



CASTONBURY
PARK
A Regency Upstairs Downstairs

The
Housemaid's
Scandalous Secret

HELEN DICKSON

Mills & Boon M&B

Helen Dickson

The Housemaid's Scandalous Secret

«HarperCollins»

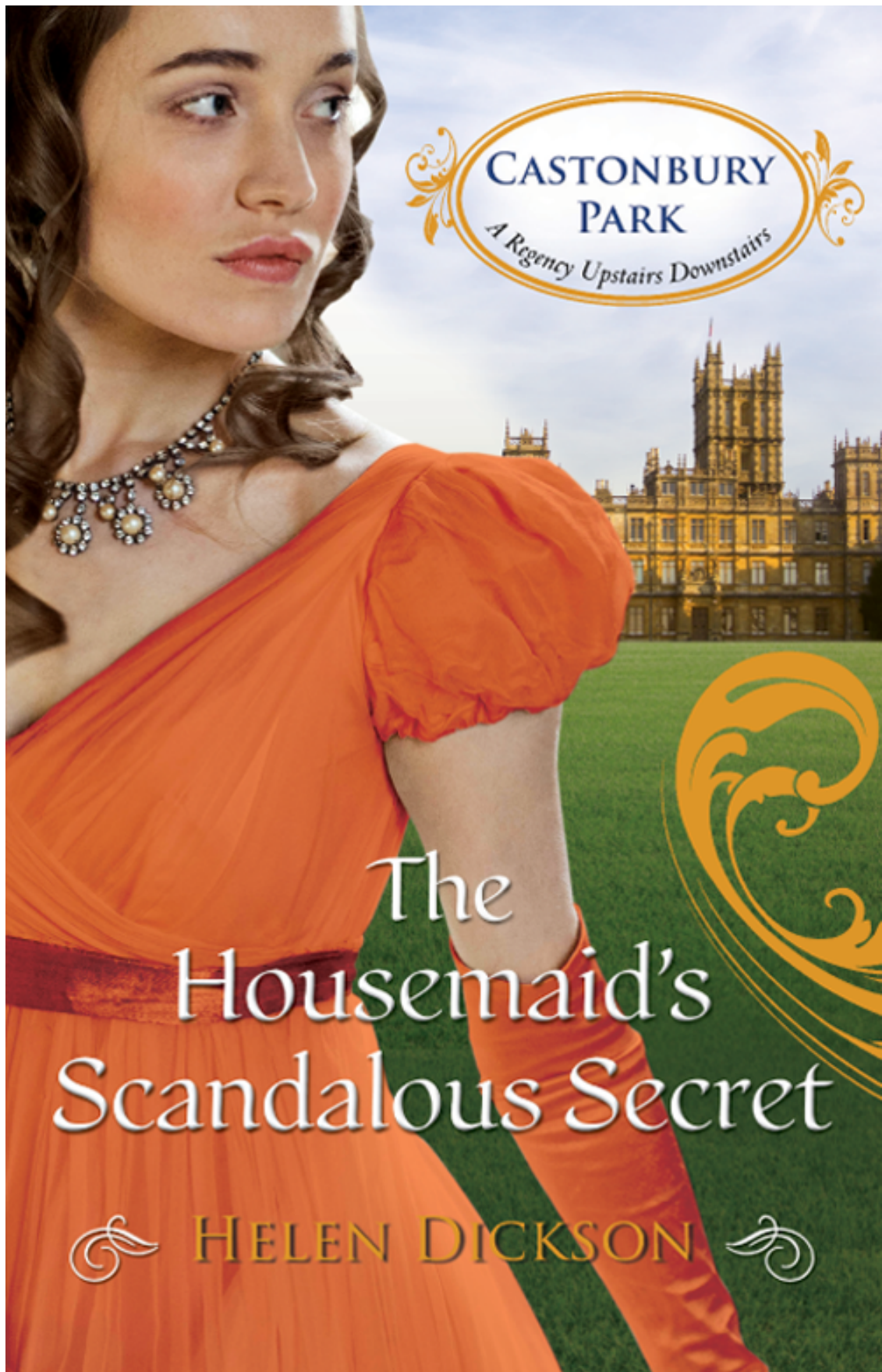
Dickson H.

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‘Your discretion and good behaviour would be most appreciated...’ Returning to Castonbury Park is just another job for Colonel Ross Montague. With his family in disarray, he promises to do his utmost to see order and decorum restored once more. That is until he’s sidetracked by the beguiling eyes of Castonbury’s newest maid –Lisette. An affair would be most improper...but when neither can deny their blazing desire, all society’s rules are discarded. So, in a house where gossip is rife, Lisette must try her best to keep her salacious liaison a secret...!

Содержание

About the Author	8
MILLS & BOON	9
Prologue	10
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	14



Castonbury Park
A Regency Upstairs Downstairs

Survival of the fittest is fine, so long as you're the one on top ... but the family that has everything is about to lose it all ...

The Montagues have found themselves at the centre of the *ton's* rumour mill, with lords and ladies alike claiming the family is not what it used to be.

The mysterious death of the heir to the Dukedom, and the arrival of an unknown woman claiming he fathered her son, is only the tip of the iceberg in a family where scandal upstairs *and* downstairs threatens the very foundations of their once powerful and revered dynasty ...

August 2012

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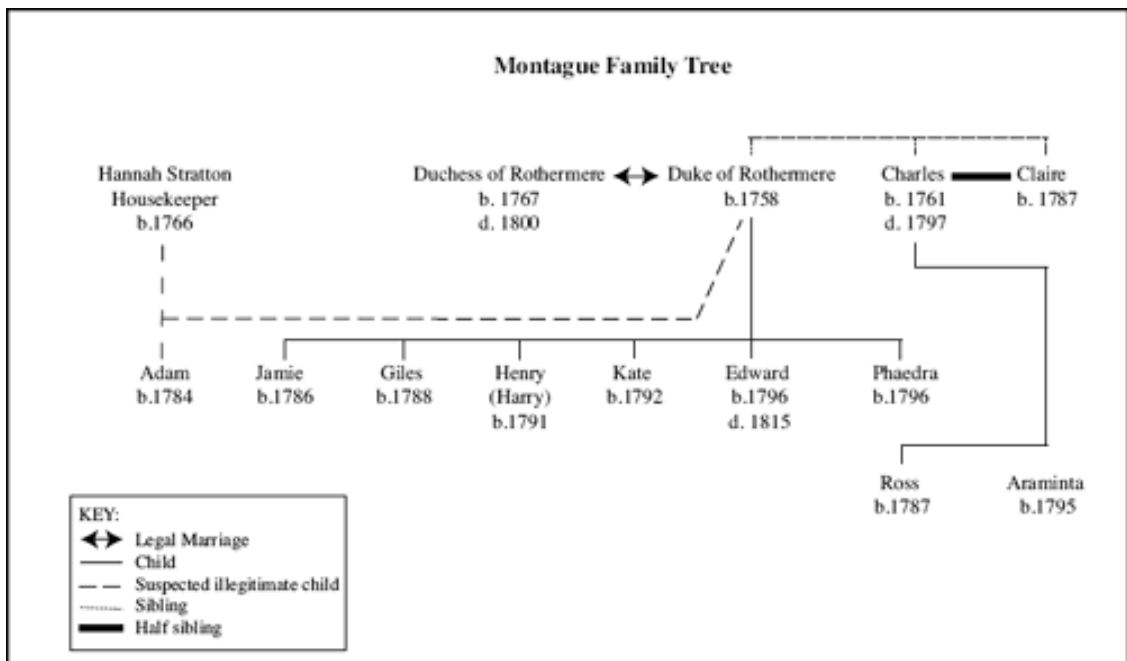
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Duke of Rothermere

Castonbury Park

Dear Ross,

Nephew, I hesitate to ask, because I know you are busy and your life is currently in India, but I would really appreciate your calm head and guidance at this trying time. As you know, we have been led to believe that my dear son Jamie is dead, but to complicate matters I have just this morning

received a letter informing us that Jamie was married, and that his new wife and young son are in the grounds of Castonbury Park. The truth is yet to be determined, for I thought I knew my son better. But, Ross, I would be most grateful if you could return to help your family and use your persuasive nature to discover what this woman wants and what indeed did happen. I believe she may be able to shed some light.

But please, however, be discreet. We cannot afford any more scandal to be unearthed whilst you are here.

*Yours,
Rothermere*



About the Author

HELEN DICKSON was born and lives in South Yorkshire, with her retired farm manager husband. Having moved out of the busy farmhouse where she raised their two sons, she has more time to indulge in her favourite pastimes. She enjoys being outdoors, travelling, reading and music. An incurable romantic, she writes for pleasure. It was a love of history that drove her to writing historical fiction.

Previous novels by the same author:

A SCOUNDREL OF CONSEQUENCE

FORBIDDEN LORD

SCANDALOUS SECRET, DEFIANT BRIDE

FROM GOVERNESS TO SOCIETY BRIDE

MISTRESS BELOW DECK

THE BRIDE WORE SCANDAL

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For my husband, George, with love—
he has provided unconditional support and
encouragement throughout.

Prologue

Cholera had killed Lisette's parents. Suddenly, at nineteen years old, she found herself homeless, penniless, with no family and no purpose in life. She was adrift but she would survive. She could survive anywhere, but she belonged nowhere.

Unable to remain in her beloved India, she was to travel to Bombay, where she hoped to work her passage on board a ship bound for England.

Lisette had enjoyed living in an Anglo-Indian society in Delhi. Her father had been an eccentric academic, a linguist and a botanist, working for the University of Oxford in India. It was through her father's friendship with the Rajah Jahana Sumana of the state of Rhuna that she had met and become a close friend of the Rajah's daughter, Princess Messalina.

Messalina was being escorted to her wedding in Bhopal and suggested Lisette travel part of the way with her as one of her attendants. Not wishing to draw attention to herself Lisette was dressed as a native girl, for to travel openly as an unescorted English girl was unthinkable.

Lisette had parted from her friend when the rains came. It was a light sprinkling at first that washed the dust from the air. Then, as the lightning pranced closer in a flashing, sizzling display of the storm's power, a torrential downpour marched across the land, turning the roads to mud and causing the rivers to overflow. The people Lisette was travelling with reached the banks of a wide, fast-flowing river at the only point of safe crossing for twenty miles upstream and down. Usually the banks here were lined with *dhobis* busy with piles of washing, *mahouts* bathing their elephants and children playing and splashing in the shallows.

The rain had stopped some time ago. The last rays of the sinking sun catching the river glittered on the rushing water in a haze of gold. The bridge creaked and swayed with the pull of the current. It was almost dark, but rather than wait until morning by which time the bridge could have been washed away or become impossible to cross, the travellers decided not to postpone their crossing.

There were so many people and conveyances and bullocks milling about the bridgehead that Lisette was in danger of being crushed to death. Panicking she tried to turn back but she was carried forward by the frenzied crowd. She saw the red uniforms of British soldiers trying to bring some kind of order to the chaos but to no avail. One of them, an exceedingly handsome and masculine British officer, was familiar to her, although they had never been introduced. He and his orderly had ridden part of the way with the rajah's procession—the presence of British soldiers had provided added protection against marauding bandits.

Trying to keep his horse from bolting from the melee ahead, Colonel Ross Montague watched the unruly multitude push onto the bridge. Light was fading fast but when he caught sight of a star-spangled bright pink sari he was transfixed. He recognised it as belonging to one of Princess Messalina's attendants. He could just make out her slender figure crushed against the rails and trying desperately to hang on. What she was doing there he did not stop to wonder at, for at that moment she was in serious danger of falling off the bridge that was dipping precariously under the weight of the crowd.

The next minute, to her horror, Lisette found herself flung into the raging torrent. With night drawing in it was difficult for the majority on the bridge to see what had happened, but looking down on the scene, Ross had a clear picture of it and immediately flung himself out of the saddle, quickly shedding his red jacket.

'Leave her, man,' his companion shouted above the din. 'There'll be many more in the water before this evening's done.'

'Hold my horse, Blackstock. The life of a soldier calls for a far greater degree of proficiency in dealing with the unexpected than is required of the average man.'

'But to jump into a fast-flowing river is in excess of your official duties. It's insane—suicidal.'

With a grin, Ross tossed him the reins and his jacket. 'I'll be back.'

Pushing his way towards the bridge, he shouted to make himself heard above the tumult of yelling voices and the thunder of the water rushing below.

The current sucked Lisette deep into the river. Breaking the surface, choking in the thick, muddy water, she didn't see the figure that dove off the bridge after her. She tried to swim but hampered by the weight of her sari it was impossible. Desperately she tried to grasp at anything that would prevent her from being washed away, but the force of the water defeated her and swept her a hundred yards or more downstream until she crashed into a tree. The bank had been washed away but mercifully the tree's roots were still secured. Grabbing at a branch she groaned when it cracked and gave way. Somehow she managed to grab another, but the long green leaves slipped between her fingers. Her heart wrenched with despair. She couldn't drown, not when she had come so far.

Suddenly she felt something slide about her waist, then knock against her legs. For one horrified second she thought she was about to be eaten by a crocodile, but then hope flared when she felt a hard body pressed to her own.

'Cling on to me,' a voice yelled in Urdu above the roar of the water.

Spluttering and thrashing Lisette desperately tried to do as he asked. Again she reached out to take a fresh grip on the tree and this time she managed to grasp a branch and hold on. Dragging herself and her companion towards it she emerged through a canopy of leaves, her sopping wet veil wrapped around her, half covering her face. The man managed to half drag himself into the branches and hauled her up beside him. Exhausted from their exertions and panting for breath, they were still for a moment. Then, seeing she was in danger of slipping back into the water, the man's arms were about her once more.

Eventually he managed to edge along the tree towards the bank. Feeling sand beneath his feet, he pulled the woman he had rescued along with him and lay down with her on the sandbank, out of the water. The night was now pitch-black and he dared not move any further. His breathing was laboured and his arms and legs ached, his body battered and bruised.

The woman clung to him in a frenzy of terror. 'Are you all right?' he asked, his mouth close to her ear.

Though she made no sound he could feel the rise and fall of her breast against his own, while the feel of her warm, wet body and every slender curve and line of it spoke eloquently of a woman, not a child.

'Are you hurt?'

She did not reply, but she shook her head in a helpless gesture that might have been either agreement or dissent, and for some reason, that small despairing gesture cut him to the heart and he tightened his arms about her, whispering foolish words of comfort. For a moment her body shuddered and she lay her head against his shoulder. Wrapped together, the darkness of the night and the danger of falling back into the river forced them to remain where they were. The night wind arose and blew strongly off the water, and the girl in his arms began to shiver in the cold air.

After a while Lisette ceased to shiver. It was strangely comforting to lean her aching head against her rescuer's shoulder. With his arms tight about her, she was conscious only of an unfamiliar and inexplicable feeling of being safe—a feeling she had longed for since the day her parents had died and she had left the safe and familiar walls of her home. She did not know why the presence and the touch of this man should give her this warm feeling of safety, and she was too battered and bruised and physically exhausted to figure it out. It was enough to feel protected.

In fact, the closeness of him was dizzying, so much so that she hardly knew her own thoughts. She felt pleurably wanton feelings rippling through her, and instead of trying hard to stifle the feelings, she allowed them to flood through her. They were overwhelming sensations, so new and strong that they frightened her. She moved slightly, as though to pull away from him, and his arms tightened in response.

It was a long time since Ross had held a woman in his arms, and though he could not see her face distinctly, the feel of her firm young body moulded against his made his blood throb through his veins. 'Hold still, my lovely. It's not safe for us to move until we have light. Until then we have no choice but to cling on to each other and keep ourselves warm.'

Had it not been for that softly rich voice, Lisette would not have relaxed into his secure embrace once more, little realising the devastating effect her thinly clad body was having on him. Her heart was racing now, part of his heart, his body ... Her face was uplifted and she strained her eyes to see her rescuer. His lean features were starkly etched, his eyes translucent in the ghostly light. It was impossible to make out anything more, but she knew it was the soldier who had accompanied the rajah's procession.

Ross held her firm. He felt the softness of her silken hair, the stirring pressure of her small, round breasts against his chest, and even in this dire situation, he ached to sample this woman more thoroughly.

Lisette's mind reeled and the next moment she felt the warmth of his mouth on hers. She gave herself up to this, her first kiss, savouring it with a sensual awakening as the stranger's arms held her captive. It lasted no more than a moment, but it was enough to stir the strange feelings until she became acutely conscious of her innocence. The trembling weakness in her body attested to its potency. She found her lips entrapped with his once more, and though they were soft and gentle, they flamed with a fiery heat that warmed her whole body. Her eyes closed, and the strength of his embrace, the hard pressure of his loins and his hand cupping her breast made her all too aware that this was a strong, living, healthy man, and that he was treating her like a woman, indeed desiring her.

In that moment Lisette tried to still the violent tremor that had seized her, but his powerful, animal-like masculinity was an assault on her senses. She was unable to resist him and she felt her body offer itself to this man, this stranger, and in that instant they both acknowledged the forbidden flame that had ignited between them. Right there, with the river raging all around them, they exchanged a carnal promise as binding as any spoken vow.

When her leg slid sideways and she felt the cold lap of water against her flesh, reason flooded back to her. She had no doubt that this man would take her there and then if she did not halt things now. Having been properly brought up and having consorted with an Indian princess, no one should treat her like this. This man thought she was a native girl, so as a native girl she must behave.

Sliding her lips away from his, with her mouth against his ear she managed to say, 'Please don't do this. Would you take advantage of an innocent woman when she has nothing with which to defend herself? Am I fair sport to be ravished like this? Would you make me an outcast for the rest of my days?'

Hearing her words Ross shook his head and gathered her to him again. With an effort he restrained the urge to take her lips once more for he must not. 'You are right. I have no wish to take you—not here, not like this—delightful though the prospect might be. I go too fast. What you are doing away from the royal procession is not my concern—and you do seem to have a penchant for getting yourself into trouble—but now that I have found you I contemplate a much grander bedding for you and me. We will talk about it when we get out of this damned river.'

Hearing the male arrogance edging his voice, Lisette swallowed drily. 'Then tell me where you plan this bedding so that I can avoid it,' she exclaimed, knowing that what he was saying was wrong ... and yet it was so wickedly exciting, like nothing she had ever experienced before.

Ross gave a small sensual laugh, sending shivering pulse beats through her body. 'Nay, my lovely girl. Do not think you can avoid your destiny. I am a soldier, but I have been in India long enough to know your culture is full of the mysteries of destiny and fate and other fantasies. When we kissed I felt the desire in you. Deny it if you can.'

Lisette was helpless in denying it. How could she, when she had felt it too?

'Rest easy,' Ross said, his arms gathering her against him, 'while we wait out the night.'

With nowhere to rest her arm Lisette placed it around his waist and closed her eyes.

As the water continued to rush around them, Ross did the same, knowing there was the danger of the water rising. If it did, they would not survive the night.

When dawn broke up the darkness of the sky, Ross opened his eyes to find his arms empty of his companion's soft warmth. Panic seized him and he cursed himself for allowing himself to fall asleep, but he had truly believed she would be safe in his arms. Standing up, his eyes did a frantic search of the water round about, but there was no sign of her.

Thankfully the river level had fallen during the night and the bridge hadn't been washed away. Without any difficulty he managed to make it to the bank. On reaching it and looking at the ground, he saw the small footprints of a woman coming out of the river. This in itself put paid to the theory that she had been washed away. But there the trail ended. She had vanished as if spirited into thin air.

He was astounded at the strength of his relief that she was alive, but then he felt a strange sensation come over him and he could hardly believe it himself when he realised it was pique and a helpless, futile sick anger against fate and himself and the foolish instinct of his kind that had driven him to leap unthinkingly to the rescue of a drowning native girl. And now the ungrateful girl had simply got up and left him; the sense of loss and disappointment would come later.

He was affronted because having endangered his life to rescue her, she had left without so much as a farewell, slipped from his hands as unexpectedly as she had been placed into them. He set off to look for his horse and young Blackstock, determined to banish the native girl from his mind. But all the way to Bombay he did not stop looking for the girl in the pink, star-spangled sari.

The events of that night were a hideous jumble in Lisette's mind, and reaction had her in its grip. On opening her eyes and seeing the river level had fallen, careful not to disturb her companion, she had gotten to her feet and looked down into his deeply tanned and undeniably good-looking face. His closed eyes were fringed with black lashes and he was tall, his chest broad and hard muscled. His luxuriant dark brown hair and clean-shaven face enhanced his masculine good looks.

Her heart stirred. How she would like to get to know him better, but there was something inside her telling her to flee, not to become entangled with this man whose only thought when they had been locked together had been to bed her. And so, shaking so violently she could barely walk, troubled by doubts and fears and a haunting sense of insecurity, she had left her handsome rescuer and made it to the riverbank.

Fortunately she spotted the people she was travelling with encamped on the other side of the river. Reclaiming her bundle she carried on with her journey to Bombay.

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