



Cartland Institute

FOR ROMANCE RESEARCH

THE COLDITZ COCK

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An **ULTIMATE HOLDING COMPANY** Publication

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Author's Note

This novel is inspired by, rather than an exact account of historical events and characters.

The Colditz Cock is the name of a glider constructed by World War Two prisoners at the infamous Colditz Castle. Allied forces liberated the prisoners before they had a chance to put their escape plan into action. However, two replicas have been made of the glider and both have proven airworthy.

The female heroine of the story is based on a young Barbara Cartland. In addition to her prolific career as a writer, Cartland was also instrumental in the development of the air towed glider, which was used to transport troops during World War Two.

Coincidentally, the glider division of the British Army was based at Tatton Park at this time.

The invasion plan referred to by the British War Cabinet is based on Operation Market Garden, an unsuccessful Allied military operation fought in the Netherlands and Germany. It was the largest airborne operation up to that time and according to some historians flawed, by poor logistical planning, over confidence, failed radio communications and sun spot activity.

Some actual names and titles have been re-used by the authors, but the characters themselves are not intended to accurately represent specific individuals.

CHAPTER ONE

“Leave my supper on the night stand” Mary sighed to her housemaid.

Gisela dutifully set the silver salver down in the corner of the room, carefully moving aside a small amethyst brooch and the collection of treasured photographs.

Mary sat gazing out of the window, through the mist that had settled on the lake. “Shall I draw back the curtains a little and set a small fire for you in the grate?” Gisela suggested.

“No thank you,” replied Mary, “I shall retire early. I will eat in a little while and then go to straight to bed.” Then she added with a sigh, “I’m feeling unusually melancholy today.”

Mary knew that, with no appetite to speak of, the food would stay untouched all evening, just as she knew that Gisela would surely make good use of the plate of cheese and ham to satisfy her own hunger.

Perhaps she should make more of an effort to eat? After all, she was the lucky one. Her thoughts wandered towards home, to her brother and sister far away in London.

She couldn’t imagine that they would have feasted in such luxury for many months. Despite her family’s standing and position, rationing meant good food was scarce, even for them.

Gisela moved to speak once more to her mistress, but sensing the mood, she turned around and quietly withdrew from the room, leaving Mary alone.

Mary looked small, almost childlike. Perhaps it was the

grandeur of the room in which she sat that made her seem so tiny.

She felt so small and lost in the world since it had descended again into conflict.

World events had engulfed her and divided her family. It seemed to her that all hope of happiness was a distant dream.

In private, Mary's face had begun to betray a growing desperation.

In London before the War she had been the belle of the ball, the debutante with whom everyone had clamoured to dance. Naturally warm hearted and radiant, the beautiful dark brown pools of her eyes gave her an exotic air which could capture the heart of any admiring suitor, and she had known how to use them to her advantage.

Her pretty rosebud lips were highly kissable, and kissed she had.

Mary's pretty oval face was framed by a stylishly set demi-wave; the height of fashion and the perfect frame for her eyes.

Many men took the sparkle in those eyes to be that of a woman in love, and she had a tendency to fall in love all too easily. But Mary's eyes were also a window into her very being, revealing a fierce intellect and questioning mind that could compete with any man.

Sat alone now in the window, her eyes rested on a small framed photograph of her mother which she had lovingly placed on her night stand. The sudden memories of home, and of the warmth and comfort of her mother that she longed for so much, brought tears to Mary's sad, brown eyes and little droplets of sorrow began to fall across her pale face.

"How has my life come to this?" thought Mary, as she sat, forehead pressed against the cold glass of the window. She was trapped in a foreign land, with a man that she felt

perhaps she no longer loved, and there was not a thing she could do about it.

Even her family were powerless to help, not that her pride would have allowed her to entertain any kind of 'rescue', even if it were remotely possible.

Mary let out a sigh at the thought of her bad luck.

Had her mother, whose opinion she so respected, not warned her against marrying "that German"? Hadn't her brother urged her not to leave England for the Continent? Well, it was her bed as the saying went, and she would have to lie in it.

Her tears were interrupted by the brusque opening of the door and the appearance of her husband.

Heinrich Strauss, or to give him his full title Baron Heinrich Von Strauss, was a tall, imposing man with an air of danger about him. Mary regained her posture with a little start, as she suddenly remembered how attractive this had once seemed to her young, impressionable heart.

When he walked into a room, everything in that room came to a halt. Mary had stopped in her tracks when she first saw Heinrich.

His piercing eyes, his strong chin and aquiline nose, and his confident gait had caused her to catch her breath.

He commanded absolute attention and respect from those around him, and Mary was no exception.

Mesmerised by his presence at the ball one evening and then by the athletic power he had shown during an afternoon's riding, she had fallen into his arms in an instant.

With little thought for the future, she had left her home and her family to follow Heinrich to Germany as his wife. How foolish she felt now. How she regretted ever catching his piercing stare.

His stare was upon her now as Heinrich crossed the room and his firm hands pulled her to him.

Today in the cold light of the castle, those eyes did not instantly provoke feelings of love; instead she felt a little crushed, like a small bird in his powerful arms.

Turning her face away from his so as to conceal her private tears, she spoke quietly. "I was just preparing to eat and then retire. I feel weary and a little unwell. Perhaps I caught a chill on my ride out yesterday."

Mary spoke uneasily.

"You should take more care" said Heinrich, as he kissed her tenderly on the neck, pulling her small body even closer towards his, "my little English Rose, you must take care not get caught by some over-zealous patrolling soldier."

"You know you are safe here and the Commandant will tolerate you as long as I fund his 'little parties', his cigars and his brandy, but he would be powerless to stop a passing SS unit from rounding you up for a slice of their own glory."

Sternly Heinrich concluded, "it is not safe for you my love, in these dangerous times of desperate men."

At these words, Mary began to tremble.

She wasn't sure if it was her fear of the dreaded SS or resistance to her husband's rough grasp that made her body shake so.

"Of course, my darling, I am always careful to avoid causing you any trouble," she said.

"I stay within these grounds and speak to no one outside, as you know." Mary paused for a moment then spoke again.

"I would never endanger you, your position, or our life here."

A weak smile spread across her lips as she dutifully reciprocated her husband's kiss, but her mind was now elsewhere and she longed be alone with her thoughts once more.

"I shall leave you to rest my darling, but please, think more carefully about your little adventures into the wild outdoors." As Heinrich said this, his hand momentarily gripped

Mary's wrist a little too tightly, "I would not want any harm to come to you. It is for your sake that I say this."

It was true that Heinrich's strong and manly deportment still inspired admiration and some passion in Mary, but she was slowly beginning to wonder if her life in the castle was that of a prisoner and that perhaps her luck would be better if she had stumbled into the arms of a stranger in the woods.

Mary composed herself and withdrew from his grip. She then turned from her husband and took up her place at the window seat looking across the gardens.

Heinrich bade her farewell and left for what was undoubtedly another long evening of brandy and stories with his Party friends at the nearby prisoner of war camp.

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It was the following afternoon and the sun had broken through the earlier mist, bathing the gardens in a warm, golden glow.

From her vantage point at the window, Mary could see a beautiful expanse of endless sky framed by the dense green borders of the grounds below.

The well kept lawn, like an untouched oasis a million miles from the conflict that raged around it, continued to produce tiny summer flowers right up to the castle's formal borders, full of roses of every hue.

Sweeping down to the walls below, the expanse of green and pink was interrupted by three statuesque beech trees, to the side of which lay a small lake.

Today, the brilliant blue reflection from the summer sky had given the murky water a glass-like sheen and Mary was certain she would be able to see her face reflected as clearly as in a mirror.

As she sat letting the thoughts and colours of the after-

noon wash over her, Mary noticed an unusual dark shadow pass across the lake's surface.

"A bird of prey, perhaps an eagle," she thought, "let me get my spy glass".

As she rose, she realised that this was no large bird sailing across the sky.

Looking up, Mary began to make out the mushroom-like form of a billowing parachute.

Transfixed, she watched as closer and closer it came until she was able to see the figure of a man falling, his descent slowed by reams of silk.

"His fall is quite graceful", she found herself thinking, "almost beautiful against the bruising late afternoon sky". The parachute's slow descent mesmerised her. For an instant she forgot her own sorrow as her whole being focussed on the scene in front of her.

Finally, after what seemed like an age, the falling man reached the ground, lurching to one side on impact as if hurt.

Involuntarily, Mary jumped to her feet, clutching ever tighter at the telescope and pressing it to her eye.

"That, if I am not mistaken, is an English RAF uniform." She could barely move her hands as she struggled to focus the glass.

"A British pilot. He must have been forced to bale out."

Now she could see a funnel of smoke creeping into the sky from the other side of the valley. "His plane must have crash landed over there. Now it won't be long before they come looking for him."

Until now and quite remarkably, it seemed that no one else had spotted the pilot.

None of the house staff were running into the garden and there were no soldiers on the scene, although Mary concluded that they would not be far away.

Mary stood and once again that day tried to compose herself. Her mind raced, wracked with confusion by this sudden event.

She took in a deep breath and closed her eyes, trying to focus her mind on the choice in front of her.

“Should I go to him? He is after all my countryman,” she thought aloud.

“But what of my husband? It wouldn’t just be my own life that would be in mortal danger, if I were to be discovered helping an enemy of the people.”

The thoughts and fears came thick and fast; “what would become of me if I were caught by the SS? Heinrich certainly would not be able to protect me.”

She wondered desperately what to do. Her life in England and her excellent but sheltered upbringing had certainly not prepared her for this.

Standing now, with her back to the scene outside, Mary knew that the time had come to make a decision. A decision that would echo across the rest of her life. Who should she betray? Her husband or her country?

She stood motionless, barely breathing for what seemed to be an age. Opening her eyes, resolve spread across her face. Her shoulders rose as if she had found her inner strength for the first time. She knew what she must do.

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The sun seemed to be toying with Mary as it slowly followed its downward course towards dusk.

She paced along the length of her room between the window and the bed. Mary maintained her usual routine, requesting a small plate of cold meats, pickles and salad which she took in the sitting room.

Just as every night, she read poetry for a short while in the

well stocked library, this evening choosing a volume of William Wordsworth; it looked to Mary as if it had hardly ever been read.

Heinrich was not partial to poetry and the book was no doubt only in the collection to bolster his reputation as a man of letters.

She opened a page by chance and her eyes glanced at the words before her: A Wren's Nest.

*Among the dwellings framed by birds
In field or forest with nice care,
Is none that with the little Wren's
In snugness may compare.*

*No door the tenement requires,
And seldom needs a laboured roof;
Yet is it to the fiercest sun
Impervious, and storm-proof.*

She thought of her own nest, the cold castle and the English soldier by the lake.

"If only I could find a way to protect myself against the storm of events," she uttered aloud as she rose from her chair.

"It is not yet 7pm madam" exclaimed Gisela, who had been attending nearby "will you be retiring early this evening?"

"Yes, I fear I still have a chill and I will read in my chambers. When Heinrich returns, please explain to him that I have retired early and that I would prefer not to be disturbed?"

"As you wish madam" replied Gisela, "I will make up the guest room in the East Wing in case it is needed."

"Thank you Gisela, once you are finished you may retire early yourself. I am sure my husband will have no further need of you this evening."

With this, Mary turned her head away, a sign that the conversation was now over and that Gisela should leave the room.

After waiting for what seemed like hours, but was in fact a few minutes, Mary left the drawing room and emerged into the corridor.

Rather than turning left towards her room, she quietly made her way towards the kitchen. Without making a sound, Mary pushed gently against the kitchen door, nudging it open so that a slim shaft of light shone onto the table in front of her.

Darkness! This meant that the staff had retired and that she was alone in the house.

The servants' quarters were adjacent to the house in an old stable block that had been converted by her husband for this purpose.

He had always favoured discretion and privacy at his home and once the war had started this had become an imperative.

Heinrich's relationship with the ruling Nazis was secured by his vast wealth and social standing. The Nazis needed funds and Heinrich needed protection for himself and his English wife.

An unspoken understanding had grown between him and local officials; as long as his money continued to fund the war effort and the lifestyle of its generals, he would be left alone to live as he chose.

Only two members of staff were allowed in the vast house, Gisela the maid and her mother Gerta who acted as cook. Such arrangements were commonplace in the houses of German aristocrats, as in those of the English.

Gerta's mother and grandmother had served Heinrich's family and the ties of loyalty were strong. They had, over time, grown fond of Mary despite her provenance.

In fact, they saw Mary as the softer, more creative influence

that Heinrich and his imposing house desperately needed.

They had watched curiously at the way this unusually practical English girl had involved herself about the castle, choosing the satin drapes that had been made for the sitting room and the delicate, flowered wallpaper.

Mary's knowledge of home-making had of course been drilled into her by her mother, but Mary's other more practical skills, and her love of poetry, had been sought out alone, quite privately and this was not a normal thing; for a girl of such standing to be so educated in words and science was frowned upon in society.

Gisela and Gerta were safely ensconced in their quarters as Mary began her secret work in the kitchen with newly discovered determination.

In the larder she found smoked cheese and Bratwurst, a large loaf of crusty bread by their side.

She gathered them up in a muslin found discarded on the kitchen table, carefully tying them into a bundle.

From a shelf she picked up a bottle of beer, two apples and she carefully filled a flask with water drawn from the pump.

Now, under the cover of darkness, she stole out of the kitchen door into the German night.