

THE DIRIGIBLE KING'S DAUGHTER

by Alys West

CHAPTER ONE

Harriet Hardy took her pistol from her reticule and flipped open the barrel. Unlocking her desk drawer, she removed a small, shiny bullet from a cardboard box and slid it into the missing space. Clicking the barrel shut, she returned the gun to her bag, added two sets of keys and snapped it shut.

Standing, she smoothed creases from her charcoal grey skirt and put on her coat. On the back of her office door hung a mirror. She shoved a couple of pins more firmly into her dark brown hair before positioning her wide-brimmed hat at the exact angle that fashion required.

In the outer office, Mr Jowett, the chief clerk, turned away from the calculating machine and looked at her over his half-moon glasses. 'I do wish, Miss Hardy, that you'd let me take this appointment. We know nothing about this man.'

'We know he's in Debrett's, and Viscount Ripley, I mean, Lord Ripley—' Harriet corrected herself having earlier ascertained the proper form of address from that estimable volume '—asked for me personally in his letter. We cannot afford to offend the aristocracy. Not even the Irish ones.' From Debrett's she'd also learned that the Viscount was heir to an estate in County Carlow. 'Especially—' Harriet added, smoothing on her gloves '—when they want to rent one of our best properties for the whole of December.'

'If you'd let John—' Mr Jowett gestured at the office boy who'd just brought in a bundle of files '—escort you to The Crescent I would be happier.'

Harriet fiddled with the clasp on her bag. Sometimes Mr Jowett was more of a mother hen than her own Mama. But then, he knew what she got up to during office hours. Harriet was very careful to ensure that Mrs Hardy thought she did nothing more strenuous than bookkeeping.

Yet, after what had happened yesterday, perhaps Mr Jowett did have a point.

‘Oh, very well,’ she said gesturing to John who dumped the files with alacrity and pulled his cap from his pocket.

‘And Miss Hardy...’ Mr Jowett said, as she opened the door.

Turning, she frowned at him. ‘What now?’

‘Your badge.’ A tentative finger pointed at her lapel. ‘You may want to remove it.’

‘Quite right.’ Hastily, she unpinning the red and white NUWSS badge and stowed it in her reticule. ‘It’s unlikely Lord Ripley has an interest in women’s suffrage.’

Outside the office, the brass plaque that read ‘*Hardy & Co — Whitby*’ shone in the weak November sunlight. The Hardy in question was her great uncle, Humphrey, who’d started the firm and acquired a number of properties while land in Whitby was cheap. When the place became a popular resort he’d begun acting as agent for other property owners who wanted to rent out their houses.

With John trailing two steps behind her, Harriet walked briskly up West Terrace towards The Crescent. Hardy & Co owned two of the elegant Regency houses and she fully intended to rent one of them to Lord Ripley at very profitable rates.

Hearing the sound of the omnibus puffing up the hill behind her, her feet slowed. Waiting for it to pass before she crossed the road, she turned her head to avoid the steam billowing behind it. The North Sea was its usual winter grey, the waves tipped with flecks of

white as they hurtled towards the cliffs. The harbour was busy with trawlers leaving on the high tide. The larger ones were steam powered, their funnels puffing out small clouds behind them. Across the bay, red roofed houses climbed up the steep slope to St Mary's Church and the Abbey; both newly famous from the adventures of Count Dracula.

Crossing the road, Harriet proceeded along The Crescent to number 5. Taking the keys from her bag, her stomach tightened. It was ridiculous but she really didn't want to go back inside. Not so soon.

Yet she had no choice. Straightening her shoulders, she pushed the door open. Having been uninhabited for over a month the house was barely warmer than the temperature outside. But that wasn't the reason she shivered as she crossed the threshold. John came in behind her and hovered uncertainly.

'Light a fire in the kitchen,' she told him. 'Let's get a bit of warmth into the place.' He scurried away and she moved into the drawing room. Kindling was stacked against the grate. Kneeling, she swiftly laid a fire and, taking matches from their hiding place in an elaborately decorated box on the mantelpiece, lit it. Watching the flames glow red as the wood caught, she heard the bell ring.

After counting to five (a trick taught her by Uncle Humphrey as it didn't do for clients to think you had nothing to do but await their arrival) she went to answer it. On the doorstep was a man dressed in a tan leather flying jacket that buttoned up the left side of his broad chest. Streaks of black marked his cheeks, his head was covered with a leather cap and his eyes obscured with brass goggles. His brown trousers, stained with smears of oil across each thigh, were tucked into heavy boots fastened with brass buckles. He was tall, well over six foot, with a neat, fashionable beard.

‘Miss Hardy, I presume?’ he enquired, pushing up the goggles to reveal white circles around his eyes. His deep, soft voice triggered a distant memory that she couldn’t place.

Harriet blinked at him. ‘And you are?’

‘Lord Ripley. We have an appointment. I must apologise for my appearance. I flew to Seamer and there were some difficulties with the steam car I hired. The engine seized up and I had to take it apart to release the right reverse eccentric. I’m afraid I haven’t had the opportunity—’ pulling out a white monogrammed handkerchief he rubbed ineffectually at his face, succeeding only in spreading the dirt further ‘—to clean up for our meeting.’

‘Forgive me, but I was expecting someone older. According to Debrett’s, Lord Ripley was born in 1845, which you, sir, were not.’

The man appeared slightly discomposed by her directness. ‘You’re right, of course, but I’m afraid events have overtaken Debrett’s. That entry refers to my uncle, who was indeed born in 1845. However, he is now the Earl of Carlow. The former earl sadly died in May.’ He gestured to the black band around his upper arm. Taking in the width of his arm, highlighted by the tightness of his leather jacket, Harriet hastily returned her eyes to his dirty face. ‘I appear—’ the man patted his jacket pockets ‘—to have left my cards in my coat but, I assure you I am Lord Ripley. If you prefer, I can return later with my card and a letter of introduction.’

Harriet hesitated. Leaving aside the man’s extremely unconventional appearance, if he was who he said he was, then securing him as a tenant would be an undoubted coup for the firm. She could easily imagine how other prospective tenants would react when she dropped into conversation that Viscount Ripley had rented one of their properties. For that kind of prestige she was prepared to dispense with a few formalities.

‘That will not be necessary, my Lord,’ she said, holding the door open for him and gesturing for him to enter.

Applying the handkerchief to his oil-stained hands with slightly more success, he looked around. ‘I see you have steam heating and gas lighting. Is that all over the house?’

‘Indeed. The house was updated a few years ago. I personally oversaw the renovations and I can promise you all modern conveniences were installed. This is now one of the most up to date and luxurious properties in Whitby.’ Harriet gestured for him to follow her.

‘There are three reception rooms,’ she said. ‘Dining room, library and this drawing room, which, as you can see, is very elegantly proportioned and appointed in the latest fashion.’

Her sweeping hand took in the sofas, chairs and occasional tables that she’d chosen from Leak & Thorp in York. They were all at least seven years old and, therefore, could hardly be called the latest fashion; but Lord Ripley didn’t look like a man who was well versed in interior design.

The Viscount strode past her into the room. ‘You can spare me the patter, Miss Hardy. I can see for myself.’ He grinned at her over his shoulder which not only took the sting from his words but made Harriet’s heart beat a little faster.

Moving over to the piano, she stared at his back. He stood, long, strong legs planted squarely on the Axminster carpet, staring out of the window, apparently more interested in the view than the décor. What was it about the way he spoke which took her back to those last lazy days in York? Careless, summer afternoons of tennis parties and glorious evenings dancing in the Assembly Rooms. The young men she’d known then had that same casual confidence, that same easy charm.

She shook her head slightly. No point dwelling on the past.

‘Is there any information you would like to know?’ she asked. Her tone was more pointed than she’d intended. ‘My Lord,’ she added, more quietly.

‘You can stop tripping over the title for one thing.’ He turned to give her a quick glance over his shoulder. ‘I’ve only had it for a few months and, as I’ve never been one to stand on ceremony, it’s been hard to get used to.’

‘If you wish,’ Harriet said carefully. She’d not had many dealings with the nobility but this kind of behaviour seemed as unconventional as his clothes.

‘I’ll be visiting with my mother and two younger sisters. Millie’s been ill and Mother thinks the sea air will do her good. As they’re mad for this *Dracula* book they wouldn’t consider going anywhere else.’

‘Mr Stoker’s book has caused quite a sensation in London I understand. Your sisters are not the only ones who want to see the places they’ve read about.’

Lord Ripley folded his arms. ‘I’m just grateful they haven’t taken it into their heads to want to go to Transylvania.’

‘May I enquire as to the ages of your sisters?’ Harriet found herself drawn to join him at the window.

‘Eighteen and twenty one.’ As if he’d suddenly become aware of it, his hand rubbed at the oil stain on his trousers. ‘I don’t think they have a sensible thought between them from one day to the next.’

Harriet smiled. ‘I’m sure I was no different at their age.’

Lord Ripley raised his eyebrows. ‘That I cannot believe, Miss Hardy.’

His gaze held hers. She blinked and turned away. ‘Shall we view the dining room?’ Not waiting for his reply, Harriet swiftly returned to the hall and swung open the elegantly panelled door.

CHAPTER TWO

Trailing her hand along the lengthy expanse of the mahogany table, Harriet felt a little flushed. It had been a very long time since a man had looked at her like that. Whitby society had made it very clear they considered her involvement in the business improper and a major detriment to what few matrimonial prospects she may have. Once she’d let it be known, not long after Humphrey’s death, that she was running Hardy & Co she’d been treated as an unmarried spinster.

Hearing Lord Ripley quietly enter the room behind her, Harriet quashed the urge to turn to look at him. At this point in a tour of the property, she’d usually point out the corniced ceiling and the William Morris curtains. Having been silenced on those points, she simply waited.

‘Have you lived in Whitby for long?’ Lord Ripley asked.

Startled by the question, Harriet looked over her shoulder at him. ‘Eight years.’

‘And where did you live before that?’

‘In York.’

‘I see.’ He nodded. ‘And what brought you to Whitby?’

Frowning, Harriet turned. The full chilly expanse of the twelve foot mahogany table separated them. ‘Family reasons.’

The Viscount walked a couple of steps towards her. 'I'm prying. I apologise. But I was in York eight years ago. Perhaps we met.'

Harriet moved back up the opposite side of the table. 'I don't think so, my Lord. I've never moved in those kinds of social circles.'

He laughed. 'Neither did I back then.' He leaned on a carved dining chair. 'Did you ever go to an Assembly Room ball?'

Harriet looked away. She had more than once. But for some reason she didn't want to admit it. 'I am a woman who works for her living, Lord Ripley. I do not get invited to balls. Now, if you've seen enough perhaps we can move on to the library?'

'Of course.'

What was it with this house and gentlemen? *Really, it was beyond enough!*

'John?' she called when she reached the hall. The boy appeared from behind the door that led to the kitchens. Realising she had to find something for him to do, she said, 'Go upstairs and open all the curtains and then wait there for me.'

Bedrooms, she'd found, were where gentlemen were most likely to forget themselves. And after yesterday there was a bullet hole just above the mantelpiece in the blue room to prove it.

'The library is well stocked and includes many modern novels.' Harriet swung open the door. 'There's even a copy of *Dracula* in case your sisters forget theirs.'

'Impressive.' Lord Ripley moved over to the book cases. 'Do you read much Miss Hardy?'

'Only account books.'

He laughed. It was a rich, infectious sound. Despite herself, Harriet smiled. 'You're like me. I only read technical manuals. My sisters despair. But then I tell them what use is a novel to me when I'm flying at six hundred feet and a propeller gets stuck!'

Harriet blinked. She'd thought the jacket was just for show. 'You're a dirigible pilot?'

He grinned. 'Yes. With the Great Eastern Company.'

'Oh. I hadn't....' A blush crept up Harriet's cheeks as she realised she couldn't possibly finish that sentence without insulting him.

'Thought I was one of the idle rich, did you?' The laugh came again.

Eyes fixed on the highly patterned carpet, Harriet blushed more deeply. The man was deeply provoking, but he was potentially a very important client and if that meant she had to swallow her pride and apologise then she would. 'I...I'm sorry, my Lord. I should not have made assumptions.'

'Not unreasonable assumptions. Mother's always on at me to give it up. The previous two Viscount Ripleys died rather untimely deaths. She doesn't want me to be the third.'

There was a thread of emotion in his voice that made Harriet look up. 'Piloting dirigibles is dangerous, is it not?' she asked quietly.

'Yes, but that's half the fun of it! Have you ever flown, Miss Hardy?'

Harriet shook her head. 'No. It's something I've wanted to do for a long time but...' She should have been one of the first to take-off from York's new aerodrome. Like so many other things, it was a dream best forgotten.

'That's a shame. I think you'd enjoy it. If you want to give it a go, I'll take you up,' he said. 'Now the aerodrome at Seamer is open it's as easy as taking the train.'

Harriet smiled at his enthusiasm. Then she remembered she could never accept.

‘Thank you, my Lord. That’s a very kind offer.’

‘Which you won’t take me up on?’ he queried moving to stand closer to her.

‘Regretfully I...’ She blinked up at him, discomforted by both his sudden closeness and surprising ability to read the meaning behind her words. ‘I think it’s time I showed you the rest of the house.’ She pushed past him to the door.

Crossing the hall, her hand cradled her bag. The weight of her pistol was reassuring. Moving quickly to the stairs, she fell back on property particulars to fill the silence. ‘There are four bedrooms. The two largest have sea views and the other two have views over the town. All of the rooms have gas lighting...’

She broke off when she heard whistling, and glanced behind her. Lord Ripley’s lips were puckered, his hand tapping a beat on the bannister. Recognising the tune, Harriet swallowed hard to dislodge the lump that suddenly formed in her throat. The memory was fresh as the day it happened, not tarnished at all from the long years she’d kept it locked away.

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