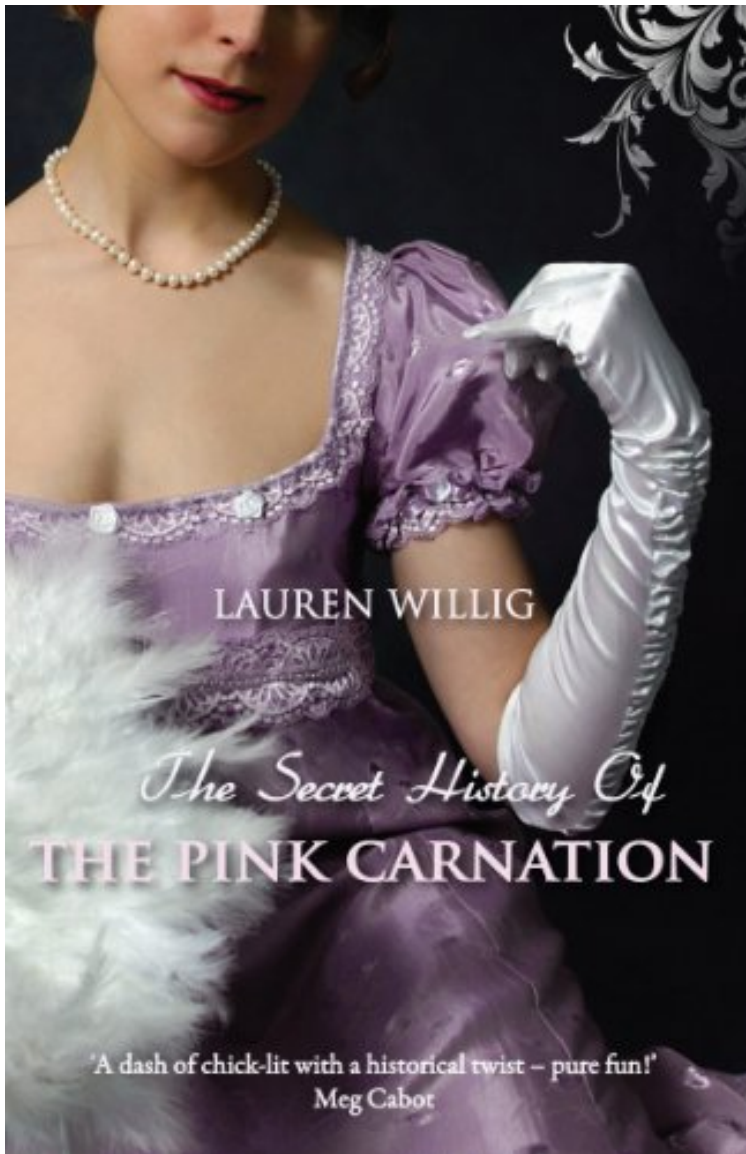


(Read free) File size: 31.Mb

The Secret History of the Pink Carnation



Par Lauren Willig
*ePub | *DOC | audiobook | ebooks |*
Download PDF

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #96840 dans eBooksPubli le: 2011-01-24Sorti le: 2011-01-24Format: Ebook Kindle

(Read free) The Secret History of the Pink Carnation

Par Lauren Willig : The Secret History of the Pink Carnation before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Secret History of the Pink Carnation:

 Download

 Read Online

Description : Description du produitDeciding that true romantic heroes are a thing of the past, Eloise Kelly, an intelligent American who always manages to wear her Jimmy Choo suede boots on the day it rains, leaves Harvards Widener Library bound for England to finish her dissertation on the dashing pair of spies the Scarlet Pimpernel and the Purple Gentian. What she discovers is something the finest historians have missed: a secret history that begins with a letter dated 1803. Eloise has found the secret history of the Pink Carnationthe most elusive spy of all time, the spy who single-handedly saved England from Napoleons invasion. The Secret History of the Pink Carnation, a wildly imaginative and highly adventurous debut, opens with the story of a modern-day heroine but soon becomes a book within a book. Eloise Kelly settles in to read the secret history hoping to unmask the Pink Carnations identity, but before she can make this discovery, she uncovers a passionate romance within the pages of the secret history that almost threw off the

course of world events. How did the Pink Carnation save England? What became of the Scarlet Pimpernel and the Purple Gentian? And will Eloise Kelly find a hero of her own?

Presentation de l'auteur Eloise Kelly longs for the romance of years gone by; for a dashing hero like The Scarlet Pimpernel to come and sweep her off her Jimmy Choo-clad feet...but instead she's sloshing around London in the rain and finally realising that romantic heroes are a thing of the past. To distract herself from such thoughts, Eloise concentrates on her History dissertation, and it's while rummaging through a pile of old letters and diaries that she discovers something amazing, something that historians have missed: the secret history of the most elusive spy of all time, The Pink Carnation. But why is the very modern Colin Selwick so determined to interfere with Eloise's research? And why does he have to be quite so charming...? Extrait Prologue

The Tube had broken down. Again. I clutched the overhead rail by dint of standing on the tippiest bit of my tippy toes. My nose banged into the arm of the man next to me. A Frenchman, judging from the black turtleneck and the fact that his armpit was a deodorant-free zone. Murmuring apologies in my best faux English accent, I tried to squirm out from under his arm, tripped over a protruding umbrella, and stumbled into the denim-covered lap of the man sitting in front of me. Cheers, he said with a wink, as I wiggled my way off his leg. Ah, cheers, that wonderful multipurpose English term for anything from hello to thank you to nice ass you have there. Bright red (a shade that doesn't do much for my auburn hair), I peered about for a place to hide. But the Tube was packed solid, full of tired, cranky Londoners on their way home from work. There wasn't enough room for a reasonably emaciated snake to slither its way through the crowd, much less a healthy American girl who had eaten one too many portions of fish and chips over the past two months. Um, make that about fifty too many portions of fish and chips. Living in a basement flat with a kitchen the size of a peapod doesn't inspire culinary exertions. Resuming my spot next to the smirking Frenchman, I wondered, for the five-hundredth time, what had ever possessed me to come to London. Sitting in my carrel in Harvard's Widener Library, peering out of my little scrap of window at the undergrads scuttling back and forth beneath the underpass, bowed double under their backpacks like so many worker ants, applying for a fellowship to spend the year researching at the British Library seemed like a brilliant idea. No more student papers to grade! No more hours of peering at microfilm! No more Grant. Grant. My mind lightly touched the name, then shied away again. Grant. The other reason I was playing sardines on the Tube in London, rather than happily spooling through microfilm in the basement of Widener. I ended it with him. Well, mostly. Finding him in the cloakroom of the Faculty Club at the history department Christmas party in a passionate embrace with a giggly art historian fresh out of undergrad did have something to do with it, so I couldn't claim he was entirely without a part in the breakup. But I was the one who tugged the ring off my finger and flung it across the room at him in time-honored, pissed-off female fashion. Just in case anyone was wondering, it wasn't an engagement ring. The Tube lurched back to life, eliciting a ragged cheer from the other passengers. I was too busy trying not to fall back into the lap of the man sitting in front of me. To land in someone's lap once is carelessness; to do so twice might be considered an invitation. Right now, the only men I was interested in were long-dead ones. The Scarlet Pimpernel, the Purple Gentian, the Pink Carnation . . . The very music of their names invoked a forgotten era, an era of men in knee breeches and frock coats who dueled with witty barbs sharper than the points of their swords. An era when men could be heroes. The Scarlet Pimpernel, rescuing countless men from the guillotine; the Purple Gentian, driving the French Ministry of Police mad with his escapades, and foiling at least two attempts to assassinate King George III; and the Pink Carnation . . . I don't think there was a single newspaper in London between 1803 and 1814 that didn't carry at least one mention of the Pink Carnation, the most elusive spy of them all. The other two, the Scarlet Pimpernel and the Purple Gentian, had each, in their turn, been unmasked by the French as Sir Percy Blakeney and Lord Richard Selwick. They had retired to their estates in England to raise precocious children and tell long stories of their days in France over their postdinner port. But the Pink Carnation had never been caught. At least not yet. That was what I planned to do: hunt the elusive Pink Carnation through the archives of England, to track down any sliver of long-dead gossip that might lead me to what the finest minds in the French government had failed to discover. Of course, that wasn't how I phrased it when I suggested the idea to my dissertation advisor. I made scholarly noises about filling a gap in the historiography, and the deep sociological significance of spying as a means of asserting manhood, and other silly ideas couched in intellectual unintelligibility. I called it Aristocratic Espionage during the Wars with France: 1789-1815. Rather a dry title, but somehow I doubt Why I Love Men in Black Masks would have made it past my dissertation committee. It all seemed perfectly

simple back in Cambridge. There must have been some sort of contact between the three aristocrats who had donned black masks in order to outwit the French; the world of the upper class in early nineteenth-century England was a small one, and I couldn't imagine that men who had all spied in France wouldn't share their expertise with one another. I knew the identities of Sir Percy Blakeney and Lord Richard Selwick in fact, there was a sizable correspondence between those two men. Surely, there would be something in their papers, some slip of the pen that would lead me to the Pink Carnation. But there was nothing in the archives. Nothing. So far, I'd read twenty years worth of Blakeney estate accounts and Selwick laundry lists. I'd even trekked out to the sprawling Public Record Office in Kew, hauling myself and my laptop through the locker rooms and bag searches to get to the early nineteenth-century records of the War Office. I should have remembered that they call it the secret service for a reason. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Not even a cryptic reference to our flowery friend in an official report. Getting panicky, because I didn't really want to have to write about espionage as an allegory for manhood, I resorted to my plan of last resort. I sat on the floor of Waterstones, with a copy of Debretts Peerage open in my lap, and wrote letters to all the surviving descendants of Sir Percy Blakeney and Lord Richard Selwick. I didn't even care if they had access to the family archives (that was how desperate I was getting), I'd settle for family stories, half-remembered tales Grandpapa used to tell about that crazy ancestor who was a spy in the 1800s, anything that might give me some sort of lead as to where to look next. I sent out twenty letters. I received three responses. The proprietors of the Blakeney estate sent me an impersonal form letter listing the days the estate was open to the public; they helpfully included the fall 2003 schedule for Scarlet Pimpernel reenactments. I could think of few things more depressing than watching overeager tourists prancing around in black capes, twirling quizzing glasses, and exclaiming, Sink me! The current owner of Selwick Hall was even more discouraging. He sent a letter typed on crested stationery designed to intimidate, informing me that Selwick Hall was still a private home, it was not open to the public in any capacity, and any papers the family intended for the public to view were in the British Library. Although Mr. Colin Selwick did not specifically say sod off, it was heavily implied. But all it takes is one, right? And that one, Mrs. Arabella Selwick-Alderly, was currently waiting for me at I dug the dog-eared scrap of paper out of my pocket as I scurried up the stairs in the South Kensington Tube station 43 Onslow Square. It was raining, of course. It generally is when one has forgotten ones umbrella. Pausing on the doorstep of 43 Onslow Square, I ran my fingers through my rain-dampened hair and took stock of my appearance. The brown suede Jimmy Choo boots that had looked so chic in the shoe store in Harvard Square were beyond repair, matted with rain and mud. My knee-length herringbone skirt had somehow twisted itself all the way around, so that the zipper stuck out stiffly in front instead of lying flat in back. And there was a sizeable brownish blotch on the hem of my thick beige sweater the battle stain of an unfortunate collision with someones cup of coffee at the British Library cafeteria that afternoon. So much for impressing Mrs. Selwick-Alderly with my sophistication and charm. Tugging my skirt right way round, I rang the buzzer. A crackly voice quavered, Hello? I leaned on the reply button. Its Eloise, I shouted into the metal grating. I hate talking into intercoms; I'm never sure if I'm pressing the right button, or speaking into the right receiver, or about to be beamed up by aliens. Eloise Kelly. About the Purple Gentian? I managed to catch the door just before it stopped buzzing. Up here, called a disembodied voice. Tipping my head back, I gazed up the stairwell. I couldn't see anyone, but I knew just what Mrs. Selwick-Alderly would look like. She would have a wrinkled face under a frizz of snowy white hair, dress in ancient tweeds, and be bent over a cane as gnarled as her skin. Following the directive from on high, I began up the stairs, rehearsing the little speech I had prepared in my head the night before. I would say something gracious about how lovely it was of her to take the time to see me. I would smile modestly and express how much I hoped I could help in my own small way to rescue her esteemed ancestor from historical oblivion. And I would remember to speak loudly, in deference to elderly ears. Poor girl, you look utterly knackered. An elegant woman in a navy-blue suit made of nubby wool, with a vivid crimson and gold scarf tied at her neck, smiled sympathetically at me. Her snowy hair that part of my image at least had been correct! was coiled about her head in an elaborate confection of braids that should have been old-fashioned, but on her looked queenly. Perhaps her straight spine and air of authority made her appear taller than she was, but she made me (five feet nine inches if one counts the three-inch heels that are essential to daily life) feel short. This was not a woman with an osteoporosis problem. My polished speech dripped away like the drops of water trickling from the hem of my raincoat. Um, hello, I stammered. Hideous weather today, isn't it? Mrs. Selwick-Alderly ushered me through a cream-colored foyer, indicating that I should drop my sodden raincoat on a chair in the hall. How good of you to come all the way from the British Library, was it? to see me on such an inhospitable day. I followed her

into a cheerful living room, my ruined boots making squelching noises that boded ill to the faded Persian rug. A chintz sofa and two chairs were drawn up around the fire that crackled comfortably away beneath a marble mantelpiece. On the coffee table, an eclectic assortment of books had been pushed aside to make room for a heavily laden tea tray. Mrs. Selwick-Alderly glanced at the tea tray and made a little noise of annoyance. I've forgotten the biscuits. I won't be a minute. Do make yourself comfortable. Comfortable. I didn't think there was much chance of that. Despite Mrs. Selwick-Alderly's charm, I felt like an awkward fifth-grader waiting for the headmistress to return. Hands clasped behind my back, I wandered over to the mantel. It boasted an assortment of family photos, jumbled together in no particular order. At the far right towered a large sepia portrait photo of a debutante with her hair in the short waves of the late 1930s, a single strand of pearls about her neck, gazing soulfully upwards. The other photos were more modern and less formal, a crowd of family photos, taken in black tie, in jeans, indoors and out, people making faces at the camera or each other; they were clearly a large clan, and a close-knit one. One picture in particular drew my attention. It sat towards the middle of the mantel, half-hidden behind a picture of two little girls decked out as flower girls. Unlike the others, it only featured a single subject unless you counted his horse. One arm casually rested on his horse's flank. His dark blond hair had been tousled by the wind, and a hard ride. There was something about the quirk of the lips and the clean beauty of the cheekbones that reminded me of Mrs. Selwick-Alderly. But where her good looks were a thing of elegance, like a finely carved piece of ivory, this man was as vibrantly alive as the sun on his hair or the horse beneath his arm. He smiled out of the photo with such complicit good humor as if he and the viewer shared some sort of delightful joke that it was impossible not to smile back. Which was exactly what I was doing when my hostess returned with a plate filled with chocolate-covered biscuits. I started guiltily, as though I had been caught out in some embarrassing intimacy. Mrs. Selwick-Alderly placed the biscuits next to the tea tray. I see you've found the photos. There is something irresistible about other people's pictures, isn't there? I joined her on the couch, setting my damp herringbone derriere gingerly on the very edge of a flowered cushion. It's so much easier to make up stories about people you don't know, I temporized. Especially older pictures. You wonder what their lives were like, what happened to them. . . . That's part of the fascination of history, isn't it? she said, applying herself to the teapot. Over the rituals of the tea table, the choice of milk or sugar, the passing of biscuits and cutting of cake, we slipped into an easy discussion of English history, and the awkward moment passed. At Mrs. Selwick-Alderly's gentle prompting, I found myself rambling on about how I'd become interested in history (too many historical novels at an impressionable age), the politics of the Harvard history department (too complicated to even begin to go into), and why I'd decided to come to England. When the conversation began to verge onto what had gone wrong with Grant (everything), I hastily changed the subject, asking Mrs. Selwick-Alderly if she had heard any stories about the nineteenth-century spies as a small child. Oh, dear, yes! Mrs. Selwick-Alderly smiled nostalgically into her teacup. I spent a large part of my youth playing spy with my cousins. We would take it in turns to be the Purple Gentian and the Pink Carnation. My cousin Charles always insisted on playing Delaroché, the evil French operative. The French accent that boy affected! It put Maurice Chevalier to shame. After all these years, it still makes me laugh just to think of it. He would paint on an extravagant mustache in those days, all the best villains had mustaches and put on a cloak made out of one of Mother's old wraps, and storm up and down the lawn, shaking his fist and swearing vengeance against the Pink Carnation. Who was your favorite character? I asked, charmed by the image. Why, the Pink Carnation, of course. We smiled over the rims of our teacups in complete complicity. But you have an added interest in the Pink Carnation, Mrs. Selwick-Alderly said meaningfully. Your dissertation, wasn't it? Oh! Yes! My dissertation! I outlined the work I had done so far: the chapters on the Scarlet Pimpernel's missions, the Purple Gentians' disguises, the little I had been able to discover about the way they ran their leagues. But I haven't been able to find anything at all about the Pink Carnation, I finished. I've read the old newspaper accounts, of course, so I know about the Pink Carnation's more spectacular missions, but that's it. What had you hoped to find? I stared sheepishly down into my tea. Oh, every historian's dream. An overlooked manuscript entitled, How I Became the Pink Carnation and Why. Or I'd settle for a hint of his identity in a letter or a War Office report. Just something to give me some idea of where to look next. I think I may be able to help you. A slight smile lurked about Mrs. Selwick-Alderly's lips. Really? I perked up literally. I sat so bolt upright that my teacup nearly toppled off my lap. Are there family stories? Mrs. Selwick-Alderly's faded blue eyes twinkled. She leaned forward conspiratorially. Better. Possibilities were flying through my mind. An old letter, perhaps, or a deathbed message passed along from Selwick to Selwick, with Mrs. Selwick-Alderly the current keeper of the trust. But, then, if there were a

Selwick Family Secret, why would she tell me? I abandoned imagination for the hope of reality. What is it? I asked breathlessly. Mrs. Selwick-Alderly rose from the sofa with effortless grace. Setting her teacup down on the coffee table, she beckoned me to follow. Come see. I divested myself of my teacup with a clatter, and eagerly followed her towards the twin windows that looked onto the square. Between the windows hung two small portrait miniatures, and for a disappointed moment, I thought she meant merely to lead me to the pictures there didn't seem to be anything else that might warrant attention. A small octagonal table to the right of the windows bore a pink-shaded lamp and a china candy dish, but little else. To the left, a row of bookcases lined the back of the room, but Mrs. Selwick-Alderly didn't so much as glance in that direction. Instead, she knelt before a large trunk that sat directly beneath the portrait miniatures. I've never been into domestic art, or material history, or whatever they're calling it, but I'd spent enough afternoons loafing around the British galleries of the Victoria and Albert to recognize it as early eighteenth century, or an extraordinarily good reproduction. Different-colored woods marked out fanciful patterns of flowers and birds across the lid of the trunk, while a large tree of paradise adorned the center. Mrs. Selwick-Alderly withdrew an elaborate key from her pocket. In this trunk, she held the key poised before the lock, lies the true identity of the Pink Carnation. Stooping, Mrs. Selwick-Alderly fitted the key almost as ornately constructed as the chest itself, with the end twisted into elaborate curls into the brass-bound lock. The lid sprang open with well-oiled ease. I joined Mrs. Selwick-Alderly on the floor, without even realizing how I'd gotten there. My first glance was a disappointing one. Not a paper in sight, not even the scrap of a forgotten love letter. Instead, my sweeping gaze took in the faded ivory of an old fan, a yellowed scrap of embroidered cloth, the skeletal remains of a bouquet still bound with a tattered ribbon. There were other such trinkets, but I didn't take much notice as I sank down onto my haunches beside the trunk. But Mrs. Selwick-Alderly wasn't finished. Deliberately, she eased one blue-veined hand along either side of the velvet lining and tugged. The top tray slid easily out of its supports. Within . . . I was back on my knees, hands gripping the edge of the trunk. This . . . its amazing! I stuttered. Are these all . . . ? All early nineteenth century, Mrs. Selwick-Alderly finished for me, regarding the contents of the trunk fondly. They've all been sorted by chronological order, so you should find it easy going. She reached into the trunk, picked up a folio, and then put it aside with a muttered That won't do. After a moment's peering into the trunk and making the occasional clucking noise, she seized on a rectangular packet, one of those special acid-free cardboard boxes they use to protect old library books. You'd best start here, she advised, with Amy. Amy? I asked, picking at the string binding the box together. Mrs. Selwick-Alderly started to respond, and then checked herself, rising to her feet with the help of the edge of the box. These letters tell the tale far better than I could. She cut off my incoherent questions with a kindly, If you need anything, I'll be in my study. It's just down the hall to the right. But, who is he? I pleaded, pivoting after her as she walked towards the door. The Pink Carnation? Read and see. . . . Mrs. Selwick-Alderly's voice drifted behind her through the open door. Urgh. Gnawing on my lower lip, I stared down at the manuscript box in my hands. The gray cardboard was smooth and clean beneath my fingers; unlike the battered, dusty old boxes in the stacks of Widener Library, someone cared for these papers well. The identity of the Pink Carnation. Did she really mean it? I should have been tearing at the twine that bound the box, but there was something about the waiting stillness of the room, broken only by the occasional crackle of burning bark upon the grate, that barred abrupt movement. I could almost feel the portrait miniatures on the wall straining to peer over my shoulder. Besides, I counseled myself, mechanically unwinding the string, I shouldn't let myself get too excited. Mrs. Selwick-Alderly might be exaggerating. Or mad. True, she didn't look mad, but maybe her delusion took the form of thinking she held the key to the identity of the Pink Carnation. I would open the box to find it contained a stack of Beatles lyrics or amateur poetry. The last loop of string came free. The cardboard flap fell open, revealing a pile of yellowed papers. The date on the first letter, in a scrawling, uneven hand, read 4 March, 1803. Not amateur poetry. Dizzy with excitement, I flipped through the thick packet of papers. Some were in better condition than others; in places, ink had run, or lines had been lost in folds. Hints of reddish sealing wax clung to the edges of some, while others had lost corners to the depredations of time and the clutching fingers of eager readers. Some were written in a bold black hand, others in a spiky copperplate, and many in a barely legible scribble. But they all had one thing in common; they were all dated 1803. Phrases rose out of the sea of squiggles as I thumbed through . . . provoking man . . . brother would never. . . . I forced myself to return to the first page. Sinking down onto the carpet before the fire, I adjusted my skirt, refreshed my cold cup of tea, and began to read the first letter. It was written in ungrammatical French, and I translated as I read. 4 March, 1803. Dear Sister With the end of the late hostilities, I find myself at last in a position to urge you to return to your

rightful place in the House of Balcourt. . . .Chapter One . . . The city of your birth awaits your return. Please send word of your travel arrangements by courier at first opportunity. I remain, your devoted brother,

Edouard. The city of your birth awaits your return. Amy whispered the words aloud. At last! Fingers tightening around the paper in her hands, she gazed rapturously at the sky. For an event of such magnitude, she expected bolts of lightning, or thunderclouds at the very least. But the Shropshire sky gazed calmly back at her, utterly unperturbed by the momentous events taking place below. Wasnt that just like

Shropshire? Sinking to the grass, Amy contemplated the place where she had spent the majority of her life. Behind her, over the rolling fields, the redbrick manor house sat placidly on its rise. Uncle Bertrand was sure to be right there, three windows from the left, sitting in his cracked leather chair, poring over the latest findings of the Royal Agricultural Society, just as he did every day. Aunt Prudence would be sitting in the yellow-and-cream morning room, squinting over her embroidery threads, just as she did every day. All peaceful, and bucolic, and boring. The prospect before her wasnt any more exciting, nothing but long swaths of green, enlivened only by woolly balls of sheep. But now, at last, the long years of boredom were at an end.

In her hand she grasped the opportunity to leave Wooliston Manor and its pampered flock behind her forever. She would no longer be plain Amy Balcourt, niece to the most ambitious sheep breeder in Shropshire, but Aime, Mlle. de Balcourt. Amy conveniently ignored the fact that revolutionary France had banished titles when they beheaded their nobility. She had been six years old when revolution exiled her to rural England. In late May of 1789, she and Mama had sailed across the Channel for what was meant to be merely a two-month visit, time enough for Mama to see her sisters and show her daughter something of English ways. For all the years she had spent in France, Mama was still an Englishwoman at heart. Uncle Bertrand, sporting a slightly askew periwig, had strode out to meet them. Behind him stood Aunt Prudence, embroidery hoop clutched in her hand. Clustered in the doorway were three little girls in identical muslin dresses, Amys cousins Sophia, Jane, and Agnes. See, darling, whispered Mama. You shall have other little girls to play with. Wont that be lovely? It wasnt lovely. Agnes, still in the lisping and stumbling stage, was too young to be a playmate. Sophia spent all of her time bent virtuously over her sampler. Jane, quiet and shy, Amy dismissed as a poor-spirited thing. Even the sheep soon lost their charm. Within a month, Amy was quite ready to return to France. She packed her little trunk, heaved and pushed it down the hall to her mothers room, and announced that she was prepared to go. Mama had half-smiled, but her smile twisted into a sob. She plucked her daughter off the trunk and squeezed her very, very tightly. Mais, maman, quest-ce que se passe? demanded Amy, who still thought in French in those days. We cant go back, darling. Not now. I dont know if well ever . . . Oh, your poor father! Poor us! And Edouard, what must they be doing to him? Amy didnt know who they were, but remembering the way Edouard had yanked at her curls and pinched her arm while supposedly hugging her good-bye, she couldnt help but think her brother deserved anything he got. She said as much to Mama. Mama looked down at her miserably. Oh no, darling, not this.

Nobody deserves this. Very slowly, in between deep breaths, she had explained to Amy that mobs had taken over Paris, that the king and queen were prisoners, and that Papa and Edouard were very much in danger. Over the next few months, Wooliston Manor became the unlikely center of an antirevolutionary movement. Everyone pored over the weekly papers, wincing at news of atrocities across the Channel. Mama ruined quill after quill penning desperate letters to connections in France, London, Austria. When the Scarlet Pimpernel appeared on the scene, snatching aristocrats from the sharp embrace of Madame Guillotine, Mama brimmed over with fresh hope. She peppered every news sheet within a hundred miles of London with advertisements begging the Scarlet Pimpernel to save her son and husband. Amidst all this hubbub, Amy lay awake at night in the nursery, wishing she were old enough to go back to France herself and save Papa. She would go disguised, of course, since everyone knew a proper rescue had to be done in disguise. When no one was about, Amy would creep down to the servants quarters to try on their clothes and practice speaking in the rough, peasant French of the countryside. If anyone happened upon her, Amy explained that she was preparing amateur theatricals. With so much to worry about, none of the grown-ups who absently said, How nice, dear, and patted her on the head ever bothered to wonder why the promised performance never materialized. Except Jane. When Jane came upon Amy clad in an assortment of old petticoats from the ragbag and a discarded periwig of Uncle Bertrands, Amy huffily informed her that she was rehearsing for a one-woman production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Jane regarded her thoughtfully. Half apologetically, she said, I dont think youre telling the truth. Unable to think of a crushing response, Amy just glared. Jane clutched her rag doll tighter, but managed to ask, Please, wont you tell me what youre really doing? You wont tell Mama or any of the others? Amy tried to look suitably fierce, but the effect was quite ruined by her

periwig sliding askew and dangling from one ear. Jane hastily nodded. I, declared Amy importantly, am going to join the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel and rescue Papa. Jane pondered this new information, doll dangling forgotten from one hand. May I help? she asked. Her cousins unexpected aid proved a boon to Amy. It was Jane who figured out how to rub soot and gum on teeth to make them look like those of a desiccated old hag and then how to rub it all off again before Nanny saw. It was Jane who plotted a route to France on the nursery globe and Jane who discovered a way to creep down the back stairs without making them creak. They never had the chance to execute their plans. Little known to the two small girls preparing themselves to enter his service, the Scarlet Pimpernel foolishly attempted the rescue of the Vicomte de Balcourt without them. From the papers, Amy learned that the Pimpernel had spirited Papa out of prison disguised as a cask of cheap red wine. The rescue might have gone without a hitch had a thirsty guard at the gates of the city not insisted on tapping the cask. When he encountered Papa instead of Beaujolais, the guard angrily sounded the alert. Papa, the papers claimed, had fought manfully, but he was no match for an entire troop of revolutionary soldiers. A week later, a small card had arrived for Mama. It said simply, I'm sorry, and was signed with a scarlet flower. The news sent Mama into a decline and Amy into a fury. With Jane as her witness, she vowed to avenge Papa and Mama as soon as she was old enough to return to France. She would need excellent French for that, and Amy could already feel her native tongue beginning to slip away under the onslaught of constant English conversation. At first, she tried conversing in French with their governesses, but those worthy ladies tended to have a vocabulary limited to shades of cloth and the newest types of millinery. So Amy took her Moliere outside and read aloud to the sheep. Latin and Greek would do her no good in her mission, but Amy read them anyway, in memory of Papa. Papa had told her nightly bedtime stories of capricious gods and vengeful goddesses; Amy tracked all his stories down among the books in the little-used library at Woolston Manor. Uncle Bertrands own taste ran more towards manuals on animal husbandry, but someone in the family must have read once, because the library possessed quite a creditable collection of classics. Amy read Ovid and Virgil and Aristophanes and Homer. She read dry histories and scandalous love poetry (her governesses, who had little Latin and less Greek, naively assumed that anything in a classical tongue must be respectable), but mostly she returned again and again to The Odyssey. Odysseus had fought to go home, and so would Amy. When Amy was ten, the illustrated newsletters announced that the Scarlet Pimpernel had retired upon discovery of his identity although the newsletters were rather unclear as to whether they or the French government had been the first to get the scoop. SCARLET PIMPERNEL UNMASKED! proclaimed the Shropshire Intelligencer. Meanwhile The Cosmopolitan Ladys Book carried a ten-page spread on Fashions of the Scarlet Pimpernel: Costume Tips from the Man Who Brought You the French Aristocracy. Amy was devastated. True, the Pimpernel had botched her fathers rescue, but, on the whole, his tally of aristocrats saved was quite impressive, and who on earth was she to offer her French language skills to if the Pimpernel retired? Amy was all ready to start constructing her own band when a line in the article in the Shropshire Intelligencer caught her eye. I have every faith that the Purple Gentian will take up where I was forced to leave off, they reported Sir Percy as saying. Puzzled, Amy shoved the paper at Jane. Who is the Purple Gentian? The same question was on everyone elses lips. Soon the Purple Gentian became a regular feature in the news sheets. One week, he spirited fifteen aristocrats out of Paris as a traveling circus. The Purple Gentian, it was whispered, had played the dancing bear. Why, some said Robespierre himself had patted the animal on the head, never knowing it was his greatest enemy! When France stopped killing its aristocrats and directed its attention to fighting England instead, the Purple Gentian became the War Offices most reliable spy. This victory would never have happened, but for the bravery of one man one man represented by a small purple flower, Admiral Nelson announced after destroying the French fleet in Egypt. English and French alike were united in their burning curiosity to learn the identity of the Purple Gentian. Speculation ran rife on both sides of the Channel. Some claimed the Purple Gentian was an English aristocrat, a darling of the London ton like Sir Percy Blakeney. Indeed, some said he was Sir Percy Blakeney, fooling the foolish French by returning under a different name. London gossip named everyone from Beau Brummel (on the grounds that no one could genuinely be that interested in fashion) to the Prince of Waless dissolute brother, the Duke of York. Others declared that the Purple Gentian must be an exiled French noble, fighting for his homeland. Some said he was a soldier; others said he was a renegade priest. The French just said he was a damned nuisance. Or they would have, had they the good fortune to speak English. Instead, being French, they were forced to say it in their own language. Amy said he was her hero. She only said it to Jane, of course. All of the old plans were revived, only this time it was the League of the Purple Gentian to whom Amy planned to offer her

services. But the years went by, Amy remained in Shropshire, and the only masked man she saw was her small cousin Ned playing at being a highwayman. At times Amy considered running away to Paris, but how would she even get there? With war raging between England and France, normal travel across the Channel had been disrupted. Amy began to despair of ever reaching France, much less finding the Purple Gentian. She envisioned a dreary future of pastoral peace. Until Edouard's letter. I thought I'd find you here. What? Amy was jolted out of her blissful contemplation of Edouard's letter, as a blue flounce brushed against her arm. A basket of wildflowers on Jane's arm testified to a walk along the grounds, but she bore no sign of outdoors exertion. No creases dared to settle in the folds of her muslin dress; her pale brown hair remained obediently coiled at the base of her neck; and even the loops of the bow holding her bonnet were remarkably even.

Aside from a bit of windburn on her pale cheeks, she might have been sitting in the parlor all afternoon. Mama has been looking all over for you. She wants to know what you did with her skein of rose-pink embroidery silk. What makes her think I have it? Besides, Amy cut off what looked to be a highly logical response from Jane with a wave of Edouard's letter, who can think of embroidery silks when this just arrived? A letter? Not another love poem from Derek? Ugh! Amy shuddered dramatically. Really, Jane! What a vile thought! No, she leaned forward, lowering her voice dramatically, it's a letter from Edouard. Edward?

Jane, being Jane, automatically gave the name its English pronunciation. So he has finally deigned to remember your existence after all these years? Oh, Jane, don't be harsh! He wants me to go live with him! Jane dropped her basket of flowers. You can't be serious, Amy! But I am! Isn't it glorious! Amy joined her cousin in gathering up scattered blooms, piling them willy-nilly back in the basket with more enthusiasm than grace. What exactly does Edouard's letter say? It's splendid, Jane! Now that we're no longer at war, he says it's finally safe for me to come back. He says he wants me to act as hostess for him. But are you sure it's safe? Jane's gray eyes darkened with concern. Amy laughed. It's not all screaming mobs, Jane. After all, Bonaparte has been consul for how long has it been? Three years now? Actually, that's exactly why Edouard wants me there. Bonaparte is desperately trying to make his jumped-up, murderous, usurping government look legitimate. . . Not that you're at all biased, murmured Jane. . . so he's been courting the old nobility, Amy went on, pointedly ignoring her cousin's comment. But the courting has mostly been going on through his wife Josephine. She has a salon for the ladies of the old regime so Edouard needs me to be his *entre*. To that jumped-up, murderous, usurping government? Jane's voice was politely quizzical. Amy tossed a daisy at her in annoyance. Make fun all you like, Jane! Don't you see? This is exactly the opportunity I needed! To become the belle of Bonaparte's court? Amy forbore to waste another flower. No. She clasped her hands, eyes gleaming. To join the League of the Purple Gentian! From Publishers Weekly The French eventually unmasked the Scarlet Pimpernel and the Purple Gentian, famed spies in the Napoleonic wars, but as Harvard graduate student Eloise Kelly discovers at the start of this breezy historical romance, the identity of the Pink Carnation remains a mystery. Working in London on her history dissertation, Eloise gets access to a trunk of papers and documents from the early 19th century. She dives into this treasure trove, and suddenly the reader is plunged into a novel within a novel, told from the viewpoint of Amy Balcourt. Amy, exiled to rural England with her mother, now wants to avenge, with the help of her cousin Jane, her father's death at the hands of the French. She hopes to be in league with the Scarlet Pimpernel, who heroically tried to save her father. Willig, a Harvard graduate student herself, does a good job painting a picture of the tumultuous era. She also makes the sparks fly between Amy and the Purple Gentian, a dashing English nobleman in charge of Egyptian antiquities for Bonaparte. But when the Pink Carnation's identity is finally revealed after many obvious clues, the reader wonders why it took Eloise so long to get it. More critically, Eloise's appearances come to seem like awkward intrusions into Amy's - and the Pink Carnation's - more intriguing story.

Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.