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My Last Duchess

Written by Daisy Goodwin

Published by Headline Review

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My Last Duchess

DAISY GOODWIN



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First published in 2010 by
HEADLINE REVIEW

An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

First published in paperback in Great Britain in 2011 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 4808 4

Typeset in Adobe Caslon by Ellipsis Books Limited, Glasgow

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 to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
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For my father Richard Goodwin – my ideal reader

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall

'My Last Duchess', Robert Browning

The American girl has the advantage of her
English sister in that she possesses all that the
other lacks

Titled Americans, 1890

Part One

LADY FERMOR-HESKETH.

MISS FLORENCE EMILY SHARON, daughter of the late Senator William Sharon, of Nevada.

Born 186—.

Married, in 1880, to

SIR THOMAS GEORGE FERMOR FERMOR-HESKETH, seventh Baronet; born May 9, 1849; is Major of Fourth Battalion, King's Regiment; has been Sheriff of Northamptonshire; and is a Deputy Lieutenant and Justice of the Peace of the County.

Issue:

Thomas, born November 17, 1881.

Frederick, born 1883.

Seats: Rufford Hall, Omskirk, and Easton Neston, Towcester.

Creation of title, 1761.

The family has been settled in Lancashire for seven hundred years.

Titled Americans, A List of American Ladies Who Have Married Foreigners of Rank, 1890

CHAPTER 1

The Hummingbird Man

Newport, Rhode Island, August 1893

THE VISITING HOUR WAS ALMOST OVER, SO the hummingbird man encountered only the occasional carriage as he pushed his cart along the narrow strip of road between the mansions of Newport and the Atlantic Ocean. The ladies of Newport had left their cards early that afternoon, some to prepare for the last and most important ball of the season, others so they could at least appear to do so. The usual clatter and bustle of Bellevue Avenue had faded away as the Four Hundred rested in anticipation of the evening ahead, leaving behind only the steady beat of the waves breaking on the rocks below. The light was beginning to go, but the heat of the day still shimmered from the white limestone façades of the great houses that clustered along the cliffs like a collection of wedding cakes, each one vying with its neighbour to be the most gorgeous confection. But the hummingbird man, who wore a dusty tailcoat and a battered grey bowler in some shabby approximation of evening dress, did not stop to admire the verandah at the

Breakers, or the turrets of Beaulieu, or the Rhinelanders fountains that could be glimpsed through the yew hedges and gilded gates. He continued along the road, whistling and clicking to his charges in their black shrouded cages, so that they should hear a familiar noise on their last journey. His destination was the French chateau just before the point, the largest and most elaborate creation on a street of superlatives, Sans Souci, the summer cottage of the Cash family. The Union flag was flying from one tower, the Cash family emblem from the other.

He stopped at the gatehouse and the porter pointed him to the stable entrance half a mile away. As he walked to the other side of the grounds, orange lights were beginning to puncture the twilight; footmen were walking through the house and the grounds lighting Chinese lanterns in amber silk shades. Just as he turned past the terrace, he was dazzled by a low shaft of light from the dying sun refracted by the long windows of the ballroom.

In the Hall of Mirrors, which visitors who had been to Versailles pronounced even more spectacular than the original, Mrs Cash, who had sent out eight hundred invitations for the ball that night, was looking at herself reflected into infinity. She tapped her foot, waiting impatiently for the sun to disappear so that she could see the full effect of her costume. Mr Rhinehart stood by, sweat dripping from his brow, perhaps more sweat than the heat warranted.

‘So I just press this rubber valve and the whole thing will illuminate?’

‘Yes indeed, Mrs Cash, you just grasp the bulb firmly and all the lights will sparkle with a truly celestial effect. If I

could just remind you that the moment must be short lived. The batteries are cumbersome and I have only put as many on the gown as is compatible with fluid movement.'

'How long have I got, Mr Rhinehart?'

'Very hard to say, but probably no more than five minutes. Any longer and I cannot guarantee your safety.'

But Mrs Cash was not listening. Limits were of no interest to her. The pink evening glow was fading into darkness. It was time. She gripped the rubber bulb with her left hand and heard a slight crackle as light tripped through the one hundred and twenty light bulbs on her dress and the fifty in her diadem. It was as if a firework had been set off in the mirrored ballroom.

As she turned round slowly she was reminded of the yachts in Newport harbour illuminated for the recent visit of the German Emperor. The back view was quite as splendid as the front; the train that fell from her shoulders looked like a swathe of the night sky. She gave a glittering nod of satisfaction and released the bulb. The room went dark until a footman came forward to light the chandeliers.

'It is exactly the effect I had hoped for. You may send in your account.'

The electrician wiped his brow with a handkerchief that was less than clean, jerked his head in an approximation of a bow and turned to leave.

'Mr Rhinehart!' The man froze on the glossy parquet. 'I trust you have been as discreet as I instructed.' It was not a question.

'Oh yes, Mrs Cash. I did it all myself, that's why I couldn't

deliver it till today. Worked on it every evening in the workshop when all the apprentices had gone home.'

'Good.' A dismissal. Mrs Cash turned and walked to the other end of the Hall of Mirrors where two footmen waited to open the door. Mr Rhinehart walked down the marble staircase, his hand leaving a damp smear on the cold balustrade.



In the Blue Room, Cora Cash was trying to concentrate on her book. Cora found most novels hard to sympathise with – all those plain governesses – but this one had much to recommend it. The heroine was 'handsome, clever and rich', rather like Cora herself. Cora knew she was handsome – wasn't she always referred to in the papers as 'the divine Miss Cash'? She was clever – she could speak three languages and could handle calculus. And as to rich, well, she was undoubtedly that. Emma Woodhouse was not rich in the way that she, Cora Cash, was rich. Emma Woodhouse did not lie on a *lit à la polonaise* once owned by Madame du Barry in a room which was, but for the lingering smell of paint, an exact replica of Marie Antoinette's bedchamber at le petit Trianon. Emma Woodhouse went to dances at the Assembly Rooms, not fancy dress spectacles in specially built ballrooms. But Emma Woodhouse was motherless which meant, thought Cora, that she was handsome, clever, rich and free. That could not be said of Cora, who at that moment was holding the book straight out in front of her because there was a steel rod strapped to her spine. Cora's arms ached and she longed to lie down on Madame du

Barry's bed but her mother believed that spending two hours a day strapped to the spine improver would give Cora the posture and carriage of a princess, albeit an American one, and for now at least Cora had no choice but to read her book in extreme discomfort.

At this moment her mother, Cora knew, would be checking the placement for the dinner she was holding before the ball, tweaking it so that her forty-odd guests knew exactly how brightly they sparkled in Mrs Cash's social firmament. To be invited to Mrs Cash's fancy dress ball was an honour, to be invited to the dinner beforehand a privilege, but to be seated within touching distance of Mrs Cash herself was a true mark of distinction, and was not to be bestowed lightly. Mrs Cash liked to sit opposite her husband at dinner ever since she had discovered that the Prince and Princess of Wales always faced each other across the width not the length of the table. Cora knew that she would be placed at one end sandwiched between two suitable bachelors with whom she would be expected to flirt just enough to confirm her reputation as the belle of the season but not so much that she compromised her mother's stratagems for her future. Mrs Cash was throwing this ball to display Cora like a costly gem to be admired but not touched. This diamond was destined for a coronet, at least.

Directly after the ball the Cashes were leaving for Europe on their yacht the SS *Aspen*. Mrs Cash had done nothing so vulgar as to suggest that they were going there to find Cora a title; she did not, like some other ladies in Newport, subscribe to *Titled Americans*, a quarterly periodical which gave details of blue-blooded but impecunious young men

from Europe who were looking for a rich American bride, but Cora knew that her mother's ambitions were limitless.

Cora put the novel down and shifted uncomfortably in the spine harness. Surely it was time for Bertha to come and unbuckle her. The strap across her forehead was digging in; she would look ridiculous at the ball tonight with a great red welt on her brow. She wouldn't mind in the least discomfiting her mother but she had her own reasons for wanting to look her best. Tonight was her last chance with Teddy before she had to leave for Europe. Yesterday at the picnic they had come so close, she was sure that Teddy had been about to kiss her, but her mother had found them before anything could happen. Cora smiled a little at the thought of her mother sweating as she pedalled to catch up with them. Mrs Cash had dismissed bicycles as hoydenish, until she realised that her daughter could use them to evade her, and then she had learnt to ride one in an afternoon. She might be the richest girl in America but surely she was also the most persecuted. Tonight was her coming-out party and here she was strapped into this instrument of torture. It was time she was released. In one stiff movement she rose and rang the bell.



Bertha was in the kitchen with the hummingbird man. He came from the same part of South Carolina as she did, and every year when he came up to supply the Newport hostesses with their favourite party trick, he would bring Bertha a message from what was left of her family. She had not

seen any of them since the day ten years ago when she had been picked by the Reverend to go North, but sometimes when she walked through the kitchens on baking day and smelt the hot sweet smell, she thought she saw the swish of her mother's blue and white striped skirt. These days she could barely remember her mother's face but that smell would knock her back into the old cabin so fast it would bring tears to her eyes. She had sent letters at first with the presents and the money, figuring that her mother would find someone to read them to her, but now she had stopped, she didn't want some stranger reading aloud to her momma the secrets of her heart.

'Your momma said to say that your Uncle Ezra passed,' said the hummingbird man, removing his bowler hat, perhaps as a sign of respect, perhaps to impress Bertha with the noble planes of his skull. Bertha bowed her head; she had a dim memory of being carried into church on Uncle Ezra's shoulders and wondering if it was safe to hold on to the hair coming out of his ears.

'It was a fine burial, even Mrs Calhoun came to pay her respects.'

'And Momma, how's she doing? Is she wearing the shawl I sent her? Tell her that the mistress brought it back from Europe.'

'I'll be sure to let her know . . . 'The hummingbird man paused and looked down at the shrouded cage on the floor where the hummingbirds slept. Bertha knew there was something wrong; the man had something to say that he didn't quite have the words for. She should help him, ask him the question that would let him reveal what was troubling him,

but a strange reluctance came over her. She wanted her mother to stay in her blue and white striped dress, warm and sweet and whole.

There was a crash from the kitchen behind and the hummingbirds stirred, their short futile flights disturbing the air like sighs.

‘What colour are they this time?’ asked Bertha, welcoming the distraction.

‘I was told to make ’em all gold. Wasn’t easy. Hummingbirds don’t like to be painted; some of ’em just give up, just lay themselves down and don’t fly no more.’

Bertha knelt down and lifted up the cloth. She could see flickers of brightness moving in the darkness. When all the guests sat down for supper at midnight they would be released into the winter garden like a shower of gold. They would be the talking point of the room for maybe a whole ten minutes; the young men would try and catch them as favours for the girls they were flirting with. The other hostesses would think a touch grimly that Nancy Cash would stop at nothing to impress, and in the morning the maids would sweep the tiny golden bodies into a surrendered heap.

‘Did Momma give you any message for me, Samuel? Is there something wrong?’ Bertha asked quietly.

The hummingbird man was speaking to his birds, making small popping noises with his mouth. He clucked his tongue and looked at Bertha sadly.

‘She told me to tell you that everything was fine, but she ain’t fine, Bertha. She’s so skinny now she looks like she might blow away in the hurricane season. She’s wasting

away, I don't give her another winter. If you want to see her again, you should make it quick.'

Bertha looked down at the birds fizzing like Roman candles in their cage. She put her hands to her hair, which was smooth. Her mother's hair was frizzy – it had constantly to be suppressed under headscarves. She knew that the hummingbird man was expecting emotion from her, tears at least. But Bertha had not cried for years, ten years in fact, since she had come North. What would be the point? After all, there was nothing she could do. Bertha knew how lucky she was, she knew of no other coloured girls who had become lady's maids. From the moment she had been made Miss Cora's maid, she had tried to speak, dress and behave like her as far as she was able. She remembered her mother's calloused hands and found she could not look at the hummingbird man.

The Blue Room bell rang again. One of the maids came out of the kitchen and shouted, 'That's the second time Miss Cora's bell's gone, you had better get up there, Bertha.'

Bertha jumped. 'I have to go now. I'll come and find you later, once the ball gets going. Don't go until I see you.' She tried to conceal her relief at the interruption with the vehemence of her tone.

'I'll be waiting for you, Bertha,' the hummingbird man said.

The bell jangled again. Bertha walked as fast as she dared up the servants' staircase. Running was forbidden. One of the housemaids had been dismissed for going down the marble staircase two at a time. Disrespectful, Mr Simmons the butler had called it.

She knocked on the Blue Room door and went in.

Cora was almost crying with frustration. 'Where have you been, Bertha? I must have rung three times. Get me out of this infernal thing.'

She was tugging at the leather bands encircling her body. The spine straightener, which had been made to Mrs Cash's special design, had all the buckles at the back and so was impossible to remove without help.

Bertha tried to appease her. 'I'm sorry, Miss Cora, the man with the hummingbirds had news from home, I guess I didn't hear the bell.'

Cora snorted. 'It's hardly an excuse that you were listening to gossip while I was trussed up here like a chicken.'

Bertha said nothing but fumbled at the buckles. She could feel her mistress twitching with impatience. As soon as she was free of the harness, Cora shook herself like a dog trying to get dry, then she spun round and grabbed Bertha by the shoulders. Bertha braced herself for a telling off, but to her surprise Cora smiled.

'I need you to tell me how to kiss a man. I know you know how, I saw you with the Vandemeyers' groom after their ball.' Cora's eyes were glittering with urgency. Bertha drew back from her mistress.

'I don't think kissing is something you can tell,' she said slowly, playing for time. Was Miss Cora going to let Mrs Cash know about her and Amos?

'Show me then. I have to get this right,' Cora said fiercely and leant towards Bertha. As she did so, a low shaft of light from the setting sun hit her conker-coloured hair, setting it ablaze.

Bertha tried not to shrink away. 'You really want me to kiss you the way I would a man?' Surely Miss Cora was not serious.

'Yes, yes, yes.' Cora tossed her head. The red mark from the harness was still visible on her forehead.

'But Miss Cora, it ain't natural two women kissing. If anyone were to see us I'd lose my place.'

'Oh, don't be so squeamish, Bertha. What if I were to give you fifty dollars?' Cora smiled enticingly as if offering a child a sweet.

Bertha considered this. Fifty dollars was two months' salary. But kissing another woman was still not right.

'I don't think you should be asking me this, Miss Cora, it just ain't fitting.' Bertha tried to sound as much like the Madam as she could; she knew that Mrs Cash was the only person in the world that Cora was frightened of. But Cora was not to be put off.

'Do you imagine that I actually want to kiss *you*? But I must practise. There is someone I need to kiss tonight and I have to do it right.' Cora shook with determination.

'Well . . .' Still Bertha hesitated.

'Seventy-five dollars.' Cora was wheedling now; Bertha knew she wouldn't be able to hold out for very long when her mistress wanted something that badly. Cora would just persist until she got her own way. Only Mrs Cash could say no to her daughter. Bertha decided to make the best of the situation.

'All right, Miss Cora, I will show you how to kiss a man, but I would like the seventy-five dollars now if you don't mind.'

Bertha knew quite well that Mrs Cash did not give Cora an allowance, so she had every reason to ask to see the money. Miss Cora was a great one for making promises she couldn't keep. But to Bertha's surprise, Cora produced a purse from under her pillow and counted out the dollars.

'Can you set aside your scruples now?' she said, holding out the bills.

The maid hesitated for a second and then took the money and tucked it away in her bodice. Seventy-five dollars should stop the hummingbird man looking at her like that. Taking a deep breath, she took Cora's flushed cheeks gingerly in her hands and bent her head towards her mistress. She pressed her lips against hers with a modest pressure and drew back as quickly as she could.

Cora broke away impatiently. 'No, I want you to do it properly. I saw you with that man. You looked as if, well,' she paused, trying to find the right phrase, 'as if you were eating each other.'

This time she put her hands on the maid's shoulders and pulled Bertha's face towards hers and pushed her lips to Bertha's, pressing as hard as she could.

Reluctantly Bertha pushed her mistress's lips open with her tongue and ran it lightly around the other woman's mouth. She felt her go stiff for a moment with shock and then Cora began to kiss her back, pushing her tongue between her teeth.

Bertha was the first to pull away. It was not unpleasant kissing Cora, it was certainly the most sweet-tasting kiss she had ever had. Better than Amos, who stank of chewing tobacco.

‘You taste quite . . . piquant,’ said Cora, wiping her mouth with a lace handkerchief. ‘Is that all you have to do? You haven’t left anything out? I have to do this correctly.’ She looked earnestly at Bertha.

Not for the first time, Bertha wondered how anyone could be as educated as Cora and yet so ignorant. It was all Mrs Cash’s fault of course. She had raised Cora like a beautiful doll. She wouldn’t mind having Miss Cora’s money or her face, but she sure as hell wouldn’t want to have Miss Cora’s mother.

‘If it’s just kissing you’re having in mind, Miss Cora, then I reckon that’s all you will require,’ Bertha said firmly.

‘Aren’t you going to ask me who it is?’ Cora said.

‘Begging your pardon, Miss Cora, but I don’t want to know. If the Madam was to find out what you’re about . . .’

‘She won’t, or rather, she will but by the time she does it will be too late. Everything will be different after tonight.’ She looked at the maid sideways as if challenging Bertha to ask her more. But Bertha was not to be drawn. So long as she didn’t ask questions, she couldn’t be made to answer them. She made her face go slack.

Cora, however, had lost interest in her. She was looking at herself in the long gilt cheval glass. Once they had kissed, she was sure that everything else would fall into place. They would announce their engagement and she would be a married woman by Christmas.

‘You’d better get my costume ready, Bertha. Mother will be here in a minute, checking that I have followed her instructions *à la lettre*. I can’t believe I have to wear something so

perfectly hideous. Still, Martha Van Der Leyden told me that her mother is making her dress like a Puritan maid so I suppose it could be worse.'

Cora's dress had been copied from a Velázquez painting of a Spanish infanta that Mrs Cash had bought because she had heard Mrs Astor admire it.

As Bertha took the elaborate hooped skirt from the closet, she wondered if the Madam had chosen her daughter's costume as much for the way it restricted the wearer's movement as for any artistic considerations. No gentleman would be able to get within three feet of Miss Cora. The kissing lesson would have been in vain.

She helped Cora out of her tea gown and into the farthingale. Cora had to step into it and Bertha had to fasten the harness like shutting a gate. The silk brocade of the skirt and bodice had been specially woven in Lyons; the fabric was heavy and dense. Cora swayed slightly as the weight of it settled on the frame. It would only take the slightest pressure to make her lose her balance entirely. The dress was three feet wide so Cora would have to go through all doorways sideways. Waltzing in such a dress would be impossible.

Bertha knelt and helped Cora into the brocade shoes with Louis heels and upturned toes. Cora began to wobble.

'I can't wear these, Bertha, I will fall over. Get the bronze slippers instead.'

'If you're sure, Miss Cora . . .'

 Bertha said cautiously.

'My mother is expecting eight hundred people tonight,' Cora said. 'I doubt she will have time to inspect my feet. Get the slippers.'

But Cora's words were braver than she felt; both girls knew that the Madam never missed anything.



Mrs Cash was making one last survey of her costume. Her neck and ears were still bare, not through austerity on her part but because she knew that any minute her husband would come in with a 'little something' which would have to be put on and admired. Winthrop had been spending a lot of time in the city lately, which meant that a 'little something' was due. Some of her contemporaries had used their husband's infidelities as a way of purchasing their freedom, but Mrs Cash, having spent the last five years shaking Cash's Finest Flour from her skirts, had no desire to tarnish her hard-won reputation as the most elegant hostess in Newport and Fifth Avenue by something as shabby as divorce. So long as Winthrop was discreet, she was prepared to pretend that she knew nothing of his passion for the opera.

There had been a time once, though, when she had not been so sanguine. In the early days of their marriage she could not bear to let him out of her sight, for fear that he would bestow that same confiding smile on someone else. In those days she would have thought jewels no substitute for Winthrop's unclouded gaze. But now she had her daughter, her houses and she was *the* Mrs Cash. She hoped that Winthrop would bring her diamonds this time. They would go well with her costume.

There was a tap at the door and Winthrop Rutherford II came in wearing the satin breeches, brocade waistcoat

and powdered wig of Louis XV; the father might have started life as a stable boy but the son was a convincing Bourbon king. Mrs Cash thought with satisfaction that he looked quite distinguished in his costume, not many men could carry off silk stockings; they would be a handsome couple.

Her husband cleared his throat a little nervously. 'You look quite magnificent tonight, my dear, no one would think this was the last ball of the season. May I be permitted to add a little something to perfection?'

Mrs Cash moved her head forward as if readying herself for the axe. Winthrop pulled the diamond collar from his pocket and fastened it round her neck.

'You anticipate me, as always. It is indeed a necklace,' he said.

'Thank you, Winthrop. Always such taste. I shall wear the earrings you gave me last summer; I think they will make a perfect match.' She reached without a moment's hesitation for one of the morocco leather boxes on the dressing table, leaving Winthrop to wonder, not for the first time, if his wife could read his mind.

The opening bars of the Radetsky March floated up from the terrace. Mrs Cash stood and took her husband's proffered arm.

'You know, Winthrop, I would like this evening to be remembered.'

Cash knew better than to ask what she wanted the evening to be remembered for. She was only interested in one thing: perfection.