

NICOLA CORNICK



THE UNMASKING
OF LADY
LOVELESS

Undone!

Mills & Boon Historical Undone

Nicola Cornick

The Unmasking of Lady Loveless

«HarperCollins»

Cornick N.

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— (Mills & Boon Historical Undone)

All of London is buzzing about The Adventures of a Woman of Pleasure by Lady Loveless, a book of barely disguised accounts of the ton's sexual escapades. Reputations have been ruined and society is scandalized, but no one is more shocked than Lord Alexander Beaumont when he learns that the mysterious Lady Loveless is none other than his estranged wife! He remembers Melicent as a shy, innocent young woman and is determined to find out where she's been getting her information...and who has turned his inexperienced bride into a brazen author of erotic literature. There's only one solution: Alex will seduce his errant wife and learn all her wanton secrets. . .

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Author Note

I am thrilled and honoured to be a part of the launch of Mills & Boon's exciting new e-book program UNDONE! In my Regency tale, *The Unmasking of Lady Loveless*, I have written a special short story for you that I hope you find fun and very, very sexy!

Welcome to Christmas in my favourite Yorkshire village of Peacock Oak, where a mysterious author is outraging the *Ton* with her wicked, erotic novels! Who is the shocking Lady Loveless? Her unmasking is going to be sensual, romantic and very scandalous...

Enjoy!

Elsewhere in Peacock Oak, there's marriage...murder...and mayhem! To be found in Nicola Cornick's novel UNMASKED Available March 2009

Coming Soon from Mills & Boon

a scandalous new trilogy BRIDES OF FORTUNE

where the rules of engagement are never what they seem!

The Confessions of a Duchess The Scandals of an Innocent The Undoing of a Lady

Nicola Cornick became fascinated by history when she was a child and spent hours poring over historical novels and watching costume drama. She still does! She has worked in a variety of jobs, from serving refreshments on a steam train to arranging university graduation ceremonies. When she is not writing she enjoys walking in the English countryside, taking her husband, dog and even her cats with her. Nicola loves to hear from readers and can be contacted via her website at www.nicolacornick.co.uk

The Unmasking of Lady Loveless

Nicola Cornick



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For Sarah Morgan and Kate Hardy

with thanks for their advice on the many uses of the quill pen.

Chapter 1

London, December 1806—three weeks before Christmas

When Lord Alexander Beaumont entered Whites that night the entire room fell silent. No man would meet his eyes; their gazes slid away to study the pattern on the carpet or the brandy in their glasses. Throats were cleared, cuffs inspected with startling intensity.

“Gentlemen?” He raised one quizzical dark brow. “Would anyone care to enlighten me as to what is wrong?”

There was silence.

“Charles?” he prompted.

“Devil take it, Alex,” his friend Charles Wheeler complained, “I knew you would ask me.”

“That’s what friends are for, Charles,” Alex said smoothly. “Well?”

Charles stood up. He loosened his neck cloth, palpably ill at ease. “Don’t know where to start, old fellow.”

“Try the beginning,” Alex advised.

“Good luck, Charlie,” someone said sotto voce.

“It’s Lady Melicent,” Wheeler blurted out. “Your wife.”

His wife.

No one ever spoke to Lord Alexander Robert Jon Beaumont about his wife.

“Thank you, Charles,” Alex said. “We may have been apart for a couple of years now, but I am still aware who Melicent is.”

Wheeler winced. Several men drew in their breath in sympathy.

“She’s... She’s written a book,” Wheeler said. “Several books. This is the most recent.” He grabbed a slim tome from the hands of a man at a nearby table and handed it to Alex.

“Steady on, Charlie,” the man protested. “I was enjoying that!”

“Bentley...” Wheeler said in a warning tone. The man’s eyes flickered to Alex’s hard face and he fell silent.

“‘The Adventures of a Woman of Pleasure by Lady Loveless.’” Alex read the gold lettering aloud. He flicked open the book.

“‘Being naked and laid open to him kindled so great a rapture in her that she lay in wanton pleasure waiting for him to plunge his huge—’”

A great harrumphing and clearing of throats followed. Alex closed the book softly and looked at his friend. “You are claiming that Melicent, *my wife*, is this Lady...Loveless?”

“Yes! Don’t call me out,” Wheeler added as Alex took a purposeful step toward him, murder in his eyes. “Bentley bribed the publisher and found out that the manuscripts are sent from someone called Mrs. Durham, from Peacock Oak in Yorkshire....” He made a pleading gesture. “You know

that was Lady Melicent's maiden name and that she resides there now." He shook his head. "She has to be stopped, Alex. She bases the characters in her books on members of the *Ton* and they are too accurately portrayed for comfort." He gestured to Bentley again. "Will's betrothal to Miss Flynn was ruined because there is a scene in the book where a character called Bill Gentley ravishes an actress in a box at the theater during a performance!"

"We all know that happened," Alex said dryly.

"That isn't the point!" Bentley piped up.

"Bentley lost an heiress worth sixty thousand," Wheeler said. "Lady Loveless's sources are impeccable. Which is why she has to be stopped."

Alex tapped the book thoughtfully against the palm of his hand. "She will be."

"What are you going to do?" Wheeler asked.

"I am going to Yorkshire," Alex said. He smiled at the look of horror on his friend's face. "No need to fear, Charles—it is the north of England, not the North Pole."

"Yorkshire in winter," Wheeler spluttered.

"Yes," Alex said, "and I will take this with me." He raised the book, and the candlelight gleamed on the gold-lettered name, Lady Loveless, on the cover. "It will prove useful...for research purposes."

"Devil take it, Alex," Bentley called, "I was reading that!" But he spoke to thin air.

Lady Loveless indeed.

How very apt for his estranged wife.

Out in the street it was snowing, tiny flakes on the edge of a cold east wind. Alex turned up the collar of his coat, refused the offer of either a hackney carriage or a sedan chair, and set off down the dark streets toward Cavendish Square. Almost he relished the idea of a run-in with a pickpocket or thief. It would at least relieve some of his anger and frustration.

The wind stung his face. He felt cold inside as well, his heart shriveled, encased in ice. *Melicent*. He thought of his bride on their wedding day. They had met for the first time a mere week before. Melicent had been a gangly debutante in her first season, with long conker-brown hair and huge brown eyes. She had been impossibly shy and seductively innocent. Even though Alex had been furious to be forced into marriage by his father, the Duke of Beaumont, he had tried not to blame Melicent.

He had been attentive to her throughout the wedding breakfast, trying to draw her out, thwarted by her reserve. Later that night he had consummated his marriage, treating his young wife with gentleness and patience, but the encounter had not been a success, for she had lain as still and cold as a statue and he felt unfulfilled and empty afterward. A few more unsatisfactory couplings had followed, but after a fortnight or so he had not sought her bed or her company any longer. Running the Beaumont estates had kept him fully occupied; they were both wife and mistress to him. He needed nothing more.

Occasionally he would appear at balls to squire Melicent in a dance or two. His mother insisted on it and it silenced the gossips and his own guilty conscience. He and his wife had never spoken of their unsatisfactory marriage. It could not be said that the two of them had drifted apart, he thought now, for they had never come together in the first place.

He was sure that no one, least of all Melicent, had guessed at the fury that had burned him up inside. She would have had no notion of the frustration and rage engendered by the threats the Duke of Beaumont had used to force his younger son into marriage. Alex's father had wanted to ensure the succession and he had known that his heir, Alex's elder brother, Henry, with his preference for men, would never marry. The duke had therefore blackmailed Alex, threatening to deny him the right to run the Beaumont estates if he did not wed. Alex had loved Beaumont with a passion from the moment he was born. The lands and the people were his life. He was the only one in the family who cared a rush for them. His father could not have chosen a more effective weapon.

The weight of the book in Alex's pocket brought his thoughts back to Melicent and reminded him that she might have been an untutored virgin when first they had married, but that she had

certainly gained some experience from somewhere—or *someone*—in the meantime. The anger kindled in him once again. How could Melicent, with her sweet, honest eyes, her generous smile and her patent innocence, have become Lady Loveless, the shameless purveyor of erotic literature? It seemed impossible.

They had been married for two years and it was a month after the Duke of Beaumont's death when Melicent had told him that she was going to Yorkshire to care for her mother and that she would be staying indefinitely. Her own father had died the previous year, her mother was an invalid and Melicent's feckless young brother Aloysius was running wild.

They had quarreled for the first time in a married life previously marked by indifference. Alex had forbidden her to go. He could see now that he had been driven by pride; it was one thing for him to treat Melicent with careless unconcern, but quite another matter for her to defy him. And she *had* defied him.

"You don't want me!" she had said bitterly, her belongings scattered about her as she hastily packed a portmanteau. "You have never needed me. Mama does."

He had not heard another word from her in two years.

Now *she* would be hearing from *him*. He would go to Yorkshire and confront his errant wife. He paused. No. He would go to Yorkshire and *seduce* his errant wife according to the style laid down by Lady Loveless. He would expose her for the wanton she must surely be.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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