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KAREN HARPER

New York Times bestselling author
of *The Royal Nanny*

Lady
OF A *Thousand*
Treasures

SANDRA BYRD

PRAISE FOR SANDRA BYRD

LADY OF A THOUSAND TREASURES

“A thousand treasures for a reader indeed! Sandra Byrd’s new, highly-anticipated novel presents a determined, realistic heroine to care for and to root for. An amazing cast of characters and Victorian settings pull the reader right into the story. And an appealing hero is ripe for redemption. I became happily lost in this compelling, lovely book.”

KAREN HARPER, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Royal Nanny*

“Eleanor Sheffield is desperate to save the family business. Skilled in valuing antiques and separating the authentic from the fraudulent, she must search for clues—and her heart—to decide whom to trust. Is her old love telling the truth or currying her favor for his own selfish ends? *Lady of a Thousand Treasures* delivers mystery, romance, and suspense in a well-researched Victorian setting.”

JULIE KLASSEN, bestselling author

“*Lady of a Thousand Treasures* by Sandra Byrd is another adventure into history and the human spirit. Sandra gives us a rich, page-turning plot, golden threads of mystery, a sparkle of romance and a treasure trove of detail about nineteenth-century collections of porcelains and paintings and the role a lady appraiser played in the collections of the English wealthy. You’ll be drawn into many vivid images and precious insights about life and faith applicable to this present moment. What a grand book! I’m always swept away by a Sandra Byrd novel, and *Lady of a Thousand Treasures* will be long remembered as one of Sandra’s best.”

JANE KIRKPATRICK, *New York Times* bestselling author of *All She Left Behind*

“*Lady of a Thousand Treasures* is truly a treasure of a Gothic romance, aptly named! Sandra Byrd is the rare writer whose evocative, atmospheric prose grabs hold and doesn’t let go, delivering a complex, intelligent novel infused with romance and faith, an enigmatic hero who will steal your heart along with a clever, antiquity-dealing heroine who will keep you on the edge of your Victorian parlor chair. The Victorian Ladies series is off to a stunning start!”

Laura Frantz, author of *The Lacemaker*

“Like the antiquities prized in this novel, *Lady of a Thousand Treasures* is a rare treasure of its own. I was swept away from the first page, back to Victorian England and into the haunting mysteries of Watchfield House. With stunning characters and impeccable research, Sandra Byrd has woven together an exquisite treasure hunt with an ending that will leave you breathless.”

Melanie Dobson, award-winning author of *Hidden Among the Stars*

“It’s a rare book that I put on my keeper shelf. *Lady of a Thousand Treasures* earns one of those coveted spots. Sandra Byrd’s writing is an absolute piece of art! The plot kept me guessing until the very end. The story, the characters, the intrigue all blend into a delicious read, making this tale one that lives on long after you close the cover. If I had to sum up this story all in one word, it would be *satisfying*.”

Michelle Griep, award-winning author of the Once Upon a Dickens Christmas series

MIST OF MIDNIGHT

“Infusing her story with mystery, tension, and emotion, Byrd strikes a fine balance between the darkness of a Gothic mystery and the sweetness of a captivating love story.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Just the right mix of mystery and romance to keep the reader guessing until the end. Shady characters along with a strong heroine transport the reader to a different time and place. The rich prose will remind readers of *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“*Mist of Midnight* is a subtly haunting, beautifully atmospheric, and decadently romantic story that will find a comfortable home among the best Gothic romances of days gone by.”

USA TODAY

“Reminiscent of Victoria Holt, [*Mist of Midnight*] includes an intriguing mystery that is so ingeniously planned that, upon finishing, readers will spend time flipping back to see how the clues were laid.”

HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY, Editor’s Choice

BRIDE OF A DISTANT ISLE

“The stunning second novel in Byrd’s Daughters of Hampshire series is captivating and compelling. . . . The intriguing Victorian England settings will appeal to Anglophiles everywhere.”

RT BOOK REVIEWS, Top Pick

“Fans of Victoria Holt and Charlotte Brontë will be enthralled by Byrd’s atmospheric storytelling, while those new to the Gothic style will find themselves transported to Hampshire, navigating a murky landscape of greed, desperation, madness, and romance.”

USA TODAY

“An absorbing, transportive Victorian romance infused with intriguing details and delicious imagery. Sandra is a master of the historical novel. Engaging to the last page.”

SUSAN MEISSNER, author of *Secrets of a Charmed Life*

A L A D Y I N D I S G U I S E

“This Victorian inspirational romance features everything fans of the genre expect: a plucky, relatable heroine with a visible Christian faith, a dashing but kind love interest, and a mystery element to foster tension until the dénouement and ‘happy ever after’ epilogue.”

BOOKLIST

“Fans of historical Victorian and Gothic romance will feel right at home in these tightly spun, suspenseful pages. Highly recommended!”

SERENA CHASE, *USA Today's* Happy Ever After, author of *The Ryn*

LADY OF A THOUSAND TREASURES





Lady
OF A Thousand
Treasures

THE VICTORIAN LADIES SERIES

SANDRA BYRD



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CHAPTER

One

SEPTEMBER 1866

WATCHFIELD HOUSE, OXFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND

A threading of voices spooled throughout the expansive chamber wherein we waited, voices so decently quiet as to be murmurs. All present quickened as lightning pierced the ground just outside the wide panel of windows, like a finger pointing deep within the earth. Perhaps it was the good Lord's way of informing us exactly where the soul of the recently departed had found its final resting place.

I did not believe Lord Lydney had ascended.

And yet Lydney had been my father's friend, patron, and benefactor. Many spoke admiringly of him. Truth be told, he

had on occasion been charitable to me. I had once believed he would be my father-in-law.

That notion had passed.

I was at Watchfield House, English country estate of Baron Lydney, once more to pay my respects and then leave as quickly as possible, putting the past firmly behind me.

My gaze shifted to Harry and, against my better judgment, rested upon him. His fair skin and unruly toss of auburn hair were admirably set off by the black he—we all—wore. I averted my gaze before he could catch me staring.

“A murder of crows.” Marguerite nodded toward a clump of unfriendly men who bobbed their heads at one another as if pecking, stiff in their age and black coats.

My dearest friend, Marguerite. Although we were nearly of an age, as a widow, she made a suitable chaperone for me whenever one was required, which was not often for a person of my social status. She knew my habit since childhood had been to sort into collectives, especially as a means of regaining control in any situation which forced my anxieties to the surface. It was a custom particularly suited to the daughter of and assistant to a conservator for collectors. I was now a conservator and valuer in my own right. Almost, anyway.

“A singular of boars.” I feigned a yawn.

She looked in Harry’s direction. “A rake of mules?” she teased.

I smiled at the jest but knew she could not truly believe that; she had always been fond of Harry, at least until he’d disappeared. Like each of us, Harry had his faults but was

certainly not a rake. He'd ever only shown interest in one woman.

Me.

My heart wavered. *Till that interest suddenly waned.* I allowed myself to look at him once more.

He stood tall and sturdy among recognizable peers; he carried himself as a man who was confident, as indeed I'd always known him to be—except in the presence of his father. Near the center of their gathering was a woman I did not know. Her hair was as black as our mourning garments; she was beautiful and young. Her jet jewelry flirted with the lamplight. I held my breath as I watched Harry look at her, his gaze and attention steady.

“An ostentation of peacocks,” I whispered to Marguerite. At that, the group of them turned and looked at me. A flush reached up my neck and I was glad for my high collar. I repented of my whisper. It was one thing to reassure oneself, quite another to be unkind, even if born out of sorrow. “Could they have heard me?”

Marguerite tucked a loose strand of her blonde hair back into its upswept style and squeezed my elbow in solidarity before shaking her head. “I think they know something that you do not . . . not yet.”

Now that she mentioned it, I had noticed eyes upon me disconcertingly and unusually all morning. I turned and faced her. “And that you know too?”

She nodded. “I only overheard a bit of uncertain gossip whilst in the hallway, but I believe you shall find out soon . . .

if it's true." Marguerite inclined her head toward the dark-haired beauty at the heart of their circle and whispered to me, "She returned with him from Venice." Then my friend slipped away.

I caught my breath and turned away lest my countenance betray my dismay and surprise. To steady myself, I walked toward an over-upholstered chair in which an elderly acquaintance appeared to be drowning, to see if he needed a gentle tug back to the surface. As I made my way forward, a man stepped into my path, blocking my progress. He stood confidently, the stance of a man unused to being told no. His jawline was chiseled and the waves of his platinum hair held in place seemingly without pomade. He seemed vaguely familiar, but I could not place him.

"The Viscount Audley." He bowed. "At your service."

I did not think it was particularly serviceable to prevent me from walking. "Miss Eleanor Sheffield. I'm certain I do not need your assistance, though I'm grateful for the offer."

"Oh, I know your name; we've met." He lowered his voice. "I believe you do need my assistance. You are a woman alone, or soon shall be. That makes you vulnerable, does it not?"

I shivered at the naked honesty and implied threat of his statement but said nothing. He did not need a further prompt.

"My help comes as advice: he'll exploit your goodwill, you know. As he always has, as his father condescended to your father. Their benevolence has never been selfless, has it been, Miss Sheffield? Nor has either proved faithful, at the end."

“I’m sorry, Lord Audley. I’m sure you mean well. But I don’t know of whom you are speaking.” *A pack of lies.*

“I believe that you do.” He looked at Harry, then back at me, and then bowed and returned to the others.

I did not know what to make of Lord Audley’s comments except to assume that he, too, knew the secret that was apparently not a secret from anyone but me.

Out of habit, I glanced up at the magnificent mantel clock. Made of French walnut, it was adorned with the three Greek Graces. To my utter surprise, it seemed to indicate the correct time. I looked at my own timepiece; yes, yes, the times were exact. But was the clock’s wood brighter than it had been? I thought so. I stepped closer to it. I could not see the works but could faintly hear them; they purred along. The glass face shone. Our firm’s associate, Mr. Clarkson, had perhaps polished it when he was here some months earlier to care for the collection in my absence.

I should ask him if he had repaired the works. If so, he was quite a bit more accomplished than would be expected. For that, I was glad.

I looked around the room, now filled with several dozen men and women, titled and not, the rich collectors who had been the baron’s friends and, some of them, my father’s commissioners. And, of course, Harry.

He caught me that time. He held my gaze as he had hundreds of times over the course of more than a decade, first as a gangly younger man, then as one who had thickened with muscle and maturity. I held my breath. I would not lie:

I had loved both the boy and the man. He smiled. I ducked a slight head bow in his direction before looking away as the tributes began.

Several in the room spoke well of the late Lord Lydney—their kind accolades seemed genuine, and even the vicar seemed at least neutral where the man had been concerned. However, several others looked at the table when the tributes were offered and did not nod or hum an agreement, and the praise soon tapered off.

I prepared to return to my room, but a man touched my arm gently. “Miss Sheffield?”

I nodded, and he introduced himself. “Sir Matthew Landon. I am the late Lord Lydney’s solicitor. A word, if I may?” His face looked to have once been angular, but it had been gently larded with years of fine living. His hair, the proverbial snow-white, was pulled back in a short queue.

I followed him to the library. Marguerite trailed discreetly behind, chaperoning. Once we three were in the room, she pretended to browse the many titles on the shelves whilst Sir Matthew led me to the late Lord Lydney’s great desk.

Harry’s great desk now. All that had been the late Lord Lydney’s was now rightfully Harry’s.

We sat, Sir Matthew on one side, myself on the other, and then he leaned across the desk. His breath smelled of crushed fennel seed. “I’ll come directly to the point. Lord Lydney has requested that you act as temporary trustee of his collection and then dispose of it at your discretion—according to his stated options, of course. You’ll be well acquainted,

better than most, with the vast treasure that is represented by the pieces in his collection. Hundreds of pieces of art and armor. Glass and porcelain. Jewelry. Silver. Furniture. Portraits. Sculpture.”

A collection, as it was commonly known, consisted of all the treasures a person, or a family over many hundreds of years, had accumulated and assembled. The treasures of the highborn and well-to-do represented riches indeed. More than that, they represented family history, affection, personal interests, and the heart of the house.

“There are perhaps as many as a thousand pieces overall,” I replied. “We have the inventory.”

Sir Matthew nodded. “Perhaps a thousand, then. The late Lord Lydney feels certain that you are the best person to ascertain if the collection should remain *in situ* or be donated.”

“Doesn’t all this come to his son? As Lord Lydney’s only child? Living child,” I hastily corrected myself.

“His son has inherited the title, the London house, and the country estate, both of which need considerable repair.” Sir Matthew shrugged. “There was nothing to be done about those bequests, one suspects. The horses are his, via his late mother.”

“But not the collection?” It was worth an untold sum. Without it, Harry’s homes would be stripped bare of everything but the carpets and the drapes.

For as long as I’d been alive, the baron had depended on our family firm, Sheffield Brothers, to acquire, value,

caretake, and curate the art. That's what our firm and others like it did for our wealthy patrons. Now, with my papa dead and Uncle Lewis flickering unreliably as he approached seventy years of age, there were no Sheffield brothers. There was only me.

And dear Mr. Clarkson, of course. But he was not family and therefore not a principal in the firm.

"Not the collection," Sir Matthew affirmed. "The late Lord Lydney indicated to me in a letter and legal documents, latterly, when he became certain that his demise was imminent, that he wanted to leave the disposal of his art at your discretion. He does not trust himself to make the right decision because of his persistent grief over the death of his first son, Arthur, and disappointment in his second son. I'm sure you must understand that disappointment better than most."

I remained resolutely silent in word and impassive in expression.

"The late Lord Lydney knows you, as your father's daughter, will understand the care and importance of each piece—as well as have the judgment and experience to determine where it should finally be housed."

I do not want this responsibility. "What would the late Lord Lydney have me do?"

Sir Matthew smiled. "He told me you'd agree, and he is right, as always. His son does not seem to have an interest in art, unless the pieces may be sold to fund the purchase of horses for sport and amusement, that is."

At that, I looked up. "Pieces have been sold?" Mr.

Clarkson had said nothing to me of this after the last inventory, so it would have to have been more recent. “The new Lord Lydney is buying additional horses with the proceeds?”

“I cannot say. I cannot say upon what he draws an income, even. Likely he has none, as his father did not provide one for him.”

I nodded. I did not know what to make of that. A year earlier I would have defended Harry’s trustworthiness and honor. Now? I was not certain. And it was true—Harry had no love of antiquities.

Sir Matthew continued, “As your final duty toward the Lydney Collection, and as Sheffield Brothers’ final task as longtime curators and co-stewards, Lord Lydney would like you to carefully consider the options and then choose to donate the entire collection, in his name, to the South Kensington Museum.”

I shivered, suddenly realizing, *He speaks in present tense, as if the man were still alive!*

“Or, upon reflection, you may decide that his son meets the qualifications his father does not currently see, though he once did, and allow the collection to remain at Watchfield House. The late Lord Lydney prefers that it be left in the hands of someone who will not sell any part of it. He wants it to be seen, enjoyed, and appreciated as the pieces relate to one another.”

Marguerite slid a book sharply back into the case.

My stomach lurched. “I am to decide if Harry is disinherited or not?”

Sir Matthew grimaced as I mistakenly used that familiar name. "Harry? There is no engagement, is there? His father was given to believe . . ."

I shook my head. "There is no arrangement." That had become clear when he'd promised to return by early last spring but did not return for six months more, and then, I'd since learned, with a Venetian beauty in tow.

"You have no professional contracts with the South Kensington, either?" Sir Matthew asked. "It would be best if, during the period of trusteeship, you have no personal or professional understanding with either party which could call your objectivity into question."

I shook my head again. I could but wish that Sheffield Brothers had a professional arrangement with the budding museum or its supporters.

"Good. I shall make that clear to the potential recipients, as well." The solicitor handed a packet to me. "You are to determine where the treasures will go. Your firm has been paid to carry out its responsibilities until the conclusion of the year, is that not so?"

"Yes," I replied. A commission long since spent.

"Please do not speak of this matter with anyone who might profit from your decision until said decision is final," Sir Matthew continued. "You'll find papers within that may supplement your own inventories and perhaps inform your assessments."

I stood and took the packet from his hands. "How long do I have?"

He appeared to calculate. "It's a little more than three months till the year's end. It will take me that long to conclude probate and further details with the estate. Is that sufficient?"

"Yes."

"Very good, Miss Sheffield. I shall forward any further pertinent documents should I come across them."

As soon as he left the library, Marguerite drew near. "What shall you do?"

I sighed. "I could simply decide, here and now, to have done with it and give it all to the museum. I already know Harry's not trustworthy."

"Do you?" she asked. She must have seen the anger I felt cross my face because she put her hand up as if to quiet me. "I agree, dearest, that his disappearing for six months—especially in light of your, er, unspoken understanding—does not speak well for him. And yet, for the many years that preceded those six months, you trusted him implicitly."

"I was an untested girl. I held foolish dreams. I misinterpreted his actions."

She laughed quietly. "You are far too wise for that. Though none of us is immune to being misled by our hearts."

"You think he should have it, then?" I asked, bewildered.

"I think you should investigate and find the truth, as you always do with your treasures."

I opened my mouth to tell her that Harry was not one of my treasures. Was he? I closed it without speaking.

He left me and did not return when he said he would. Not once, but twice.

Marguerite waited for me to speak, and finally I did, after a realization. “This collection was my father’s as much as the late Lord Lydney’s. I must see this honestly through—where would it be best placed?—though it’s most likely that in the end, I will come to the same conclusion his father did.”

“Delivering those valuable *objets d’art* to the South Kensington Museum would be a fine means by which to serve justice to the new Lord Lydney,” she said. “Is that what you intend?”

“Does Harry know you are his champion?”

“I am *your* champion, dearest. But I have witnessed several occasions when you were happy together and I want to see you happy again—under whatever circumstances make that possible. I don’t want you to rush toward a justice which may not be just.”

“Why shouldn’t justice be served? I have been led along and then abandoned. Giving the collection to the South Kensington may be just after all.”

“That’s very possible; perhaps it’s even probable. His father has asked you to confirm that. And if you determine that justice will be served, it should be served cold, and I shall be gladdened when you find happiness elsewhere.”

Would I find happiness at all? Marguerite had not, not really. Perhaps happiness was not something to wish for.

We left the library, and as we entered the main reception area, all eyes turned to me. Now I knew why. Perhaps

Sir Matthew had told them—perhaps the late Lord Lydney himself had signaled his intentions to his friends. The young woman I had seen with Harry earlier appeared to circulate through the crowd, more hostess, it seemed, than guest.

They all watched as Harry looked at me and I back at him. He began to make his way toward me. I did not move.

Friends and associates of the old man likely believed the late Lord Lydney had placed this decision in my hands because he trusted me but did not trust himself to see or act with impartiality after the untimely death of Harry's older brother, Arthur. Perhaps they were right. But Lord Audley was not amiss in pointing out that the late Lord Lydney had not been a pleasant man, nor one who was reluctant to use other people to reach his own goals regardless of the cost. It had been no gift to force me to decide whether to plunder the house of the man I'd once loved. To do so would be to publicly confirm his father's claim that Harry was neither trustworthy nor honorable.

But did Harry deserve the collection, should it be freely given? That raised the next question: Had he ever deserved me? My heart, so freely given?

Harry finally arrived at my side and drew close to me, the bergamot and spice of his cologne enveloping me. The color of his eyes, which changed from hazel olive to hazel brown with his mood, reflected affection—hazel olive. I took a deep breath to steady the swelling emotions his nearness provoked. Instead, the scent of him made me waver even more.

He glanced at my ring finger and found it bare. “Seven tonight?”

He did not need to say where. I knew.

Duty-bound and prepaid, I could not avoid determining the fate of the riches. I could, however, have declined to meet Harry at seven.

But I did not.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

COLLECTING

It all started with a cow creamer! I first became aware of the mania for collecting, especially among the Victorian and Edwardian British, while watching an episode of *Jeeves and Wooster*: “Jeeves Saves the Cow Creamer.” In it, a certain set of men were trying to outdo and outmaneuver one another to acquire and keep a silver cow creamer. Wodehouse played the scenes for absurdity, of course, but in that poking of fun was a truth we all recognize—collecting can become a competitive sport.

Today's culture reflects the continuing interest in collections, and understanding and appreciating what those who came before us collected. How many of us enjoy watching *Antiques Roadshow*, for example? We gasp along with the owners when a rugged, torn blanket is valued at tens of thousands of dollars, or a treasure long believed to be a rare work of art is discovered to be a fake.

Collecting was and is both personal and public. Before there were museums, viewing other people's collections was a way to see what they had gathered from their travels, purchased on their own, or inherited from their family. There's pressure, then and now, for wealthy art owners to donate for

the good of all. The largest museum, at least by the sheer number of pieces, is the Victoria and Albert. It has nearly 150 galleries with items from over 5,000 years. The museum had its beginnings in the Great Exhibition of 1851, the brainchild of Prince Albert; in 1854 it became the South Kensington Museum, and finally ended up with its most fitting name, the V&A, in 1899.

REAL PEOPLE

One of my great pleasures as an author is weaving real people in among my fictional characters. In this book, the person who brought me—and I hope you, dear readers—considerable delight is Lady Charlotte Schreiber.

Although I found Lady Charlotte Schreiber in several sources, the richest trove was found in the book *Magpies, Squirrels and Thieves: How the Victorians Collected the World*, by Jacqueline Yallop.

In the book, I learned, “In a departure from the usual model of the gentleman’s club, women, too, were invited and by 1867 there were eight female members (of the Burlington Fine Arts Club).” Also, “Charlotte’s journals are littered with references to helping out her sister collectors. In November 1869, for example, she spent ‘two very pleasant hours’ with Mrs. Haliburton, a widowed china collector who became a regular visitor and correspondent, and in June 1884 she called on Lady Camden, in Eaton Square, to discuss china. By the 1870s, Charlotte was already being recognized as an

expert, and she was able to use her unusual level of access to the male worlds of curating and dealing to act on behalf of her female friends both at home and abroad.”

Lady Charlotte had a most unusual life, marrying a much-younger man (fourteen years her junior) for love, after her first husband’s death. You can view part of her collection of fans and parlor games, which she donated to the British Museum, here: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?searchText=schreiber+collection

Dante Rossetti was another real person who appears on the pages of the novel; he was a poet (as was his sister, Christina), an artist, an eccentric, and a collector. There is much to be read about him, too, in *Magpies* and elsewhere. His painting *Lady Lilith*, which appears in my book as the painting he showed Ellie in which Harry’s mother’s perfume bottle was a piece of staging, was sold by Sotheby’s as I was writing this novel. It sold for £680,000, or nearly one million US dollars. The promotional material the auction house put forward tells that the painting was shown at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1883, though it was painted, signed, and dated in 1867. Rossetti lived on Cheyne Walk, very near to where Miss Gillian Young, the heroine in my book *A Lady in Disguise*, lived just a few years later.

One interesting—and creepy—fact about Rossetti’s life is that he was so distraught when his wife died of a laudanum overdose that he had a manuscript of unpublished works buried with her. Many years later, short of cash and addicted

himself, he had the grave dug up to try to reclaim the work and sell it. Too bad he didn't make that £680,000 in his lifetime!

By all accounts, Elizabeth Garrett, later Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, was the first woman physician in England. She began her career as a nurse, then applied to Oxford, Cambridge, Glasgow, Edinburgh, St Andrews, and the Royal College of Surgeons. Each of them promptly rejected her, so she applied to the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries and was licensed through a loophole allowing her to practice medicine. The unexpected loophole was promptly sewn shut after her admittance, but that did not stop her, and other women's, forward progression in the field.

ITALIAN WARS OF UNIFICATION

History classes, for most of us, did not cover much Italian history. Readers may be surprised, as I was, to learn that there were three wars in the nineteenth century which, in the end, allowed the city-states of the Italian peninsula to become one unified Kingdom of Italy by 1871. To keep things from becoming too complex, I've often used the word *Italian* to describe the language and area as we know it today. As in all wars, there was looting, and much of the looting went into private collections.

I drew the desire for Harry's friend Stefano Viero to save his family's treasures from the truth of what went on in his beloved Venice in the years leading up to the 1866 return of Venice

from Austria to Italy. In *A Brief History of Venice* by Elizabeth Horodowich, I read, “Most dreadful, however, was the degree to which the French vandalized and pillaged the city. Napoleon ordered all the public statues and sculptures depicting the Lion of St Mark, both in the city and on the mainland, to be removed since they were symbols of a despotic regime. They were added to his imperial wealth. He also shipped the four bronze horses above the doorway of the basilica of San Marco to Paris on 7 December 1797, placing them first before the Palace of the Tuileries and then on the Arc de Triomphe. He put the lion on top of the column in the piazzetta on the Place des Invalides. Newspaper cartoons around Europe depicted the lion of St Mark caught in a net or crushed beneath the feet of a crowing Gallic cock as Napoleon’s troops systematically pillaged every corner of the city, including the mint, fleet, and archives. They hired women to pick precious stones out of their ancient settings that they melted down. They took the diamonds from the Treasury of San Marco to be set in Empress Josephine’s crown. In particular, in the weeks just before handing Venice over to the Austrians in January 1798, the French desperately tried to remove anything and everything from the city that might benefit their Austrian enemies.”

And then, from 1806 to 1810, “In a perhaps ironic reversal of much of Venetian history, the French methodically removed every last item of beauty or value from the city, literally down to the nails on which the city’s paintings hung. . . . While figures vary dramatically, approximately 80–90 churches and around 100 palaces were razed during the French occupation.

They carted off the valuable furnishings and artworks from both private homes and religious and charitable institutions to enrich French coffers and museums. Gold, silver, crosses, candlesticks, goblets, and crowns were melted down and disappeared forever. Marble, altars, paintings, relics, parquet floors, mosaics, frescoed ceilings, stuccoed walls, antique reliefs and inscriptions, furniture, porcelains, textiles, carpets, glass, and entire libraries were dismantled, destroyed, or sequestered by the crown. Through later auctions and resales these objects were eventually dispersed around the world.”

There were many frauds exposed in this book, as well as the authentication and valuation of precious works of art. Almost all the objects described are real pieces of art, drawn from various sources but described by my own observation and language. All the frauds, and the methods by which they were learned to be fraudulent, were also all drawn from authentic cases.

Because the Continent was often in an uproar and subject to art thefts, almost everyone was deceived at some time. Many of these frauds were not found out until the twentieth century when X-ray, carbon dating, and chemical testing came about. So, in the years when my book takes place, it really was a business built on experience and integrity.

And yet, isn't that what our lives are tested upon, even now? Integrity? That is not a bad thing. As Lady Charlotte says in the book, “It is only by testing or being tested that we understand whether the substance or the person is as it appears to be or is merely masquerading.”