Auntie Loosy be alone with her new husband." She cast Louise a knowing look and teased, "Don't need no pointers from an old married woman, do you now?"

Louise lifted her gaze to the ceiling but watched Lady Car out the door before she responded. "It's not as though it's the first time; we both know that."

Amanda smiled. "'deed I do." She had started toward the doorway when Louise reached out to clasp her arm and hold her back.

"What do I *tell* him?" Louise's face was tight with anxiety, her voice tremulous.

Before she answered, Amanda pushed her son a few steps in front of her and out the door. "You wait for me right there," she instructed him then ducked back inside the bedchamber."The truth," she whispered. "What else?"

"I was wondering, maybe I could just say...*nothing*?"

"And you think the man won't realize you're not a virgin?" Amanda laughed. "That's wishful, girl." She winced. "Sorry I'm reverting to my old ways, Your Highness."

Louise cuffed her gently on the arm. "Stop that. We stand on no formalities, you and I." She sighed. "I had guessed, from things my mother said in recent days, that Lorne might already know. So, why bring it up? I mean, it's quite possible she's told him about my wild years."

"About Donovan, you mean?"

Louise shut her eyes and nodded. "I truly did love him, you know. To think he so suddenly took off. Not a word..."

"Most of them do, dear."

"Well, I suppose I was naïve."

"Very."

“And I didn’t know that—“

“Now isn’t the time to blame yourself.” Amanda touched Louise on the shoulder and gave her a comforting smile. “You were so very young. We both were. Anyway Donovan is in the past. I can’t imagine Lorne will reject you when he finds out you’ve had someone before him. Someone who really didn’t matter. Or at least...he doesn’t now. Lorne’s such a sensible, modern man.”

Louise bit down on her bottom lip and gave her an anguished look. “I don’t know what to think.” She groaned. “But it would make sense that Mama would have told him I’d had...experience. Why else would she champion a marriage with someone who wasn’t a royal? A man with such a minor title.”

“I don’t understand all the fuss.” Shaking her head, Amanda peered out the door to check on Eddie. Lady Car was entertaining him, coaxing the little boy to march up and down the hallway like a Beefeater. “You make it sound as if it’s never been done before, marrying a commoner.”

Louise let out a bitter laugh. “Not for over three hundred years has a child of an English monarch married outside of the royal families of Europe.”

Amanda winced. She hadn’t realized that. “Then your mother must have discussed this with him, don’t you think?”

Louise shook her head. “I just don’t know.” She looked down at her hands, clenched in front of her. “I do need to tell him. I know that, Amanda. It’s only fair. And if he is upset...well, I must then deal with the consequences.”

“I’m sure he’ll come around. Men’s egos, they’re fragile things, tough as they pretend to be in front of their friends.” Amanda kissed her friend on the cheek, pried Louise’s locked hands

apart and gave them a squeeze for courage. “After you return from Scotland, come to the shop and tell me how it went. Better yet, write to me. Soon.”

“I will,” Louise promised.

Louise watched the door slowly close, shutting her, alone, inside the Lavender Suite at Claremont House.

Hushed voices came to her from the hallway outside. Lady Car taking her leave for the night. Amanda passing by Lorne with little Eddie in hand, perhaps teasing a blushing bridegroom with a saucy remark about his wedding night.

Louise sat down on the edge of the bed, its embroidered coverlets already turned back to reveal an expanse of pure white linen. She held her breath, waiting for Lorne to step through the door...

Please join me for the rest of Princess Louise’s adventure as she tries to unravel the mystery of a lost lover, discovers a new, though forbidden, love—and defends the Crown from a ruthless enemy bent on destroying her family. Mary Hart Perry