

# Barbara Cartland

49



## Who Can Deny Love?

the Barbara Cartland Eternal Collection

*[www.barbaracartland.com](http://www.barbaracartland.com)*

## *Who Can Deny Love?*

The Marquis put his arm around her, kissing her passionately, possessively, until she turned her face away,

“I will not frighten you,” he said, imploring, “but, my darling, you are not only divine and ethereal, but also human. Let me take you away – find a house – we will be alone!”

He kissed her once again and departed.

It was then she gave a cry that seemed to come from the very depths of her being.

“I love him,” she sobbed. “I love him. But – I am not a – I cannot do – what he asks!”

## *Author's Note*

Works of Art have been forged for centuries – usually the imitation being for profit.

Albrecht Dürer was obliged to obtain an Imperial decree declaring the imitation of his woodcuts and engravings a criminal offence. The art of faking has flourished since the Rococo period, when petty Princes and newly created Nobles employed the forgers because they wished to display famous works of art.

Today the demands of American and Arab millionaires are so enormous that even the long-established centres of 'faking', such as Paris, Rome, Florence, Vienna and Madrid, find it almost impossible to keep up with the demand.

The most famous modern forgers were Hans van Meegeren, who admitted to painting the Vermeers that were 'discovered' between 1935 and 1945 and the sculptor Alceo Dossena, who in 1927 voluntarily disclosed the secret of his forgeries.

Both these men produced such magnificent fakes that their work may be regarded as something much more significant than mere fraud.

# Chapter One

## 1802

The Marquis of Fane drove his superfine horses down St. James's Street, conscious that his enemies and many of his friends were watching him with envious eyes.

It was not only because of his horses that the Marquis aroused envy, jealousy and other violent emotions in people's hearts.

He was too good at everything to be anything but a controversial figure and it was not surprising that he had a bad, positively raffish reputation even amongst those who circulated round the Prince of Wales.

As a sportsman the Marquis commanded the respect of the sporting world, but he also infuriated those who competed against him in horse-raising, because he was so cocksure of being the winner that they felt it was almost unfair that he should pass them at every winning post.

In other types of sport, especially where it concerned the 'fair sex', inevitably the Marquis captured the most beautiful women from under the noses of friend and foe alike.

He was reputed to have left more broken hearts behind him than any beau in the last century.

His conquests at times annoyed even the Prince of Wales.

"I cannot understand what they see in you, Fane," he had remarked disagreeably only a week ago.

This was when he learnt that a dancer who had caught his eye on the stage at Covent Garden was already under the Marquis's protection.

His Royal Highness did not expect a reply to his question, because the answer was obvious.

The Marquis was not only extremely handsome but extraordinarily wealthy and possessed houses containing treasures that his family had accumulated since the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

That he was also self-sufficient, cynical and declared openly that he had never been in love proved an irresistible challenge to women.

“There is no female born who does not wish to reform a rake,” one of the older members at White’s Club had said the previous evening, “but where Fane is concerned they might as well try to stop a forest fire with a bucket of water!”

This remark was evoked by the news that Lady Isabel Chatley had left London owing, the newspapers said, to ‘*an indisposition which obliged her to rest in the country air*’.

Everyone was well aware that neither the country nor any other sort of air was likely to cure the broken heart she had suffered at the hands of the Marquis of Fane.

He had grown bored with her when the Court returned to London at the beginning of April.

By the end of the month everyone knew of her feelings and his indifference, and had listened to her continual cry that she wished she was dead.

That she had given up the chase and retired to the country was a relief to those who were bored by her complaints. At the same time they all agreed that the Marquis had as usual behaved badly.

He might have guessed before he started his flirtation, if that was what it was, that Lady Isabel was the clinging sort’.

“It is no excuse that she is a damned good-looking woman!” another Club member said ruminatively. “All Fane’s women are that. It is just that he is so insensitive to other people’s feelings that he has no idea of the painful consequence of his interest, which never lasts long.”

Those listening to the two old gentlemen found themselves wishing that their ‘interest’ in women brought them even half the results that the Marquis achieved so easily.

It seemed to those who were sipping their brandy and considering how they should spend their evening that the Marquis had much more fun out of life than they did.

That was a thought that was galling to say the least of it.

The Marquis, with an expertise which was as remarkable as everything else he did, turned his horses at the end of St. James’s Street towards Carlton

House.

Actually he was thinking it was rather a bore that the Prince had sent for him when he had intended on returning to his house in Berkeley Square to change for his dinner engagement with Lady Abbott.

She had commanded his attention last night at Devonshire House because the gown she wore was so transparent that when she entered the room he had, for one startled moment, thought that she was completely naked.

He must have met Lady Abbott on a number of previous occasions, but he had never before noticed that her figure was outstanding until the transparency of her gown had been brought so forcibly to his notice.

It was then that he decided she was worth more than a casual glance and there was no doubt that the lady in question was only too willing.

Her dark hair and slanting green eyes reminded him of a panther and he found when he talked with her in the garden that she could flirt provocatively and with the land of sophistication that he always found amusing.

Like the Prince the Marquis preferred women who were well versed in the art of love and the ways of the world.

Although anxious mothers scuttled their offspring away at his approach as if even by looking at him they might become contaminated, young girls in fact were perfectly safe from him. The Marquis was not even aware of their existence.

When his relatives were brave enough occasionally to suggest to him that it was time he married and had an heir, he set them down abruptly.

Equally he thought to himself that if he did marry it would have to be a widow who understood the Social world in which he moved and, what was more important, understood his need to be constantly amused and entertained.

There was nothing the Marquis dreaded more than boredom and he took care that he was seldom in either the company or the situation where he might conceivably be bored even for a few minutes.

When he was racing, boxing, watching a mill or hunting, the activity stimulated him. Similarly, he found himself entertained when the pursuit of some attractive prey was difficult or prolonged.

The trouble where women were concerned was that they fell far too easily into his arms almost before he held them out.

Although he looked forward to spending the evening with Lady Abbott, he had the uncomfortable feeling that it would end predictably like every other evening when he found a woman desirable and she capitulated all too soon.

He drew up outside the fine Corinthian portico added to Carlton House by Henry Holland.

The house was still far from finished, but was already acclaimed as a triumphant success by those who supported the Prince and stigmatised as a costly failure by those who did not.

It was well known that the Prince's debts were rising towards half-a-million pounds, a great deal of which had been incurred in rebuilding and redecorating the sumptuous Palace, which, it had been averred, 'had no spot without some finery upon it, gold upon gold'.

Others said openly that it was vulgar in its opulence.

The Marquis appreciated that the Prince had outstandingly good taste and, although His Royal Highness spent a great deal of money he did not possess, he was quite certain that posterity would believe it to be justified.

As he walked into the splendid hall, decorated with Ionic columns of brown Siena marble, which led to an octagon and graceful double staircase, he thought, as he had thought before, that the Prince possessed an artistic sense for which the public never gave him credit.

Because the Prince had a Cosmopolitan mind and education, he had sent his friends and agents to France, whenever the exigencies of the revolution and the subsequent wars allowed it, to buy furniture and *objets d'art*.

They had brought back paintings, clocks, looking-glasses, bronzes, Sèvres china, and tapestries and now at last they had a setting worthy of them.

As the Marquis walked up the stairs without hurrying, he knew that with the help of the sales rooms and dealers in London, the Prince had accumulated the most comprehensive collection of works of art ever assembled by an Englishman, let alone by a future Monarch.

The Marquis had, in fact, helped to find and improve the collection with paintings by Pater Greuze, Le Nain and Claude, which the Prince had hung in his new rooms in a manner that commended itself to any art lover.

The extraordinary thing was that amongst the men with whom the Prince surrounded himself, many of whom were very intelligent, few had the

same appreciation of art as the Marquis.

This was because in his own houses he had inherited paintings and treasures that compared very favourably with those that the Prince was accumulating.

He was also aware that the Queen had said angrily,

“The Marquis of Fane encourages George to spend money simply by flaunting his own possessions in front of him.”

This was not quite true.

The Marquis could not help it if the Prince of Wales, whenever he stayed at Fane Park in Hertfordshire or visited Fane House in Berkeley Square, felt he must ‘go one better’ than his friend.

The Prince was waiting for him in the drawing room decorated in the Chinese style that many people of cultured taste in England had admired since the 1750s.

The Prince had become enamoured of it after he had seen the Temples and Pagodas which Sir William Chambers, a leading architect at the time, had built at Kew for his grandmother.

He had actually sent an agent to China to buy furniture for this room, for which it was said the bill amounted to six thousand eight hundred pounds, including four hundred pounds for lanterns alone.

This evening, however, the Prince was not interested in the decorations of this room, but in a painting standing on the floor propped against one of the sofas, which he had been contemplating when the Marquis was announced.

He looked up excitedly, saying,

“There you are, Virgo! And a devil of a time you’ve been getting here!”

“Forgive me, Sire,” the Marquis apologised casually. “I was not at home when your message arrived, but immediately I returned I obeyed your request.”

‘Well, you are here and that’s all that matters,’ the Prince said quickly. “Come and look at this!”

The Marquis moved across the room with an expression of slight annoyance on his face because he had, from the urgent wording of the Prince’s note, expected something more interesting and dramatic than yet another painting.



He was flattered that his opinion was usually asked before the Prince bought anything in the art world. At the same time he was regretting that he had not waited to bathe and change first and then he could have gone straight from Carlton House to Lady Abbott.

The painting was a large one and, he noted, in extremely good condition.

Many of the Prince's purchases were black with age and dirty and, on being cleaned, did not justify the excitement His Royal Highness felt about them.

This, however, was clearly a fine painting and, after he had looked at it for one moment, the Marquis said, drawing the words slowly,

"It appears to be a Van Dyck."

"That is what it purports to be," the Prince said. "Look more closely, Virgo. Do you not notice anything?"

A note of excitement in the Prince's voice made the Marquis concentrate on the painting more closely than he had done before.

He saw that the robes the Madonna was wearing of red and dark blue were very much in the Van Dyck style and the exquisitely drawn hands bore unmistakably the artist's trademark.

The Holy Child, rosy and fat, was particularly brilliantly executed and, like many of his paintings, showed a striking psychological insight.

Then he looked at the face of the Madonna and there was suddenly an expression of surprise in his eyes.

The Prince, who was watching him, smiled delightedly.

"You notice it? I knew you would. It struck me the moment I saw the painting."

"It is certainly very similar," the Marquis murmured.

"There is no question about it," the Prince said. "Look for yourself."

He pulled from behind the sofa another painting, which had been hidden there, and turned it round to place it beside the Van Dyck.

It was a painting also of the Madonna, which he and the Marquis had thought to be an exceptional find the previous year.

Stephan Lochner's paintings were to be found on the Continent, but none were known in England. However, the Prince had been able to buy one of his 'fair and gentle' Madonnas, a delicate, dreamy figure, the contours of which seemed almost to melt into her surroundings.

It had been expensive because his paintings were so rare and the dealer, who had bought it for the Prince, had been able to tell him little of its history except that it had come from a private collection.

The Prince had been in ecstasy over the painting, referring to it continually with a kind of lyricism.

But the Marquis had understood why the Lochner Madonna moved him so much, because he himself felt the same about it.

He was certainly not sentimental as the Prince was and yet, when he was looking at it, it evoked an emotion that made him feel that he was listening to a Mediaeval love ballad sung to the music of a spinet.

“Damn!” he had ejaculated later when he was alone. “I wish I had found that painting myself!”

He had, in fact, found it irresistible and he seldom visited Carlton House, as he invariably did several times a week, without walking into the music room to look at the painting, which they had discovered was called *The Virgin of the Lilies*.

This had been inscribed in small but elegant writing on the back of the frame and, while they thought it must have been added much later, the name had remained in the Marquis’s mind.

Now, incredibly, so that he felt his eyes must be deceiving him, there was the same face portrayed by Van Dyck.

The composition was, of course, very different and Van Dyck’s painting was not so ethereal or so delicate, but there was no doubt that, seen side by side, the faces of the two Madonnas were identical.

The same large eyes, the same little straight nose, the perfectly curved lips and the same rapt expression, almost one of ecstasy, as if some of the glory of Heaven was within her.

“It’s extraordinary!” the Marquis exclaimed at length.

“That is exactly what I thought,” the Prince remarked, “and yet how could it have happened, unless Van Dyck copied Lochner?”

“That is very unlikely,” the Marquis replied. “From all we know about him, he was far too proud to think of copying another artist and he always used models for his paintings.”

“It would be impossible for him to use the same model as Lochner,” the Prince suggested.

The Marquis nodded, knowing that when the Councillors of Cologne some seventy years after Lochner's death had proudly shown his *Adoration of the Kings* to Albrecht Dürer, a visiting celebrity, they could tell him nothing more about the artist except that he had come from Meersburg on Lake Constance and had died in the poorhouse.

It had been generally accepted, however, that his death occurred sometime between 1451 and 1460.

As if he knew exactly what the Marquis was thinking, the Prince said,

"Van Dyck was born in 1599 and died in London in 1641."

"Then he must have copied the Lochner painting when he was abroad."

"I suppose so," the Prince said, "but it is very strange, since none of his other paintings portrays a face anything like this one nor do they have such a delicate spiritual quality."

"That is true," the Marquis agreed. "I suppose it is genuine?"

"Isaacs, who brought it to me, assured me that it is one of the best Van Dycks he has ever seen."

"Isaacs was selling it!" the Marquis remarked cynically.

He thought for a moment and then he added,

"It was Isaacs who brought you the Lochner."

"Yes, of course," the Prince replied. "I realised that."

"I am just wondering," the Marquis said, "whether in fact we are being deceived."

"If we are, then the painter is a genius in his own right," the Prince answered. "Look at the folds of that robe. Look at the texture of the child's skin. It is exactly in the Van Dyck tradition."

The Marquis, however, was looking at the Lochner, realising that there were other similarities besides the face, which a less experienced critic would not have noticed.

The robe in *The Virgin of the Lilies* was very different from that in Van Dyck's painting of the Madonna and yet, because he was so knowledgeable about art, the Marquis thought that there were certain brush strokes that were identical in the two paintings and something else too, which he could not put a name to.

He studied both works for a little while and knew that his instinct, which he had always trusted, told him there was something suspicious about both

the paintings.

He knew the Prince was waiting for him to speak and at last with a sigh he remarked,

“Strange, very strange – and for the moment I cannot find an explanation. I’ll tell you what I will do, Sire. I will try to find out a little more about where Isaacs obtained these paintings.”

“That’s a good idea!”

“Have you bought much from him before?”

“Only the Lochner,” the Prince replied. “He brought me two or three portraits which were not outstanding, so I did not even bother to show them to you. Then, as you know, we were both captivated by the Lochner.”

His Royal Highness paused before he added,

“I paid more for it than I should have, but I still consider it was worth it.”

“So do I,” the Marquis agreed.

There was a faint smile on his lips as he remembered that, while the Prince fixed the price, the Marquis paid the bill.

“Now let me think,” the Prince said, putting his hand to his head. “Last year Isaacs brought me an El Greco which was too damaged to be interesting and a rather indifferent Van Dyck which I also refused.”

“I remember that one. Anything else?”

“No, I think that is all, until he called today with this Van Dyck.”

“It’s certainly a very fine painting,” the Marquis said. “But if you take my advice, Sire, you will say nothing about its resemblance to the Lochner until I have found out all I can about it.”

“I will leave everything to you, Virgo,” the Prince said. “You know I trust your judgement completely in anything that concerns art.”

The Marquis accepted this compliment as his right and did not dispute the Prince’s good judgement.

Instead he said,

“You have certainly aroused my interest, Sire, and I assure you I shall start work immediately in trying to discover where Isaacs obtained both these paintings. Now I think we were somewhat remiss in allowing him to be so vague about the Lochner.”

“You are right! Of course you are right!” the Prince agreed.

He gave an almost boyish smile as he said,

“I think we were both so delighted with it that we were eager to have it at any price without asking too many questions.”

“It did cross my mind that it might be stolen,” the Marquis said.

“And mine!” the Prince ejaculated.

“Now, if you will excuse me, Sire – ” the Marquis began, only to be interrupted as the Prince cried,

“You are not leaving, Virgo? If you are, come back and dine with me. I want to go on talking about paintings and a great many other subjects of mutual interest.”

He was obviously disappointed. He often found it difficult to persuade the Marquis to be his guest, although he enjoyed his company perhaps more than any of his other friends.

“There is nothing I would have liked more, Sire, had I known about it earlier, but you will understand that it would be extremely rude if I cancelled my dinner engagement at the very last moment.”

The Prince smiled.

“I can guess that you are dining with some ‘fair charmer’.

His eyes twinkled as he wagged his finger at the Marquis.

“Be careful, Virgo! You know as well as I do that your reputation is as bad as mine, if not worse, and we cannot afford to add to our list of crimes!”

The Marquis smiled.

“Whatever we do or do not do, Sire, there will be endless people to talk about us, to exaggerate our every action, and if that fails, to invent what they do not know.”

The Marquis made an expressive gesture with his hands as he continued,

“Personally, if I have to be verbally hanged, I prefer to have had the pleasure of committing the crime in question!”

The Prince threw back his head and laughed.

“That’s good, Virgo, and very reassuring. I feel the same, so we will walk to the gallows together. Let’s hope that we will find that exercise worthwhile.”

“I think that is likely, Sire,” the Marquis replied, “and yet so often one is disillusioned.”

“My dear Virgo,” the Prince said, “you must not become a cynic – ”

“I am certainly not that where paintings and horses are concerned,” the Marquis answered.

“Only with women,” the Prince parried, then he added,

“Don’t give up hope. Perhaps one day we shall find *The Virgin of the Lilies* and she will be as lovely as Lochner portrayed her.”

“I have a feeling that that would be impossible,” the Marquis remarked. “At the same time it does not cost anything to go on hoping.”

Again the Prince laughed and the Marquis made his farewells and walked down the stairs.

As he was driving up St. James’s Street on his way home, he found himself quite unexpectedly regretting that he had not accepted the Prince’s invitation to stay and dine at Carlton House.

The conversation would be amusing, as it always was and the food and wine excellent, but that was not the reason.

It was because quite suddenly the slanting green eyes of Lady Abbott did not, in retrospect, seem so attractive as they had earlier in the day.

Intruding on his memory of her Ladyship’s face was the delicacy of the Madonna in *The Virgin of the Lilies*.

Her eyes, dreamy and wistful, looked out on the world as if they saw an enchantment that was part of herself and seemed to emanate from the grace of her figure, holding a bunch of lilies in her arms and surrounded by them.

Her hair was fair and drawn back beneath the conventional crown, not one of jewels but of flowers and there were at the corners of the painting small angels with pointed wings peeping down at her.

It was a face that the Marquis could not erase from his mind and there was an expression in her eyes which he had not only never seen in any other painting but certainly in no living woman.

‘If only I had known her,’ he found himself thinking.

Then, as he turned his horses from Piccadilly into Berkeley Square, he told himself that he was being ridiculous and becoming obsessed with a painting in a manner that he would have found laughable in any of his contemporaries.

Lady Abbott would doubtless be amusing, as he expected and, if she at least put up a few defences and a little opposition to his advances, the evening would not be wasted.

He hoped the inevitable conquest would not be too easy or too soon.