



ELLORA'S CAVE

*Blush*

JUST LIKE  
OLD TIMES

*Hetty St. James*

SCINTILLATING  
SAMPLES

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Just Like Old Times

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# *JUST LIKE OLD TIMES*

Hetty St. James

## Dedication

To my dear son—who is also a man of few words—and his charming wife. You know who you are!

## Chapter One

The sun was relentless, beating down on the solitary figure of a man as he trudged down the dusty pathway. His bare feet, as well as other areas of skin exposed to the sun through the openings of the tattered shirt and ragged pants, were all a naturally dusky hue. Dark and dusty curls framed a pleasant, open face with surprisingly blue eyes. A medium-sized bundle was slung over one shoulder.

Squinting against the bright sunlight, he wondered anew at the way an artist would be able to look at different shades of brown and see tan and gold and cream and deep russet. Obviously, his eyes weren't that experienced. He sighed hugely, but continued his forward trek, stirring up little puffs of the dry dirt beneath his feet as he did so.

Far off in the distance, shimmering in the glaring light, he could make out a tree or two, if he searched diligently enough. Perhaps their presence signified also the presence of water—a most highly wished-for commodity. If he didn't allow himself to think of it, perhaps he wouldn't desire it quite so avidly.

After a few more steps his ears picked up the high-pitched jingling of harness, accompanied by the deeper thudding sounds of the horses' hooves coming from that same opposite direction. Many hooves, if his ears could be believed. Showing a deal of sense, the walker quickly moved to the side of the road and knelt down in the dried grass.

The lone man fumbled with the bundle, which had fallen to the ground. He had barely time to ease himself to a sitting position and take up a sketch pad and wisp of charcoal before the approaching horses became visible.

It was a small troop of French soldiers, in uniform, chattering amongst themselves. The leader spied the would-be artist and signaled for his troops to halt. "*Chien!*" the man shouted disparagingly, causing the artist to grin in spite of himself. It was a lop-

sided, loose sort of expression, one that would not have been recognized by any of his friends, had he any in this forsaken place.

*“Attendez-moi!”* the leader commanded, but the would-be artist ignored him. An angry movement of an arm caused one of the troops to hurriedly dismount and make his way to the artist. With a great flourish, the soldier withdrew his sword from the scabbard at his waist and advanced upon the hapless vagabond.

Appearances can be very deceiving, and that presented by the artist—primitive, dusty and, truth be told, apparently not too recently visited by cleanliness—led the soldier to believe that this was a person of little or no consequence. His manners were none too nice as he prodded the artist to his feet, helped along by the tip of his sword.

A sharp word from the troop leader directed at one of the other soldiers led to a piece of rope being thrown loosely over the prisoner’s head, where it rested lightly on his broad shoulders. But when the soldier tugged on the rope to encourage his captive into motion, a spate of rough words emerged from the hitherto silent man. He turned toward his small collection of belongings, indicating by a few sweeping motions that they must accompany him.

With a grunt, the soldier loosened the rope and motioned for his captive to gather up the measly belongings. Without another word, the little caravan headed down the roadway, stirring up more little puffs of dry dirt as they did so.

\* \* \* \* \*

At a knock on the rustic door to an even more rustic office, the only occupant raised his head. *“Oui,”* he called out, unfolding his tall frame from the chair behind the desk. Not by a flick of an eyelash did he indicate that he had ever before seen any of the persons who now entered his office. Those men in military uniform saluted, briskly and with many flourishes. The one who was not in uniform stood slackly, weaving slightly from side to side.

His dark face was now marked by light-colored streaks where perspiration had made rivulets as it moved downward, contrarily leaving darker stains on his clothing. The leader of the troop who had escorted him to this place prodded him to stand at attention. To no avail, however.

At a signal from the higher-ranking officer, a torrent of words issued forth from the troop leader. With a sound of disgust, that worthy demonstrated how he had gained obedience from his prisoner, clanking his sword in an effort to display his competence. He motioned to one of his men who, without ceremony, threw down the dusty satchel containing the prisoner's belongings, at his very feet.

"No, no!" the prisoner cried, cringing, falling to his knees to better protect his possessions. He turned his face upward, and with great pleading eyes, silently begged for compassion from the officer who had yet to utter a sound.

Some kindness, some inner feelings perhaps, prompted the officer to lower himself to the prisoner's level, and he held out his hand. The prisoner studied the face of his captor, then silently handed over the satchel.

Standing, the officer carefully placed the bag on his desk, and began a silent but thorough perusal of the poor contents. A battered tin cup, a piece of charcoal, a pad of paper tattered at the edges. Something that might once have been a shirt, but was now not much more than a collection of loose threads.

Warily watching the prisoner, the officer picked up each item in turn. It was only after observing a very slight reaction that the officer picked up the pad of paper and began to thumb through it.

"No, no!" came again from the prisoner, as he reached out one hand, tentatively, to protect his paper.

A careful perusal showed only very rudimentary sketches on several of the pages. Perhaps with instruction, the artist might have someday graduated to a ranking of "tolerable". As it was, however, the sketches were hardly better than might have been made by a child of six or seven years. But still, this one was certainly a church and,

several pages later, there was a bridge. Further on, a lightning-struck tree, listing badly to one side of the page. And finally, one sheet removed from the last one, a lady. Rather, it was a poor copy of a portrait of a lady.

The officer glanced down at the prisoner. Holding the pad of paper in one hand, the officer pointed to the kneeling man with the other, and raised one eyebrow in question.

*"Si, me,"* came the response, complete with bobbing head. One hand tentatively reached out for the remembered treasure.

*"No, I think I'll keep this for a while,"* the officer stated. In an outburst of words, he issued instructions to the little troupe. Two men approached the prisoner and, each of them taking one of his arms, pulled him to his feet and then out of the room. One of the soldiers so far forgot himself as to offer the captive a drink from his own canteen.

With a show of poor grace, the troop leader flung the bundle at the poor man, grasped him roughly by one arm, and led him to the door leading to the outside—and freedom. *"Allez!"* he said. *"Vamos!"* He flung one hand out to demonstrate where the prisoner should go.

It took no further encouragement for the dusty and tattered man to leave the building. Exhibiting a surprising burst of speed, he ran, heedless of the pebbles in the pathway, not stopping for breath or a furtive look, until he was a mile or more down the road. When he was sure that he was very much alone and unobserved, he allowed a small smile to creep across his face.

His shoulders seemed suddenly straighter, as was his back, and a cheerful tuneless whistle accompanied his steps as he hastened from the vicinity.



## Chapter Two

At a posh gentlemen's club in London, two old friends ran into each other, literally, rounding the corner at the same time, but from opposite directions. "Hastings!" cried the taller of the two, and reached eagerly to clutch the hand of the other.

"Bigelow." A wide smile creased the face under the dark curls and the startling blue eyes. "By Jove, it's about time." The two stood still, facing each other, looking for the proper words.

"Share a bottle with me?" inquired the man addressed as Bigelow. "I've never had the chance to thank you for what you did for Becky last year."

"Is she...is she—?"

"She's fine. Just fine, thanks to you. Entirely to you." He motioned the other man into the cozy room where a fire was crackling merrily in the huge fireplace. There were comfortable chairs placed one to either side of the marble surround, perfectly positioned for easy conversation, yet with a degree of privacy.

When a waiter appeared, unobtrusively, the order was given for a bottle of the best brandy and a pair of glasses to be brought in immediately, and then for them to be left alone.

The men raised a glass each in silent toast to the other. It was a few minutes before Paul Bigelow, otherwise known as the Earl of Poston, turned to face his companion. "And now, if you please, Hastings, I would like to know the story."

Viscount Richard Hastings, he of the blue eyes and dusky curls, turned toward his friend. "When Chris took that bullet, Becky insisted on staying behind to nurse him. It was just a fluke, of course. There was no reason for anyone to have been in that area, certainly no one with weapons. It can only have been a deserter. I couldn't find anyone and I did look. I stayed with them until Chris died and I saw that he was buried

properly. Becky...B-Becky was all any man could hope for, she even said the proper words over him and all, and then..." After a moment's silence, Hastings looked at his friend, and added, in a soft voice, "And then, I dug a grave and we placed his body there. It isn't what I would have wished for a hero but I didn't know what else to do just then. There was no one to ask." He shook his head from side to side, slowly, as he remembered the unhappy task.

Only someone who had been through such an ordeal could understand the necessity for a moment of reflection, to regain his composure before continuing with the sad story.

"We had previously decided to head for the coast, and planned to leave just after sunset that day, traveling at night, then resting up during the day. But before we could make a start, there were several army stragglers suddenly wandering through the area. Heaven only knows what might have happened to Becky had she left there, even with me to offer what protection I could. Gave her my provisions, including my rifle and ammunition, my sword—all my rations. Told her to barricade herself in the cellar, dark and dank as it was." He shook his head in remembrance. "Horrible place," he added, shuddering at the memory. "Told her I'd do my best to get her out, but it might take a day or two. She'd have to stay quiet, be careful until then."

"She always was the best of good playfellows, you know," said Bigelow, smiling fondly at the memory of his sister as a girl. "You do know, of course, that we all thought you'd offer for her. Mother, included. I think she was rather hopeful, in fact."

"To be certain, I had thought that myself," Hastings responded, a wry smile on his face. "But then she met Chris and it was all over. I doubt if she ever looked at me or any other man after that evening at Almack's." He took a sip of his brandy. "I'm sure we never considered that she'd someday be required to use all her youthful experience at being our prisoner." In spite of the somberness of the story, both men chuckled in remembrance of those earlier days, so long ago now—when they were all young.

"I had heard you were in the area, gathering intelligence, but still, you could have knocked me over with a feather when I saw you, there in that hut, in a Frenchified uniform! But then, you always did speak the language like a native," said Hastings.

"How better to be in a position to hear things one shouldn't hear than to be in such a place? And don't forget, our mother was French and always spoke it to Becky and me when we were children," added Bigelow.

"Talk about surprised! When you raised your head and I saw those blue eyes, I came close to giving it all away." Bigelow gazed at his oldest boyhood friend. "But then I remembered the games we played as boys. How we spent days devising ciphers and secret codes." He paused again, briefly. "You were so reluctant to give up the pad of papers I was sure there must be something hidden in there that you really wanted me to see. It bothered me that I could not express my relief at finding you alive and apparently well. But of course, I could not, without risking both our lives."

Hastings laughed. "For certain it wasn't in that cup or the raggedy shirt. Becky spent an enjoyable evening taking it apart to look so tattered. Said she'd spent years as a girl putting threads in things, now she could enjoy taking them out for a change." He took another swallow of his wine.

"Yes, I remember well how m'sister used to complain about forever running a needle into her finger or else she was tangling her threads. Who would have thought such an experience to come in handy so many years after?" Bigelow mused. "They were clever, though, your pictures," he continued. "I'd ridden past that church just the day before. So after you were dismissed," again he chuckled in remembrance, "I set out again, apparently just wandering through the countryside."

"I rode a few miles in one direction, but it didn't feel right, so I turned back, and went past the church again, but going the other way this time. It wasn't long before I passed the bridge. I took the pad out to look at it more closely and realized that there were blank pages between the drawings, and not always the same amount of blank pages. I decided they must have some significance."

"You needed to be aware of the proper tree. If you'd turned too soon, you'd have missed the road to the hut where Becky was."

"I soon realized that the number of blank pages did indeed mean something, and before I knew it, I'd found the tree you drew so accurately, along with the miniature of Becky hanging from one of the branches. From that point on, it was a fairly simple rescue."

"Yes, but you had a good horse, and money. We'd had neither."

Bigelow faced his friend, surprised by the look of longing on Hastings' face. "I say. Come home with me for dinner. The Dowager is here in town, you know. And Becky. Surely you'd give them the chance to say 'thank you'. Becky has asked about you several times, you know, and I had to tell her I'd had no word."

"After you dismissed me, I had to go on acting the fool, or risk being taken up again. I made my way to the coast, all right, but all the ships were going in the wrong direction. It took me entirely too long to get back to England, and I promise you, I don't intend to leave it again anytime soon."

"Then come with me. We'll celebrate—"

"Celebrate?"

"Oh, any number of things." Bigelow stood up, encouraging his friend to do the same. "First and foremost, I think, will be a toast in appreciation that we're all back together again. Just like old times."

Hastings smiled as he stood, and nodded his head. "Just like old times," he agreed.

## About the Author

Having the books of Georgette Heyer and Agatha Christie as companions while growing up in the midwestern U.S., it's hardly to be wondered at that Hetty St. James would become a devoted Anglophile. When she decided to write a book, of course it was a Regency novel that emerged. Several others followed, although not all of them to the completed stage. Thanks to Cotillion, however, they soon will all be finished! And possibly even published! Other favorite eras of history are the Plantagenet/Tudor years, but always, Regency is at the top of the list.

In addition to writing and reading about the Regency, Ms. St. James greatly appreciates classical music and Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy. Of course, he was also wonderful as Jack in the recent filmed version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Although once married, Ms. St. James is now not married, but is still the mother of one son, who encourages her writing efforts.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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