

Barbara Cartland

This is Love

THE ETERNAL 241 COLLECTION



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The Master of the Horse is esteemed as the third great Officer at Court, giving place only to the Lord Steward and the Lord Chamberlain of the Royal Household.

Formerly this Officer was called 'Constable, and held much more power than his successors of today.

He now has the charge of ordering and disposing of all matters relating to the Sovereign stables, races and breeds of horses and has jurisdiction over the Equerries, Pages and many others employed in his department.

At State Processions he rides next to the Sovereign and, in the case of a Queen Regnant, in the carriage with Her Majesty.

At the Coronation of Queen Victoria the Master of the Horse and the Mistress of the Robes rode in the State carriage with the Queen.

The present Master is the Duke of Westmoreland.

Historically records of the appointment started in 1391 with the first Master of the Horse, Sir John Russell.

There were four previous holders of the position starting in 1360, but Sir John Russell was the first to hold the title officially.

He served King Richard II faithfully.

CHAPTER ONE ~ 1885

Lady Athina Ling turned her horses off the main road and drove down a narrow lane.

She resented having to slacken their pace because it was growing late and she was still a long way from home.

The hedges were high and so she drove ahead with considerable care.

At the first bend of the lane, however, she was forced hastily to pull sharply at the reins as to the front of her and coming out of a field was a farm wagon.

The wagon's horse was right across the lane and the farm yokel driving it realised somewhat belatedly that there was other traffic on the road besides himself.

He managed to turn his horse as Lady Athina was pulling in hers as hard as she could.

The chaise would just have had room to pass the farm wagon if the wagon had been pointing straight up the lane.

As it was, the lighter wheel of the chaise then crashed against that of the wagon.

The horses came to a standstill and the groom with Lady Athina jumped out.

The wheels were fortunately not locked together as they might easily have been.

But at the same time the wheel of the chaise, being the lighter of the two, was somewhat damaged.

"You was a-comin' along too fast!" the yokel said aggressively, fearing that someone would blame him for what had happened.

"I am afraid I was," Lady Athina replied in a soft voice, "and this lane is very narrow."

"Folks've said that afore," the yokel remarked.

Her groom came to the side of the chaise to report,

"I'm afraid, my Lady, the wheel's been damaged. Not badly, but it'd be a mistake to try and get 'ome on it."

"You mean we must have it mended first?" Lady Athina asked. "If we can find someone to do it."

The yokel was listening to their conversation.

"There be a blacksmith up at *The Crown and Feathers*," he said, "and 'e be good 'un, if 'e ain't gorn 'ome."

"And where is *The Crown and Feathers*?" Lady Athina enquired.

He pointed down the lane that she had just come along.

"It be down thar," he said, "'tis the best Posting inn in these parts and it be on the left."

"Thank you," Lady Athina replied, "now please tell me where I can turn."

He indicated ahead and the groom jumped into the chaise. Very carefully, Lady Athina tooled her two well-bred horses to where there was a wide entrance into a field. She then carefully turned the chaise round.

As they drove back past the farm wagon, the wheel of the chaise was bumping and felt somewhat unsteady.

"You are quite right, Gauntlet," she said. "We could not reach home with it like this."

"I'm afraid it'll take a good hour to mend, my Lady," Gauntlet replied.

"Well, if it does, we will just have to stay the night at the Posting inn."

There was then a poignant silence and Lady Athina knew that he disapproved of the idea.

Gauntlet had been with her father since she was a child and now that he had died, Gauntlet looked after her almost possessively as if she was one of his own children.

"It's no use being disapproving," she said after a moment when he did not speak. "I know that I should have a chaperone, but then you are far more effective than even Mrs. Beckwith could be."

"People'd be shocked, my Lady, if they knowed you was a-stayin' in a public inn without Mrs. Beckwith in attendance."

Athina laughed and it was a very pretty sound.

"You are making me seem as if I was Royalty, Gauntlet! It will be only for one night and, if you think it might cause a scandal, I will not use my own name."

She paused before she added,
“I will be ‘Mrs. Beckwith’ – and why not?”

Gauntlet made a strange sound that signified neither approval nor disapproval.

As she drove on, Athina thought just how lucky she was to have him with her.

She could always rely on him in an emergency and, if there were drunken young men at the inn who insulted or tried to be familiar with her, Gauntlet would deal with them.

The wheel was decidedly more wobbly by the time *The Crown and Feathers* came into view.

It was indeed, as the yokel had informed her, a large impressive Posting inn for such a sparsely inhabited part of the country.

Lady Athina was aware that there were no stately houses nearby where she might have found friends.

However, to have gone back to where she had come from would have been almost as far as going home.

She had been staying the night with an ancient aunt who had been on the verge of death for the last five years.

Athina was quite certain that she would last for at least another five before she finally arrived at the Heaven that she was convinced was waiting for her.

In the meantime she enjoyed more or less compelling her relatives to visit her.

When they arrived she tantalised them with promises of benefiting from her will and such promises were usually rescinded almost before they left.

As far as Athina herself was concerned, she wanted nothing from her aunt. However, she felt it was her duty to go when she received one of her plaintive letters starting,

“This may be the last time that I am able to invite you to visit me.”

Athina had enjoyed the drive.

She had been extremely firm when her chaperone, Mrs. Beckwith, had suggested accompanying her.

“You know long drives give you a headache,” she said, “and that Aunt Muriel will treat you as if you are dust beneath her feet. She has never had any time for what she always calls ‘superfluous additions to the household’ and that I am afraid, is the category that you come into.”

They both laughed.

“Well, I know that Gauntlet will look after you,” Mrs. Beckwith commented, “and you will be away for only the one night.”

“I will be back home in good time for dinner on Tuesday,” Athina promised.

She kissed Mrs. Beckwith affectionately and, when she left, she had waved to her as she went down the drive.

Athina’s father, the Earl of Murling, had died last year.

He had left his only child a large fortune, a large house and a large estate.

What relatives there were in the vicinity had, immediately after the funeral, asked Athina which of them she intended to reside with.

Alternatively whom she would wish to come to live with her as her chaperone.

“When I looked at their faces,” Athina related to Mrs. Beckwith, “I knew that what they were really thinking was how much money Papa had left me and that it must be kept in the family.”

“That was actually very sensible of them,” Mrs. Beckwith replied.

“Not at all,” Athina retorted. “It was just sheer greed. They were afraid that I would be pursued by endless fortune-hunters who would somehow contrive to get their hands on money that might otherwise have been theirs.”

“Now you are being cynical,” Mrs. Beckwith demurred. “You are too young, dearest, and far too beautiful to look at the world through anything except for rose-coloured glasses.”

During that time she taught Athina as if she was a Governess and her lessons had proved an enormous success.

Mrs. Beckwith was an extraordinarily clever Teacher and Athina enjoyed travelling with her in thought and imagination as she hoped one day to travel in reality.

Athina’s father had died just before she was eighteen and she was now a very well-educated and intelligent young woman.

The Earl had arranged for her to be presented at Court to Queen Victoria and to have her first Season in London.

But, as she was plunged immediately into deep mourning, it was obviously impossible that summer.

This year, however, the family had agitated her and arranged that she should go to London at the beginning of May.

This was now just about two weeks ahead and Athina was already wondering if she really wished to leave the beautiful countryside.

"I love being here when there are primroses in the hedgerows and daffodils in the Park," she told Mrs. Beckwith. "I cannot believe that anything in London could be any more entrancing."

"You know just as well as I do," Mrs. Beckwith replied, "that you have to meet charming young gentlemen, dance every night at a ball and fulfil your dear father's dream that you will be the 'Belle of the Season'."

Athina laughed.

"Papa wanted me to be that because it would be a compliment to him. He always behaved as if he had created me."

"Which, of course, he indeed had!" Mrs. Beckwith smiled. "If he was here now, I would certainly congratulate him!"

Athina laughed again.

"I have the uncomfortable feeling that both you and my Papa are going to be disappointed. What will happen is that the young men I meet will think I am a 'blue stocking' and avoid me like the plague!"

Mrs. Beckwith put her head on one side and contemplated her pupil.

"I have actually wondered about it myself," she confessed. "You must, Athina, be intelligent enough to let the man always know best, especially when he is wrong."

Athina threw up her hands.

"I refuse! I absolutely refuse! If they will say something stupid, as some of Papa's friends used to do, I shall just find it impossible not to correct them."

"In which case you will have to come back home and talk to the primroses and the daffodils," Mrs. Beckwith warned her.

"And, of course, you, dearest Becky," Athina then added. "I love talking to you and that reminds me that the new book on the Universe has just arrived and we must both read it tonight."

The library at Murling Park was already packed with new books and Athina was far more interested in them than in the clothes that she had been buying to take to London with her.

She had wanted to rent a house in Mayfair and stay there on her own with Mrs. Beckwith.

But there was such an outcry from her relations at the idea that she agreed instead to stay with one of her more amenable aunts.

This particular aunt of hers was married to one of the Gentlemen-in-Waiting at Buckingham Palace and so she had the right *entrée* to all the important functions there.

Mrs. Beckwith had agreed that she would stay in the country at Murling Park and Athina knew that she would miss her dreadfully.

She was still feeling rather dubious as to what she would find in the Social world.

How could it compare with the joy of owning the finest stables in the country?

There were her father's finest horses still stabled at Newmarket and it had been impossible while she was in mourning to attend Race Meetings or indeed any public gathering or any sort.

Queen Victoria had set the fashion for long-drawn-out and over-emphasised black mourning after she lost her most beloved Prince Albert in 1861.

Athina had therefore been confined to Murling Park and it had not troubled her in the slightest.

She missed her father so much, it would have been impossible for her not to do so.

But Mrs. Beckwith was an amusing and delightful companion.

The many horses, Athina often thought to herself, compensated for having no young men to talk to.

She looked so lovely as she rode off on some spirited stallion that she quickly had under her control that Mrs. Beckwith would watch her and sigh.

Athina was exquisite with her golden curls that had a touch of red in them.

Her grey eyes were unusual.

In fact she had a unique beauty that made her different from all other girls of her age.

It was, Mrs. Beckwith knew well, the reason why she had been Christened Athina after the Greek Goddess.

From the moment she was born she acquired a loveliness that few other babies had.

'I wonder what will happen to her?' Mrs. Beckwith asked herself as Athina trotted off down the drive, her sylph-like figure silhouetted against the darkness of the trees.

The way she rode reminded her of Diana the Huntress.

Now Athina drove her horses into a large courtyard of the Posting inn where there were several carriages of different styles parked at one end.

This meant that the horses had already been taken into the stables and their owners had gone into the inn.

"Don't forget that I am 'Mrs. Beckwith'," Athina warned Gauntlet as she drew the horses to a standstill. Gauntlet then opened the door of the chaise.

Athina stepped out and, as an ostler came hurrying towards them, she said,

"We have urgent need of a blacksmith as we have had an accident to a wheel. I hope that there is one available here or nearby."

"That 'e was just a few minutes ago," the ostler replied.

"Please fetch him quickly for me," Athina urged him.

The ostler hurried off and she turned and smiled at Gauntlet. Then she walked towards the entrance of the inn.

Inside the proprietor was standing inside the low-ceilinged hall and, having appraised the newcomer, he bowed politely to Athina.

"Can I be of help to you, ma'am," he asked.

"I have had an accident to a wheel of my chaise," Athina replied.

The proprietor looked at her quizzically as she went on.

"And so I am hoping that your blacksmith can mend it, but as it is now getting late I must stay the night"

"I'll be able to accommodate you, ma'am," the proprietor nodded.

"I would like your best bedroom," Athina said. "My luggage is at the back of the chaise and I also require a room for my groom."

"That'll be seen to immediately," the proprietor promised her.

He sent a porter scurrying to collect Athina's luggage and then an elderly housemaid in a mob cap was called to show her upstairs.

The stairs were of oak and uncarpeted but well-polished.

The bedroom Athina was shown into was comfortable although, of course, not luxurious. It was on the first floor, which indicated to her that

there was nothing better in the inn.

She told the maid that it would suit her and she would be staying for only one night.

“Are you busy at the moment?” Athina asked conversationally as they waited for the porter to bring up the luggage.

“We’ve a number of gentlemen stayin’ on their way ’ome from the Races, ma’am,” the maid replied, ‘but otherwise things be a bit dull around ’ere.”

The porter brought in Athina’s small trunk, which was all she had required for the one night stay with her aunt.

As the maid started to unpack for her, she took off her hat, which was somewhat dusty and changed her gown.

By the time she had washed and then brushed her hair, it was dark outside.

She knew, as there was no moon tonight, that it would have been impossible to drive home through the narrow lanes.

‘I am far safer here,’ she told herself, ‘for we might have had a more serious accident if we had continued on that terrible road.’

At the same time she knew that Mrs. Beckwith was expecting her and she would be worried when she did not arrive as she had said she would.

‘We will leave directly after breakfast,’ she decided, ‘and I will be home well before luncheon.’

She told the maid to call her at eight o’clock prompt, thanked her for helping her with her gown and then went downstairs.

The dining room was large and boasted a beamed ceiling like the hall and there was a large fire crackling in the grate.

It had been a cold spring and, although the days were beginning to be turn warmer, it was still chilly at night.

The proprietor was at the foot of the stairs as Athina descended and he waited for her.

“I’ve kept a table for you, ma’am,” he said, “’tis close to the fire and I hopes you’ll enjoy your dinner.”

“I am sure I shall,” Athina answered him.

She had remembered when the housemaid was not looking to slip a ring onto the third finger of her left hand. It was a pretty ring with three diamonds and had belonged to her mother.

By twisting it round so that the diamonds were on the inside of her hand, it looked like a Wedding ring.

The proprietor escorted her to the table that he had described and Athina was pleased to find that she was on her own in the dining room.

The rest of the tables were occupied at the other end of the room.

When she had ordered all that she wanted to eat, the proprietor hurried away to the kitchen.

She was then able to look round at her fellow guests.

At one table there were three elegantly dressed young men. They were laughing and joking with each other too loudly while apparently celebrating or anticipating a win at the Races.

At two of the other tables there were what Athina thought must be commercial travellers.

Then there was an elderly couple. The woman had a red shawl over her shoulders and she guessed that they were staying in the inn and were not just travellers.

She then started in her mind to make up stories about each of the guests as she often did when she saw strangers in the countryside and villages.

Then at the other side of the fireplace she saw that there was a man who was obviously a gentleman. And with him was a small boy.

She had not noticed them at first, but she was made aware of their presence when she could overhear the gentleman speaking sharply to the waiter.

He had apparently brought him a bottle of wine that was different from the one that he had ordered and the gentleman cursed the waiter for being stupid.

Looking at the gentleman without appearing to do so, she thought that he looked disagreeable and clearly bad-tempered. She suspected that he was also a heavy drinker.

The little boy with him was obviously very young and she made a guess that he was about nine years of age.

He had fair hair and seemed a rather delicate child and Athina thought that he also looked very tired.

She wondered where they were going and what their relationship was.

Her dinner arrived after only a short wait and she started to eat.

As she did so, she heard the gentleman start complaining about the food and sending away one dish because in his view the meat was cut too thickly.

She ruminated that, whoever he might be, her father would have disapproved of him.

“I dislike men who shout at waiters,” he had said to her once.

He himself had never shouted at his servants. If he rebuked them, it was in a cool quiet manner that was far more effective than if he had raged at them.

The gentleman, who obviously had ordered a large meal, was still complaining as Athina finished hers.

She felt that, while the food admittedly was not very exciting, it was edible and on the whole well cooked.

She had also been attended to without there being any long waits.

When she thanked the waiter for his excellent service, he said,

“It’s bin a pleasure waitin’ on you, ma’am.”

She smiled and left the dining room.

She could still hear the gentleman’s voice blasting away by the time she had reached the foot of the stairs.

A porter hurried to stop her before she went any further.

“Your groom, ma’am,” he said, “as told me to tell you that the wheels of your chaise ’as now bin repaired.”

“Thank you,” Athina replied.

Once in her bedroom she undressed and then found that she was unexpectedly tired.

Listening to her aunt saying the same things over and over again that she had heard so often before was always exhausting.

They had also come quite a long distance to where they were now.

‘I should sleep well,’ Athina told herself.

She said her prayers and as she said them she felt, as she always did, that her father was close to her.

Also her beloved mother, whom she had adored and who had died two years previously.

They had both been, she recalled, charming and delightful people.

The sad thing was that they did not get on and did not even like each other.