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The American Heiress: A Novel

By Daisy Goodwin



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"Anyone suffering *Downton Abbey* withdrawal symptoms (who isn't?) will find an instant tonic in Daisy Goodwin's *The American Heiress*. The story of Cora Cash, an American heiress in the 1890s who bags an English duke, this is a deliciously evocative first novel that lingers in the mind." --Allison Pearson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *I Don't Know How She Does It* and *I Think I Love You*

Be careful what you wish for. Traveling abroad with her mother at the turn of the twentieth century to seek a titled husband, beautiful, vivacious Cora Cash, whose family mansion in Newport dwarfs the Vanderbilts', suddenly finds herself Duchess of Wareham, married to Ivo, the most eligible bachelor in England. Nothing is quite as it seems, however: Ivo is withdrawn and secretive, and the English social scene is full of traps and betrayals. Money, Cora soon learns, cannot buy everything, as she must decide what is truly worth the price in her life and her marriage.

Witty, moving, and brilliantly entertaining, Cora's story marks the debut of a glorious storyteller who brings a fresh new spirit to the world of Edith Wharton and Henry James.

"For daughters of the new American billionaires of the 19th century, it was the ultimate deal: marriage to a cash-strapped British Aristocrat in return for a title and social status. But money didn't always buy them happiness." --Daisy Goodwin in *The Daily Mail*

One of *Library Journal's* Best Historical Fiction Books of 2011



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Editorial Review

Review

Advance Praise for *The American Heiress*:

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"The detailing is beautiful, the great phalanx of historical characters amusing, and the relief of reading a novel that puts enjoyment first so rare and gratifying that I am ready for a sequel." --Amanda Foreman, author of *GEORGIANA, DUCHESS OF DEVONSHIRE*, winner of the Whitbread Prize for Biography

"Deliciously classy. A story that gallops along, full of exquisite period detail." --Kate Mosse, author of *LABYRINTH* and *SEPULCHRE*

"I was seduced by this book, rather as Cora was seduced by her duke: with great skill and confidence. Intriguing, atmospheric, and extremely stylish, I was still thinking about it long after I had reached the end." --Penny Vincenzi, author of *THE BEST OF TIMES*

"Top-notch writing brings to life the world of wealth on both sides of the Atlantic. This debut's strong character development and sense of place will please fans of historical romance, including book club members." --*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Sparkling and thoroughly engaging...a delight. Filled with vitality and peopled by a vigorous supporting cast of characters...the story of a poor little rich girl learning the hard way... makes for a highly enjoyable and intelligent read." --*London Sunday Times*

About the Author

DAISY GOODWIN, a Harkness scholar who attended Columbia University's film school after earning a degree in history at Cambridge University, is a leading television producer in the U.K. Her poetry anthologies, including *101 Poems That Could Save Your Life*, have introduced many new readers to the pleasures of poetry, and she was Chair of the judging panel of the 2010 Orange Prize for Fiction. She and her husband, an ABC TV executive, have two daughters and live in London. *The American Heiress* is her first novel.

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THE AMERICAN HEIRESS (Chapter 1)

The Hummingbird Man

Newport, Rhode Island, August 1893

THE VISITING HOUR WAS ALMOST OVER, SO the hummingbird man encountered only the occasional carriage as he pushed his cart along the narrow strip of road between the mansions of Newport and the Atlantic Ocean. The ladies of Newport had left their cards early that afternoon, some to prepare for the last and most important ball of the season, others so they could at least appear to do so. The usual clatter and bustle of Bellevue Avenue had faded away as the Four Hundred rested in anticipation of the evening ahead, leaving behind only the steady beat of the waves breaking on the rocks below. The light was beginning to go, but the heat of the day still shimmered from the white limestone façades of the great houses that clustered along the cliffs like a collection of wedding cakes, each one vying with its neighbour to be the most gorgeous confection. But the hummingbird man, who wore a dusty tailcoat and a battered grey bowler in some shabby approximation of evening dress, did not stop to admire the verandah at the Breakers, or the turrets of Beaulieu, or the Rhinelander fountains that could be glimpsed through the yew hedges and gilded gates. He continued along the road, whistling and clicking to his charges in their black shrouded cages, so that they should hear a familiar noise on their last journey. His destination was the French chateau just before the point, the largest and most elaborate creation on a street of superlatives, Sans Souci, the summer cottage of the Cash family. The Union flag was flying from one tower, the Cash family emblem from the other.

He stopped at the gatehouse and the porter pointed him to the stable entrance half a mile away. As he walked to the other side of the grounds, orange lights were beginning to puncture the twilight; footmen were walking through the house and the grounds lighting Chinese lanterns in amber silk shades. Just as he turned past the terrace, he was dazzled by a low shaft of light from the dying sun refracted by the long windows of the ballroom.

In the Hall of Mirrors, which visitors who had been to Versailles pronounced even more spectacular than the original, Mrs Cash, who had sent out eight hundred invitations for the ball that night, was looking at herself reflected into infinity. She tapped her foot, waiting impatiently for the sun to disappear so that she could see the full effect of her costume. Mr Rhinehart stood by, sweat dripping from his brow, perhaps more sweat than the heat warranted.

'So I just press this rubber valve and the whole thing will illuminate?'

'Yes indeed, Mrs Cash, you just grasp the bulb firmly and all the lights will sparkle with a truly celestial effect. If I could just remind you that the moment must be short-lived. The batteries are cumbersome and I have only put as many on the gown as is compatible with fluid movement.'

'How long have I got, Mr Rhinehart?'

'Very hard to say, but probably no more than five minutes. Any longer and I cannot guarantee your safety.'

But Mrs Cash was not listening. Limits were of no interest to her. The pink evening glow was fading into darkness. It was time. She gripped the rubber bulb with her left hand and heard a slight crackle as light tripped through the one hundred and twenty light bulbs on her dress and the fifty in her diadem. It was as if a firework had been set off in the mirrored ballroom.

As she turned round slowly she was reminded of the yachts in Newport harbour illuminated for the recent visit of the German Emperor. The back view was quite as splendid as the front; the train that fell from her shoulders looked like a swathe of the night sky. She gave a glittering nod of satisfaction and released the bulb. The room went dark until a footman came forward to light the chandeliers.

'It is exactly the effect I had hoped for. You may send in your account.'

The electrician wiped his brow with a handkerchief that was less than clean, jerked his head in an approximation of a bow and turned to leave.

'Mr Rhinehart!' The man froze on the glossy parquet. 'I trust you have been as discreet as I instructed.' It was not a question.

'Oh yes, Mrs Cash. I did it all myself, that's why I couldn't deliver it till today. Worked on it every evening in the workshop when all the apprentices had gone home.'

'Good.' A dismissal. Mrs Cash turned and walked to the other end of the Hall of Mirrors where two footmen waited to open the door. Mr Rhinehart walked down the marble staircase, his hand leaving a damp smear on the cold balustrade.

In the Blue Room, Cora Cash was trying to concentrate on her book. Cora found most novels hard to sympathise with - all those plain governesses - but this one had much to recommend it. The heroine was 'handsome, clever and rich', rather like Cora herself. Cora knew she was handsome - wasn't she always referred to in the papers as 'the divine Miss Cash'? She was clever - she could speak three languages and could handle calculus. And as to rich, well, she was undoubtedly that. Emma Woodhouse was not rich in the way that she, Cora Cash, was rich. Emma Woodhouse did not lie on a lit à la polonoise once owned by Madame du Barry in a room which was, but for the lingering smell of paint, an exact replica of Marie Antoinette's bedchamber at le petit Trianon. Emma Woodhouse went to dances at the Assembly Rooms, not fancy dress spectacles in specially built ballrooms. But Emma Woodhouse was motherless which meant, thought Cora, that she was handsome, clever, rich and free. That could not be said of Cora, who at that moment was holding the book straight out in front of her because there was a steel rod strapped to her spine. Cora's arms ached and she longed to lie down on Madame du Barry's bed but her mother believed that spending two hours a day strapped to the spine improver would give Cora the posture and carriage of a princess, albeit an American one, and for now at least Cora had no choice but to read her book in extreme discomfort.

At this moment her mother, Cora knew, would be checking the placement for the dinner she was holding before the ball, tweaking it so that her forty odd guests knew exactly how brightly they sparkled in Mrs Cash's social firmament. To be invited to Mrs Cash's fancy dress ball was an honour, to be invited to the dinner beforehand a privilege, but to be seated within touching distance of Mrs Cash herself was a true mark of distinction, and was not to be bestowed lightly. Mrs Cash liked to sit opposite her husband at dinner ever since she had discovered that the Prince and Princess of Wales always faced each other across the width not the length of the table. Cora knew that she would be placed at one end sandwiched between two suitable bachelors with whom she would be expected to flirt just enough to confirm her reputation as the belle of the season but not so much that she compromised her mother's stratagems for her future. Mrs Cash was throwing this ball to display Cora like a costly gem to be admired but not touched. This diamond was destined for a coronet, at least.

Directly after the ball the Cashes were leaving for Europe on their yacht the SS Aspen. Mrs Cash had done nothing so vulgar as to suggest that they were going there to find Cora a title; she did not, like some other ladies in Newport, subscribe to Titled Americans, a quarterly periodical which gave details of blue-blooded but impecunious young men from Europe who were looking for a rich American bride, but Cora knew that her mother's ambitions were limitless.

Cora put the novel down and shifted uncomfortably in the spine harness. Surely it was time for Bertha to come and unbuckle her. The strap across her forehead was digging in; she would look ridiculous at the ball tonight with a great red welt on her brow. She wouldn't mind in the least discomfiting her mother but she had

her own reasons for wanting to look her best. Tonight was her last chance with Teddy before she had to leave for Europe. Yesterday at the picnic they had come so close, she was sure that Teddy had been about to kiss her, but her mother had found them before anything could happen. Cora smiled a little at the thought of her mother sweating as she pedalled to catch up with them. Mrs Cash had dismissed bicycles as hoydenish, until she realised that her daughter could use them to evade her, and then she had learnt to ride one in an afternoon. She might be the richest girl in America but surely she was also the most persecuted. Tonight was her coming-out party and here she was strapped into this instrument of torture. It was time she was released. In one stiff movement she rose and rang the bell.

Bertha was in the kitchen with the hummingbird man. He came from the same part of South Carolina as she did, and every year when he came up to supply the Newport hostesses with their favourite party trick, he would bring Bertha a message from what was left of her family. She had not seen any of them since the day ten years ago when she had been picked by the Reverend to go North, but sometimes when she walked through the kitchens on baking day and smelt the hot sweet smell, she thought she saw the swish of her mother's blue and white striped skirt. These days she could barely remember her mother's face but that smell would knock her back into the old cabin so fast it would bring tears to her eyes. She had sent letters at first with the presents and the money, figuring that her mother would find someone to read them to her, but now she had stopped, she didn't want some stranger reading aloud to her momma the secrets of her heart.

'Your momma said to say that your Uncle Ezra passed,' said the hummingbird man, removing his bowler hat, perhaps as a sign of respect, perhaps to impress Bertha with the noble planes of his skull. Bertha bowed her head; she had a dim memory of being carried into church on Uncle Ezra's shoulders and wondering if it was safe to hold on to the hair coming out of his ears.

'It was a fine burial, even Mrs Calhoun came to pay ...

Users Review

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