



The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo

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This much seems to be agreed: in 1817, Mary Willcox, a woman in her early twenties from the village of Witheridge in mid-Devon, was found wandering on a country lane in Gloucestershire. At first she remained silent, but when she spoke it was in an unknown foreign tongue. She was despatched to the workhouse in Bristol, but eventually she was taken in by the Worralls, a wealthy local family. For whatever reason, she persuaded the Worralls, and many others, that she was Lady Caraboo, a princess from a distant Eastern clime. For some ten weeks, sundry experts became convinced of her authenticity and she achieved celebrity in the locality and the press. Mary was the most unreliable of witnesses, but a glance at Wikipedia would provide **BfK** readers with more detail of her probable earlier history and eventual fortunes.

Catherine Johnson broadly adopts this version of Mary's adventures in Gloucestershire. The fiction also allows insights into Caraboo's thinking and the invention of characters who gather around her at Knole Park, the Worralls' home. Cassandra, their 16-year-old daughter, is Johnson's own creation. Steeped in romantic novels, including Mary Shelley's **Frankenstein**, Cassandra's thoughts run mostly on visits to the dressmaker and the milliner, and upon young men. Appearance is all. She is captivated in an instant by the 'dark and long' eyelashes of the local innkeeper's son, though when it comes to a choice, she's rather more entranced by Edmund Gresham, school friend of her brother Fred ('He would look at her the way he had done at the ball - his eyes intense, almost desperate?'); his charms are enhanced by the prospect of a life at Gresham Hall and the title which marriage might one day bring.

Cassandra's shallowness serves to emphasise the courage of Caraboo/Mary and, ironically, her integrity. Johnson's Caraboo is only 17 but she has already suffered the loss of a still-born child, and the book opens with her rape at the rough hands of a couple of farm boys. Her own quick-witted inventions derive from the life she has endured, the scriptural stories through which she learned to read at Sunday school, and the bedtime tales she made up to distract her anxious little sister back home in Devon. So, as each challenge comes along - facing a phrenology and linguistics expert, resisting a rum-soaked fraud of a naval captain who's never been to sea - she responds with an increasing awareness of her own strength. Eventually - and this is probably the strongest strand in the novel - it is her encounter with Fred which changes things for both of them.

We meet Fred early in the tale on one of his regular visits with his friends to a brothel, close to Westminster School, where he is in his final term. Ahead lie the tedium of Oxford (he's no scholar) and a lifetime in his father's bank in

Bristol. On his return to Knole Park for the holidays, Fred sees through Caraboo's pretence. But to his surprise, he comes to recognise Mary's intrinsic honesty; she is toying with a social class with pretension at its core. Fred is convinced that in the end, 'Every one of us is a liar'. In a wildly romantic conclusion, it looks as though the unlikely couple will leap every barrier the differences of social class put in their way.

Some of the social commentary seems heavy-handed ('She's intelligent' for a woman. And an American?); and until Fred's self-awareness dawns, readers may feel there are longeurs where the plot lacks incident. Cassandra remains no more than an amusing caricature, but even so, the tale of Lady Caraboo 'a curious one indeed' and the transforming relationship between Mary and Fred make for an entertaining read.

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