

# A Q&A with Barbara Taylor Bradford

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**This year marks the 40th anniversary of your first book, the million-copy bestseller, *A Woman of Substance*. Since then, you've written over thirty novels. Where do you get your ideas from?**

I really don't know. With *A Woman of Substance*, I was writing a piece one day – I was a journalist at the time – when quite suddenly, there was a girl in my head. A little girl walking across a moor. I thought, what's this? And I put another piece of paper in the typewriter and started writing: a little girl, walking across the moors. She's a servant working in a big house and she's going to make it. And then I typed – she is a girl who becomes a woman of substance. I remember thinking that was a great title! With *Master of His Fate*, a similar thing happened. I was working on another book, and I had stopped working for the day. I was sitting down with a cup of tea – thinking of nothing really – and there was this boy. And I thought, who's this little boy pushing a barrow up a hill? And within half an hour, I just knew he was a little boy who worked with his father on a market stall, who wanted to become a great merchant prince. That's really just what happens – someone just pops into my head; I don't know from where.

**What drew you to set the novel in the Victorian period?**

Well, once I had the idea, I thought – when is this going to be? What period of time should it be? And I remembered, as I was writing, that Fortnum & Mason was in its heyday in the

1800s, so it occurred to me then to set it in the Victorian times. It's a fascinating era, and a very strange time in a sense because Britain was the greatest nation, and the richest nation, but there was also great poverty – and so it really was two different worlds.

### **Did you do a lot of research for the book?**

Yes, as I realised I knew nothing, really, about the Victorian times. The only thing I knew was that human nature doesn't change. Every feeling we have as human beings, they all had before us. So, I knew the Victorians were like us, but I then realised I needed facts: I needed the names of streets, I needed to know about markets. When I'm researching a period, I really like to read about the people in it. I read a wonderful biography of Dickens by Claire Tomalin, I read A.N. Wilson's *Victoria: A Life*, I read a book about the Prince of Wales who became King Edward VII. The research took a long time, and when I finished that I knew I had to start writing – because if you spend too much time researching, you'd never get the book finished.

### **Was there anything you learnt during your research that shocked you?**

Well, I learnt that the poverty really was incredible – the conditions were terrible. We were the richest country in the world, but the average people went to bed with empty bellies. And I was also reminded, as I read, what a man's world it was. Of course, it still is a man's world! But it was a man's world to the nth degree in Victorian England – they really looked down on women, they really thought women weren't clever enough to be their friends. And the other thing that shocked me was

the clothing that women wore in the mid-1800s. It was crinoline time, so their outfits started with underwear, then an overskirt, and then a hoop made of metal, and then over that came two layers of petticoats. And then came the corset! And then over the crinoline shell went another couple of underskirts, and only *then* the dress on top of it all! It made me think, how on earth could anyone have a glamorous affair?! You'd have to take the maid with you to help you in and out of your outfit.

**Over the years, you've written so many incredible family sagas. What is it that makes stories about families so compelling?**

I think the most dangerous place to be in the world is in the middle of a large family. There are sons, daughters, spouses, grandchildren, cousins, aunts and uncles – who are all full of emotions. And there are so many emotions: anger, jealousy, love, jealousy (there's a lot of it!), greed. If you think of all the emotions we're filled with, and then imagine you have eighteen people in a family – well, you could have a war! And blood isn't always thicker than water.

**The second book in the House of Falconer series, *In the Lion's Den*, is out in Autumn 2019 – turn the page for a sneak peek...**

# ONE

DREAD. That was the feeling James Lionel Falconer was experiencing as he sat at his desk in his office at the Malvern building in Piccadilly.

It was Wednesday, September twenty-fifth in 1889, and that afternoon a packet of documents had arrived an hour ago by courier from Paris. James had opened the packet eagerly and read them immediately, shocked to the core by the bad news they contained.

James looked down at his hands resting on the pile of documents, a chill running through him at the thought of giving them to Henry Malvern, who was an ailing man. Rocked by his daughter's breakdown and his brother Joshua's stroke and lingering death, his employer had been unwell all summer with a debilitating fatigue. But James had no choice. The head of the company had to know everything.

A deep sigh escaped him as he opened the top drawer of his desk, placed the documents inside, locked the drawer, and pocketed the key.

Taking out his watch he saw that it was almost seven o'clock. At least he didn't have to face Mr. Malvern until tomorrow morning. By which time his friend and colleague Peter Keller would be in his office next door, if James needed him. Keller was stalwart and had become a close friend, with shared interests. And Keller worked in the Wine Division and might be able to help solve this mess.

Striding across the room, James put on his coat and left his office.

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When James stepped outside onto Piccadilly, it was drizzling after a day of heavy rain. The early evening light had dimmed, and there was a slight mist, but the street lamps were aglow. People were rushing home after work, dodging in and out, and around each other, the pavements wet and slippery. James joined the throng.

He hurried toward Half Moon Street, wanting to get home as fast as he could. The sound of horses hooves, the rattling of carriage wheels, and the general bustle of the traffic in the streets grated on him tonight. He turned up the collar of his top coat and plunged his hands into his pockets. It was not only wet but cold for September.

The moment he opened the door and went into the small flat he shared with his Uncle George, a newspaperman, James felt a great sense

of relief. The gas lamps on the walls filled the room with a shimmering light and a fire burned in the hearth. In an instant his uncle's smiling, face appeared around the kitchen door. 'Supper is almost ready!' he announced. Smiling, James hung his damp coat on a hook behind the door, then returned to the kitchen to help George.

His uncle was deftly carving a large piece of roast beef, and he said, without looking up, 'Your grandmother left this for us today, while we were at work.' Laughing, he added, 'And these two loaves of freshly baked bread. You see, she dotes on you, Jimmy lad.'

'And you too, Uncle George... you're her son.'

A smile slid across George's face, and he finally looked across at his nephew. 'She's the best there is, nobody like her.'

James nodded, and spotted the small glass pot with a white paper label stuck on it. *Horseradish sauce*, it read, in his grandmother's handwriting. He smiled inside. She always thought of every little thing, right down to the last detail.

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Sitting at the kitchen table a bit later, eating their roast beef sandwiches and drinking mugs of hot tea, James was quiet. His mind kept going over the problems dogging the Wine Division in Le Havre, problems that the documents he'd received today confirmed.

'I dread giving the terrible news from Paris to Mr. Malvern,' James said, grimacing.

'Just give him the documents and tell him he won't like what he reads,' George had suggested. 'You may well be surprised that he's been expecting bad news anyway.'

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Sleep did not come easily that night. James considered it to be his saviour, the key to his health. Yet when it was elusive he did not toss and turn like some people might; instead he lay perfectly still. Reflection and analysis were his special friends during these wearisome, sleepless hours.

He was glad he had his uncle to talk to. He had always been particularly close to George, even as a child, and they had truly bonded on a different level when he moved into the flat on Half Moon Street in Mayfair. Not that they saw much of each other. George was a journalist working on *The Chronicle*, where his star had risen over the years. His hours at the newspaper changed constantly.

James appreciated George's wisdom and began slowly to relax, stretching his long legs in the bed, settling himself comfortably on the pillow. The dread had slithered away. Mr. Malvern *had* to know everything and perhaps he might not be too surprised after all.

However, James was glad that Peter Keller would be in the next office. They had become good friends. Keller knew the wine business; his knowledge and dedication, plus hard work gave James the freedom to oversee the business's shopping arcades, which could not be neglected.

Much against his will, Alexis Malvern crept into his mind, and for a split second, he felt a rush of emotion, sudden desire for her. But he squashed this when he focused on her lack of concern for her father and the business she would one day inherit.

He saw her continued absence as a dereliction of duty. And these thoughts damaged her image in his mind. She just didn't quite live up to his standards, didn't fit the bill was the way he thought of her behaviour. Quite unexpectedly, Georgiana Ward came into his mind, and he wondered how she was, how she was doing. He had only ever once asked his cousin William if he had any news of her. William had shaken his head, then murmured, 'My mother has only heard from her once, letting her know that she was feeling better away from London fogs. That's all I know.'

James had remained silent at the time, not wanting to probe too hard. A small sigh escaped as he turned on his side. Whenever he thought of the older woman who had been his first lover he realized how kind she had been to him, how much she had cared about him. One day, he thought. One day I will meet someone like her... I know I will.