

JILLY COOPER
ARAMINTA'S WEDDING
pictures by
SUE MACARTNEY-SNAPE



About the Book

Flatgrove, the most beautiful house in Lincolnshire, and home of Rufus, fifth Earl of Atherstone, is seriously cold in winter, the sort of place Eskimos send their children to as punishment. It is also a prize inheritance. Though married four times, Rufus has no son and gloomily contemplates his estate passing into the hands of his large, plain, good-natured daughter, Araminta, and her greedy and boring cousin, Piggy Atherstone, who is determined to marry her.

Quite early in the season, however, Piggy acquires a serious rival in Bounder Cartwright, a debonair money-market gambler, whose sexual conquests are as prolific as his investments are suddenly catastrophic. Bounder finds Araminta's prospects devastatingly attractive. By Ascot he has won the day and the wedding is fixed for September.

Then at the last minute the events of the previous Boxing Night catch up with the Atherstones in a surprising way. Will the wedding take place or not?

The combination of Jilly Cooper's leisurely and irreverent tale of country house life with the colourful and sharply observed paintings of Sue Macartney-Snape which inspired it, presents a wickedly funny portrait of the English upper classes at play. *Araminta's Wedding* is irresistible fireside reading for even the coldest of stately homes.

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Artist's Dedication

Author's note

1. The Rousing of Rufus
2. Joining the Ladies
3. Amazing Grace
4. A Very Nice Girl
5. Not a Very Nice Man
6. Cast Not Earls Before Swine
7. A-Hunting We Will Go
8. With One Bounder . . .
9. Pulling a Fast One
10. Bounder at the Wedding
11. The Midas Touch
12. An Advance Guard of Aunts
13. Love Among the Lurchers
14. Hardly Anyone for Tennis
15. A Brush with Memories
16. An Unwelcome Guest
17. The Wooing of Araminta
18. Teatime Tristesse
19. The Fourth of June
20. Eco and Narcissus
21. Aunt George on the Warpath
22. Party Politics
23. Mariana's Blues
24. Meet the Plant Aunts
25. Widows' Weeds
26. Bounder for the Cup

27. Bridge Too Far
28. Love-Forty: Repent in Sorrow
29. Gather Ye Rosebud
30. Gertie is Royally Enclosed
31. Bounder Drops One Brick and Picks Up Another
32. Runs and Ruins
33. Double Chins and Double Gins
34. Storied Urns and Animated Busts
35. A Hopeless Case
36. Dog Day Afternoon
37. A Rancorous Run-Up
38. Gaining a Son
39. The Gossips
40. Bring Back Hanging on Every Word
41. Brightly Dawned Their Wedding Day
42. Hat Attack
43. Mistaken Identical
44. The Ride of the Vel-Crows
45. Come Fly with Me

About the Author and Illustrator

Also by Jilly Cooper and Sue Macartney-Snape

Copyright

Araminta's Wedding

*or
A Fortune
Secured*

A COUNTRY HOUSE EXTRAVAGANZA



*pictures by
Sue Macartney-Snape
words by
Jilly Cooper*

Artist's Dedication

*To my mother
and in memory of my father*



Sue Macartney-Snape

Author's note

The pictures came first. They were brilliantly funny, often poignant, exquisitely observed, and teeming with splendid dogs. Utterly enchanted, hazily thinking of extended captions, I agreed to write a linking text.

After several failed attempts to write a series of little essays about English upper-class life (the only common tie between otherwise unrelated pictures) I resorted, in despair, to fiction. My problem was handling so many different characters. But at last I found a heroine in a schoolgirl hat ([see here](#)) and decided to call her Araminta. The fat slob in the same picture became her villainous cousin, Piggy, who, to my delight, I discovered playing bridge in another picture ([see here](#)). Lounging in his bath, the epitome of caddish glamour ([see here](#)), emerged my hero, Bounder Cartwright.

I only hope the end result complements Sue's gloriously idiosyncratic vision.

I would like to thank Rosie Abel-Smith and Andrew Parker-Bowles for reading early drafts and coming up with endless hilarious suggestions, and Annette Xuereb-Brennan for typing the manuscript.

I am also immensely grateful to Katy Hepburn for designing such a beautiful book and to Geoffrey Strachan and Mary O'Donovan for editing it. Geoffrey deserves particular gratitude for masterminding the entire operation and commuting between artist and author – not the easiest task – with such tact, humour and understanding.

Jilly Cooper





The Rousing of Rufus

1

ON BOXING NIGHT, Rufus, fifth Earl of Atherstone, slept with his fourth wife Rosebud for the first time in twenty years. This was entirely thanks to his eldest sister Pansy, who always got the wrong end of the stick. Believing the recently published Madonna book to be a learned treatise on paintings of the Virgin Mary, and hoping it might include the Titian Madonna which hung in the Great Hall at Flatgrove, Pansy ordered it for the Earl as a Christmas present. The consequences of this misunderstanding were far-reaching.



Earlier on Boxing Night, there had been a dinner party at Flatgrove. The food, which included pheasant shot by the Earl, was deliciously chilled because the maids had such a long trek from distant kitchens. The wines were infinitely worse than they should have been because Drinkwater, the butler, had already drunk the best.



Rufus Atherstone, who could trace his family back to William Rufus, had the same concussed air as his forebear of having been hit by a large branch. While his guests discussed wife avoidance and tax avoidance and the latest demand for £250,000 from Lloyds, and wept crocodile tears over the even worse 'lorsses' of their friends, Rufus enjoyed a quiet sleep.

Peter Ponsonby-Porter, who was admired by his friends as 'a most amusing fellow', then invited the rest of the table to tell him who they would ask for directions if they were 'lorst' in the desert; a pink panther, an honest Lloyds broker, or a dishonest Lloyds broker?

The answer was the dishonest broker, because the other two were figments of the imagination. The helpless guffaws of laughter woke Rufus Atherstone, who had a second glass of port, and asked if anyone had heard news of Herbie Foxxe-Whapshott's prostate.

'Poor fellow's in hospital with a cafeteria up his cock.'





Joining the Ladies

2

FLATGROVE, THE MOST beautiful house in Lincolnshire, was seriously cold, the sort of place Eskimos send their children to as punishment. Even the sleekest lurchers living there grew long shaggy coats. By the time the ladies had returned to the drawing-room from powdering their noses in distant bedrooms, the coffee was cold and Rufus's mistress, Flappy Foxe-Whapshott, who always behaved as though she owned the place, had hogged the fire. Drinkwater then offered the ladies a liqueur. They would have preferred kümmel. Unfortunately the kümmel was now inside Drinkwater, so they had to make do with armagnac.



Rufus's fourth wife Rosebud – with whom he had not slept since their honeymoon – was an excellent hostess, but unromantic. Once, when taken onto the terrace to admire the full moon, Rosebud had merely contemplated the silvery disc and pondered how many guests she could seat round it. Neither she nor Rufus could control Drinkwater.

Now was the time, rather than during dinner, for the other wives to compliment her on the delicious *moule soufflé* and how much Jean-Baptiste, the French chef, who'd formerly worked at the Dorchester, had blossomed. They then began peering surreptitiously inside the Christmas cards, most of which seemed to say: 'Jeremy was declared redundant in February, but Dommie got into Eton. Can't *think* where he gets his brains from!'

Knowing Rufus and their husbands would be at least an hour, everyone settled down to a serious bout of 'who's

doing what to whom'. The discussion then moved on, as it always did, to Rufus's glamorous and wayward third wife, Grace, who had evidently just had her eyes done.

'Such agony, my dear, they peel the skin right off your face,' said Flappy Foxe-Whapshott with relish. As Rufus's mistress of long standing, she detested Grace. 'That woman,' went on Flappy, 'has been pretending to people she's gone off to a health farm.'

'What's that?' quavered Rufus's sister Pansy, who had given him the Madonna book. 'Did you say Grace had run off with a healthy farmer?' Everyone thought this was 'fritely' funny.

By the time the men finally came out of the dining-room, it was half past ten, and Rufus Atherstone was yawning his head off and pointedly turning off lights. Mr Corker, the local wine merchant, who had only been asked because Rufus owed him so much money, was very put out. Having delivered so much drink to Flatgrove over the years, most of it admittedly consumed by Drinkwater, he and his wife had expected an evening of Bacchanalia and had ordered a minicab to collect them at midnight. They now had to creep down the drive and hover furtively by the main gate in the pouring rain and frantically flag down the minicab when it finally appeared.



Meanwhile, in a port-induced stupor, Rufus Atherstone had stumbled off to bed. Flipping through the Madonna book in search of the Flatgrove Titian, he was so turned on by the photographs of the knickerless pop star that he stumbled excitedly out onto the landing and instead of lurching right into Flappy Foxe-Whapshott's bedroom, turned left in confusion and jumped on an amazed Rosebud.





Amazing Grace

3

RUFUS ATHERSTONE HAD stopped making love to Rosebud, his fourth wife, on their honeymoon, because he realised that he was still hopelessly in love with his third wife, Grace. Grace had destroyed their marriage and broken his heart by eloping with his best friend, Peter Ponsonby-Porter, after giving birth to Rufus's only child, his daughter Araminta. Reluctant to relinquish her title, however, Grace had resisted marrying again.



Grace Atherstone, a great beauty, was nicknamed 'the Lincolnshire poacher' because, singing: 'It's my delight on a shining knight,' she had poached practically every husband in the county. Nor was it just Lincolnshire. Half the husbands in Knightsbridge, Kensington and Chelsea had done it with bad Grace.

The most fashionable woman of her age, she held court at Libertine Hall, ordering everyone around. Grace was also a setter of trends. The day she nonchalantly went to Ascot in a pair of black court shoes from which her new labrador puppy had eaten both toes, she started an instant fashion for peep-toed shoes, which was even adopted by the Royal Family.

Grace had terrific Ex-appeal and used huge dollops of charm to ride roughshod over people to get what she wanted. One Saturday night, when a young traffic cop had chased her home from a party at 100 mph, she had got off