

Molly Elliot Seawell



*The Loves
of the Lady
Arabella*

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'Tis not in my nature to be cowed by any woman whatever. Therefore, when I found myself in the presence of my Lady Hawkshaw, in her Chinese drawing-room, with her great black eyes glaring at me, and her huge black plume of feathers nodding at me, as she sat, enveloped in a vast black velvet robe like a pall, I said to myself, "After all, she is but a woman." So I stared back at her with all the coolness in the world—and I was a seeker after favor, too—and but fourteen years of age, and had only seven and sixpence in my pocket. The tall footman who stood behind Lady Hawkshaw's chair made a grimace at me; and I responded by a fierce look, as if I were about to run him through the body.

"Jeames," said her ladyship, "go and make my compliments to Sir Peter Hawkshaw, and say to him that his roistering kept me awake half the night, and consequently I feel very ill this morning; and that his great-nephew, Master Richard Glyn from America, is come after a midshipman's warrant in his Majesty's navy,—and I desire Sir Peter to attend me in my *bowdwor* immediately."

Her ladyship's French was the queerest imaginable,—yet in her youth she had the French tutor who had taught the daughters of the Regent of France.

There was a silence after the tall footman left, during which my lady and I eyed each other closely. I remembered having heard that she had defied her father, Lord

Bosanquet, and one of the greatest family connections in the kingdom, in order to marry Sir Peter, who was then a penniless lieutenant in his Majesty's navy and the son of a drysalter in the city. This same drysalter was my great-grandfather; but I had an infusion of another blood through my mother, God bless her!—who was of a high family and a baronet's daughter. The drysalter strain was honest, but plebeian, while the baronet strain was rather more lofty than honest, I fancy.



“Here is your nephew Tom’s brat.” Page 3

Having heard, as I say, of the desperate struggle it cost Lady Hawkshaw to marry her lieutenant, I somewhat expected to find her and Admiral Sir Peter Hawkshaw living like doves in a cage, and was disconcerted at the message her ladyship sent her lord. But I was still more disconcerted when Sir Peter, a short, stout man, with a choleric eye, presently bounced into the room.

“Sir Peter,” said her ladyship, “here is your nephew Tom’s brat, who wants a midshipman’s warrant.”

Sir Peter stopped short, looked me over,—I was tall for my age,—and grinned savagely. I thought it was all up with me and was almost ready to haul down my flag.

“And Sir Peter,” screamed her ladyship, “he must have it!”

“Hang me, my lady!” snapped Sir Peter, “but when did you take such an interest in my nephew Tom’s brat?”

“This very hour,” replied Lady Hawkshaw tartly, and tossing her black plumes haughtily. “You behaved like a wretch to the boy after the death of his father and mother in America; and God has given you the chance to make amends, and I say he shall have his warrant.”

“Zounds, Madam!” bawled Sir Peter; “since you take the liberty of disposing of my warrants, I presume you are the holder of my commission as Vice-Admiral of the White in his Majesty’s service. Let me know it if you are—let me know it, I say!”

“Stuff!” responded my lady, to which Sir Peter answered something that sounded like “Damme!” and then my attention was distracted from this matrimonial engagement by the silent entrance of two young girls. One of them was

about twelve years of age. She had dove-like eyes, and her dark lashes kissed her cheek. She came and stood familiarly by Lady Hawkshaw's chair; and the gentle affectionateness of her manner toward that redoubtable person amazed me at the time. This was my first sight of Daphne Carmichael; and when she fixed her soft, childish glance upon me, it was like the sight of stars on a cloudy night. But the other one, a tall girl of sixteen or thereabouts, dazzled me so that I am obliged to confess I had no more eyes for Daphne. This older girl was the Lady Arabella Stormont, and was then and always by far the handsomest creature I ever beheld. I shall not attempt to describe her. I will only say that her brilliant face, with such a complexion as I never saw before or since, showed a haughty indifference toward the shabby boy over whom Sir Peter and Lady Hawkshaw were squabbling, and the sense of my shabbiness and helplessness pierced my heart under Lady Arabella's calmly scornful gaze.

Both of these young girls were the great-nieces of Sir Peter Hawkshaw, but not on the drysalter's side, so they were no blood-relation to me. Sir Peter was their guardian, and Lady Hawkshaw had charge of them, and was most kind and devoted to them in her way. I soon found out that every one of Sir Peter's family had a good friend in Lady Hawkshaw; and I may as well say here that for true devotion and incessant wrangling, I never saw a married pair that equaled Sir Peter and Lady Hawkshaw.

The discussion between them concerning me grew hotter, and I grew as hot as the discussion, in thinking what a figure I was making before that divinely beautiful Lady Arabella. I had clean forgotten Daphne. Lady Hawkshaw

lugged in a great variety of extraneous matter, reminding Sir Peter of certain awful predictions concerning his future which had been made by the last chaplain who sailed with him. Sir Peter denounced the chaplain as a sniveling dog. Lady Hawkshaw indulged in some French, at which Lady Arabella laughed behind her hand.

The battle royal lasted some time longer, but Lady Hawkshaw's metal was plainly heavier than Sir Peter's; and it ended by Sir Peter's saying to me angrily:

"Very well, sir, to oblige my lady I will give you the remaining midshipman's berth on the *Ajax*, seventy-four. You may go home now, but show yourself aboard the *Ajax* at Portsmouth, before twelve o'clock on this day week, and be very careful to mind your eye."

I had nerved myself to hear with coolness the refusal of this fiery admiral; but his real kindness, disguised under so much of choler, overcame me. I stammered something and stopped,—that hound of a footman was grinning at me, because my eyes were full of tears, and also, perhaps, because my coat was of cheap make, and my shoes needed attention. But at that moment little Daphne, with the greatest artlessness, came up and slipped her little hand into mine, saying:

"He means he is very much obliged to you, uncle, and to you, dear aunt."

I do not know how I got out of the house, but the next thing I knew I was standing on the street outside. I had been told to go home. I had no home now unless the Bull-in-the-Bush tavern be one. But I did not return to the Bull-in-the-Bush, whose tawdry splendors revolted me now, after I had

seen Sir Peter Hawkshaw's imposing house, as much as they had before attracted me. I was tingling with the sense of beauty newly developed in me. I could not forget that exquisite vision of Lady Arabella Stormont, who seemed to my boyish mind more like a white rose-bush in full flower than anything I could call to memory. I made my way instead to the plain, though clean lodgings, where I had spent the years since my parents' death, with good Betty Green, the widow of Corporal Green, late of my father's regiment.

These two excellent but humble creatures had brought me, an orphan, home from my birthplace, America, consigned to Sir Peter and Lady Hawkshaw. This woman, Betty Green, had been my mother's devoted servant, as her husband had been my father's, and it was thought perfectly safe to send me home with them. But there was a danger which no one foresaw. Betty was one of those strange women who love like a lioness. This lioness' love she felt for me; and for that reason, I believe, she deliberately planned to prevent my family from ever getting hold of me. It is true, on landing in England, her husband's regiment being ordered to Winchester, she went to see Sir Peter Hawkshaw and, I suspect, purposely made him so angry that, Lady Hawkshaw being absent, he almost kicked Betty Green out of the house. That is what I fancy my lady meant when she reproached Sir Peter with cruelty to me. I well remember the air of triumph with which Betty returned and told the corporal of her ill success; then, clasping me in her arms, she burst out with a cry that no admiral nor ladies nor lords neither should take her darling boy away from her. Green,

her husband, being a steady, cool-headed fellow, waited until the paroxysm was over, when he told her plainly that she must carry out my parents' instructions, and he himself would go to see Sir Peter as soon as he could. But Fate disposed of this plan by cutting short the corporal's life the next week, most unexpectedly. Then this woman, Betty Green,—illiterate, a stranger in England, and supporting us both by her daily labor,—managed to foil all of the efforts of Admiral Sir Peter Hawkshaw to find me; for he had done all he could to discover the whereabouts of his nephew's orphan. 'Tis not for me to say one word against Betty Green, for she slaved for me as only a woman can slave, and, besides, brought me up in the habits and manners of a gentleman, albeit she did little for my education, and to this day I am prone to be embarrassed when I have a pen in my hand. I can not say that I was happy in the devoted, though savage love she lavished upon me. She would not allow me to play with the boys of her own class, and those of my class I never saw. All my clamorings to know something about my family on either side were met by her declaring that she had forgotten where my mother's people lived; and as for Sir Peter, she gave me such a horrifying account of him that I never dreamed it possible to receive any kindness from him. At last, though, on her death-bed, she acknowledged a part of the deception her desperate affection had impelled her to play upon me. The poor soul had actually forgotten about my mother's family, and had destroyed everything relating to them, but directed me to go to Sir Peter; and thus it was that, on the day after I saw Betty Green, my only friend on earth, laid in a pauper's grave, I went to the house of my

father's uncle, with the result narrated. When I got back to the humble lodgings where I had lived before Betty's death, I looked up a small box of trinkets of little value which had belonged to my mother, and from the sale of them I got enough to live upon for a week, and to make my way to Portsmouth at the end of it. Either Sir Peter had forgotten to tell me anything about my outfit, or else I had slipped out so quickly—galled by the fear of weeping before that rascally footman—that he had no chance. At all events, I arrived at Portsmouth by the mail-coach, with all of my belongings in one shabby portmanteau.

I shall not describe my feelings during that journey toward the new life that awaited me. In fact, I scarcely recall them coherently; all was a maze, a jumble, and an uproar in my mind.

We got down in the inn yard,—a coach full of passengers,—I the only one who seemed adrift and alone among them. I stood looking about me—at a pert chambermaid who impudently ogled the hostlers and got a kiss in return; at the pretentious entrance to the inn; at all of the bustle and confusion of the arrival of the coach. Presently I saw a young gentleman somewhat older than myself, and wearing the uniform of his Majesty's sea-service, come out of the inn door. He had a very elegant figure, but his face was rather plain. Within five minutes of my first meeting with Giles Vernon, I had an example of what was one of his most striking traits—every woman in sight immediately fixed her attention on him and smiled at him. One was the chambermaid, who left off ogling the hostlers and gaped at this young officer with her coarse, handsome face all

aflame; another was the landlady, who followed him to the door, smirking and fanning herself; and the third was a venerable Quakeress, who was about entering the inn, and who beamed benevolently on him as he bowed gallantly in passing. I know not why this should have made such an impression on me; but being young and a fool, I thought beauty was as highly prized by women as by men, and it surprised me that a fellow with a mouth so wide and with something dangerously near a squint should be such a lady-killer. It was common enough for young gentlemen holding midshipmen's warrants to come down by the coach, and as soon as he saw me this young officer called out:

"Halloo, my hearty! Is it a ship of the line or a frigate you are booked for? Or is it one of those damned gun-brigs which are unfit for a gentleman to serve in?"

Now, the peculiar circumstances of my bringing-up had given me a ridiculous haughtiness,—for Betty Green had never ceased to implore me to remember my quality,—so I replied to this offhand speech in kind.

"A ship of the line," said I. "Damme, do you think I'd serve in a gun-brig?"

He came up a little closer to me, looked at me attentively, and said,—

"It's an infant Rodney, sure. Was not Americus Vespuccius your grandfather? And was not your grandmother in love with Noah when he was oakum boy at the Portsmouth docks?"

I considered this very offensive and, drawing myself up, said,—

“My grandfather was a baronet, and my grand-uncle is Admiral Sir Peter Hawkshaw, whose flagship, as you may know, is the *Ajax*, seventy-four.”

“I know him well,” responded my new acquaintance. “We were drunk together this night week. He bears for arms Lot’s wife after she was turned into a pillar of salt, with the device, ‘I thirst’.”

This was an allusion to the drysalter. For I soon found that the young gentlemen in the cockpit were intimately acquainted with all of the antecedents, glorious or otherwise, of their superior officers.

The lie in the early part of this sentence was patent to me, but so great was the power to charm of this squinting, wide-mouthed fellow, that I felt myself drawn to him irresistibly, and something in my countenance showed it, for he linked his arm through mine and began again,—

“I know your great-aunt, too, Polly Hawkshaw. Dreadful old girl. I hear she can tack ship as well as the admiral; knows to a shilling what his mess bill is, and teaches him trigonometry when he is on leave.”

This was, of course, a vilification, and Lady Hawkshaw’s name was not Polly, but Apollonia; but I blush to say I spoke not one word in defense of either her or her name. It occurred to me that my new friend was a person who could give me much information about my outfit and uniforms, and I candidly stated my case to him.

“Come on,” he cried. “There’s a rascal of a haberdasher here who lives off his Majesty’s officers, and I’ll take you there and fit you out; for Sir Peter’s the man to have his young officers smart. A friend of mine—poor fellow!—

happened to be caught in mufti in the *Ajax* the other day, and Sir Peter had all hands turned up for an execution. My unhappy friend begged that he might be shot instead of hanged, and Sir Peter, I'll admit, granted him the favor. The poor fellow tied the handkerchief over his eyes himself, forgave all his enemies, and asked his friends to pay his debts. Zounds, 'twas the most affecting scene I ever witnessed."

I plainly perceived that my companion was talking to frighten me, and showed it by thrusting my tongue into my cheek, which caused him to burst out laughing. He presently became grave, however, and assured me solemnly that a sea-officer had his choice of dressing handsomely, or being court-martialed and shot. "For," said he, "the one hundred and forty-fourth regulation of the service reads, 'All of his Majesty's sea-officers are commanded to marry heiresses, and in these cases, the usual penalties for the abduction of heiresses are remitted'. Now, how can we abduct heiresses, or even get them to look at us, without fine clothes? Women, my boy, are caught by the eye alone—and I know 'em, by Gad!"

This trifling speech remained in my memory, and the day came when I recalled the idle talk of us two laughing midshipmen as prophetic.

We went together to a shop, where, under his direction and that of an oily-tongued shopman, I ordered one of the handsomest outfits any midshipman could possibly have, including two dozen of silk stockings, as my new-found friend informed me that every man on board his Majesty's ships, from the admiral down to the jack-o'-the-dust, always

wore silk stockings, because in the event of being struck by a ball or a pike or a cutlass in action, the danger from inflammation was much less with silk than with cotton or wool.

All went swimmingly, until it was time to pay for the things. Then, I acknowledge, I was at a loss. The shopman, suddenly changing his tone, cried out to my companion,—

“Mr. Giles Vernon, I remember the last reefer you brought here bought near a boatload and paid with the foresail, as you gentlemen of the sea call it. I will not be done this time, I assure you.”

At this, Giles Vernon promptly drew his sword, which did not disturb the shopman in the least, as I found out afterward; young gentlemen of Giles’ age and rank, in Portsmouth, drew their swords whenever they could not draw their purses. But I was very unhappy, not on Giles’ account, but on that of the poor shopman, whom I expected to see weltering in his blood. After a wordy war, Giles left the shop, taking me with him, and menacing the shopman, in case the purchases I had ordered did not come aboard the *Ajax* that night.

I thought it wise to suggest that I should now go aboard, as it was well on to three o’clock. Giles agreed with me. I had forgotten to ask him what ship he was attached to, but it suddenly occurred to me that he, too, might be in the *Ajax*, and I asked him. Imagine my delight when he said yes.

“But if the admiral does not behave himself better,” he added, “and if the captain does not ask me to dinner oftener than he has been doing lately, I shall prefer charges against both of them. I have been assured by the lords in admiralty

that any request of mine will be regarded as an order by them, and I shall request that Admiral Hawkshaw and Captain Guilford be relieved of their commands.”

By that time we had reached the water and there, stepping into a splendid, eight-oared barge, I saw Sir Peter Hawkshaw. He caught sight of us at the same moment, and the change in Giles Vernon’s manner was what might have been expected. He was even more modest and deferential than I, as we advanced.

“Here you are!” pleasantly cried the admiral to me. “You ran away so fast t’other day, that I had no chance to give you any directions, and I scarcely expected you to turn up to-day. However, I shall now take you to the ship. Mr. Vernon, I have room for you.”

“Thank you, sir,” responded Giles very gratefully, “but I have a pressing engagement on shore—a matter of important business—” at which I saw the suspicion of a grin on the admiral’s homely old face. He said little to me until we were in the great cabin of the *Ajax*. For myself, I can only say that I was so awed by the beauty, the majesty, the splendor of one of the finest ships of the line in the world, that I was dumb with delight and amazement. Once in the cabin, the admiral asked me about my means and my outfit. I burst out with the whole story of what occurred in the haberdasher’s shop, at which Sir Peter looked very solemn, and lectured me upon the recklessness of my conduct in ordering things with no money to pay for them, and followed it up with an offer to fit me out handsomely. This I accepted with the utmost gratitude, and in a day or two I found

myself established as one of his Majesty's midshipmen in the cockpit of the *Ajax*, and I began to see life.