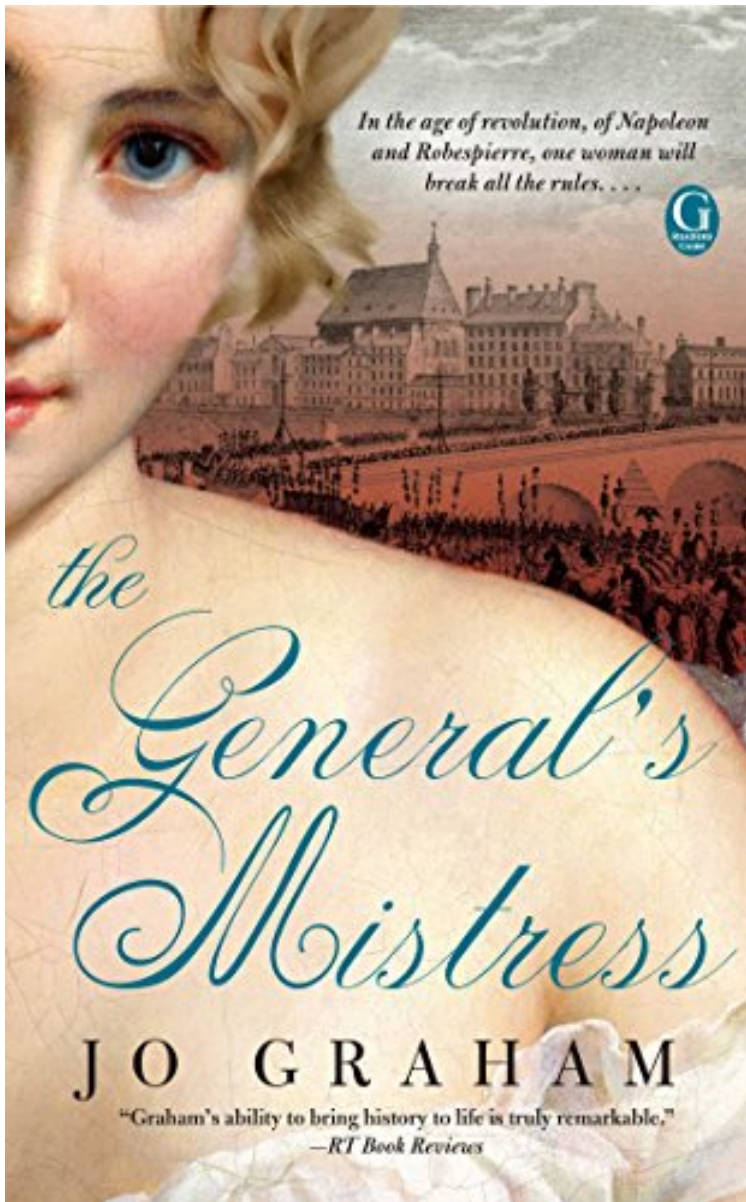


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# The General's Mistress (English Edition)



Par Jo Graham

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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA Dutch woman flees her marriage to become a courtesan against the backdrop of the French Revolution in this steamy historical novel described as Girl with a Pearl Earring meets Dangerous Liaisons.Libert, Egalit, Sensualit. . . . As a spirit of change overturns Europes old order, strong-willed Elzelina Versfelt enters her own age of revolution. Married as a romantic young girl to a man who wanted only her money, but neither loves nor desires her, Elza refuses to be chained any longer. Leaving Amsterdam, her marriage, and her home, she flees to Francewhere the old rules no longer apply, debauchery is not a sin . . . and nothing is forbidden. Yet Elza finds herself bound in a new way, to the ambitious

General Moreau. And while they share pleasure, pain, and carnal adventures, she dreams of another man, an unruly red-haired soldier she first saw in the promise of a Tarot card. Drawn by this half-real, half-imagined hero, Elza defies her relationship with Moreau, and begins a perilous search across war-torn Europe. . . . But will this woman with the instincts of a survivor, the passion of a courtesan, and the gift of second sight ever find the destiny for which she has risked it all? This stunning novel blends history with the language of the heart to tell a sensual story of an era of upheaval . . . and of the clamoring, dangerous desires of a woman's

soul.

**Extrait**

**The Cuckoos Child**

Charles van Aylde was not a nice young gentleman. His fair hair was powdered, swept back from a high, flawless brow. His eyes were blue. Blue eyes were common enough, but his were midnight, the color of sapphires, the color of secrets. His coat was midnight too, his collar reaching to his chin, the shoulders padded wide, the very height of fashion. His cravat was ruched with Valenciennes lace; his hands were long and white. He affected a small quizzing glass, and he wore a diamond on the last finger of his left hand. I considered him in the mirror, my own reflection, but no longer a girl. In the drawing rooms and spas of the waning eighteenth century, I knew I was prey. Men might play deadly games of war or passion or politics, but the role of a young woman was to be the prize, the lovely and innocent thing for which all others strove for good or ill, to take or defend her virtue and honor as though she were a castle perennially under siege. Such was against my nature. If that was the lot of women, then I would become Charles instead. I passed through the card parlors where, as Charles, I played conservatively and somehow usually left the table with more than I had brought, though there were no large wins that might call attention to me. Charles did not speak much, and his face was expressionless. In the drawing rooms and at the gaming tables of the baths, in the assembly rooms where young ladies danced the minuet under the careful eyes of their mothers, his manners were polished but not excessive. He was, after all, the scion of an old Dutch family of means, a wealthy man but not a titled one, reveling in the indiscreet pressure of the fingers in the figures of the dance, the brush of his hand against a blushing cheek, the sudden heated look that spoke more of conquest than any kinder passion. And yet, when he left the rooms it was alone. There were no careful mothers in the inns and taverns that surrounded the baths proper. Instead the taverns were full of soldiers, travelers, tradesmen, and whores. The stakes were higher and the games less genteel. I did not venture here without a sword at my side. It was a dress sword, a pretty thing, but no less sharp. There were words over cards with a drunk hussar, a recruit hardly more than his own age. Steel rang as the dress sword was drawn sinister, a left-handed fencer in a dirty, crowded room. The hussars' friends stepped between. Let's not take this so seriously. There's too much drink all around. An officer barely twenty broke it up. The recruit compounded his difficulties by promptly vomiting on the officer, who swore in Flemish and French both. I took my winnings and sheathed my blade. The coins we were quarreling over would hardly pay my laundress. With a negligent shrug, I left the disputed coins on the table in the puddle of spilt beer. Use it to clean up then, I said. I glanced once more at the young officer holding the recruit's arms, raised one eyebrow, and left the tavern, reveling in the sharp spice of danger. I did watch my back on the way back to the spa, but the only person I met was a whore. Get you something nice, sir? she asked, dropping a battered fan from ample cleavage. I stopped and looked at her appraisingly. I don't think so just now, I said, cultivating just the right gesture, one finger beneath her chin, tilting her head into the light. But you are lovely. I walked back to the spa, to the fine rooms for wealthy people, the suites of travelers with plenty of money to spend taking the waters. Charles van Aylde did not slip in. He strode, the swagger of a blade too young to fear anything. I lit a candle in front of the gilt glass over the sitting room fireplace, the flare illuminating even, handsome features, a mouth too thin and tight for beauty. I closed the heavy velvet drapes and went into the bedchamber on the left. There, in front of the dresser and washstand, I took off my coat and carefully hung it away. The rooms were silent, though voices still came from the streets. Outside a spring drizzle was beginning. I dipped a cloth and washed the powder from my face with tepid water, looking in the mirror. I opened my shirt, watching one finger trace down from the opened cravat to the top of the contrasting lines of stays, the swell of breasts carefully hidden. Upon my word, I said, what are you hiding, Charles? I smiled at myself in the mirror, and it was not such a nice smile. I opened the top of the stays and rubbed at one pale pink nipple. Charles smiled back in the mirror. Lovely, I protest, I whispered. White flesh and white corset, white cravat and shirt opened, man's clothes over woman's body. I ran my hands over my breasts, pulling the nipples free of the top of the corset, drawing and plucking at them, watching them roseate. You are beautiful, I whispered, but there was no one to answer but myself. The next afternoon I was taking English tea with my mother in one of the salons, wearing a gown of raspberry-and-white-striped lawn. A lace shawl around my shoulders. I dropped it. Before I could bend, a hand seized it. Allow me, a gentleman said. It was the officer

from the tavern. He lifted the delicate lace and handed it to me. Your servant, Madame. Thank you. He clicked his heels together smartly. Lieutenant Bleeker, Madame. The honor is mine. He seemed even younger in the light of day. Madame Ringeling, I said. And this is my mother, Madame van Aylde-Versfelt.

I indicated my mother. She nodded over her tea. I saw his eyes widen almost imperceptibly. Yes, he recognized the name. Would he take the bait? I believe I am acquainted with your brother, Madame, he said. Oh? I said. Over his shoulder in the great mirrors I could see my reflection. With honey-blond hair, a rose and white complexion, and a pouting mouth stained the color of raspberries, Madame Ringeling resembled her brother, but not so very closely. My son is around somewhere, my mother said. It was pleasant to make your acquaintance, Lieutenant, I said airily. Perhaps our paths will cross again. There was a power to it, knowing something he could not possibly guess. It was a polite dismissal, and he made his bows. My mother took up the lace shawl and began absently shredding it. Elzelina, I wish youd be more polite. Youre quite too old for competition with your younger brother. At thirty-eight, my mother hardly looked as though her youth was far behind. Her hair was still platinum fair, and her hands were hardly wrinkled at all. You would never bring me anywhere if Charles didnt insist, she said. He always thinks of my comfort. Mother, it was I who suggested we come to the baths, I said. Your doctor recommended it, remember? Yes, but I would never have come without Charles, she said. Her beautiful fingers picked at the lace. I cant imagine traveling without him to protect me. What if we were set upon by highwaymen? In case you hadnt noticed, Im an adequate shot, I said tightly. I am quite certain Charles is no better than I. Mother picked up her teacup. Oh, I know Leo showed you how to hold a gun, and Im sure thats all very well, but you cant imagine youre half the man Charles is. Mother, I said, getting to my feet, I assure you that I am entirely the man Charles is. I stalked out of the salon. I was still fuming when I opened the door to our rooms. Berthe was brushing out my dinner gown. I flung my shoes under the bed and opened the Hungary Water, dabbing it on my temples. My face was bright pink in the mirror. Have you quarreled with Madame again? Berthe asked. Charles this and Charles that and all the time Charles, I said. I put down the bottle and ran my hands over my face, breathing in the deep scents of citrus and vetiver. Charles is dead these ten years. Berthe came over and stood behind me as I regarded her stout form next to mine in the mirror. And its a sad thing, to be sure. But you know your mother would never have come to Bad Bentheim without you playacting at Charles. And her doctor said that staying in Amsterdam was just making her worse. Because she thinks theres a curse on the house, I said. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. She thinks that her uncle watches her out of mirrors and that there are bloodied monks in the cellar left over from the Spanish and a dead childs ghost moaning around in the attic. Compared to some of the things my mother believes, believing that Charles is alive is fairly sane.

Berthe patted me on the back. Shes not the first mother to lose a child and disbelieve it. For ten years? I asked. Isnt that carrying it a bit far? Charles would be sixteen if he were alive. He died when I was eight. We had been in Rome. An elderly cardinal was persuaded that my father was his distant kin, and insisted that we stay in a lovely house he owned in the Eternal City. For all I knew, it was true. My father was a big man, broad-shouldered, and he smelled of tobacco and sweated velvet. He wore his light-brown hair in an unpowdered queue, the strands on the sides coming loose and falling forward over his stubbled cheeks. He shaved before the evenings activities began, so daylight always caught him unshaven, if it caught him at all. My father was the illegitimate son of a Hungarian count, or so he said, but it was his word against that of my mothers kin. My mothers people, the van Aylde and the Jonghes, were old merchant families in Amsterdam, men with warehouses and ships and fine multistory houses overlooking the harbor. My mother was an orphan and an heiress who lived with her uncle in an old house full of tiny rooms and teak paneling brought back from the other side of the world. When she was sixteen she climbed out a barred window and ran away with Leopold Versfelt, who might or might not be the illegitimate son of a Hungarian count, and whose income was precisely nothing per annum. Rome was pestilential. All I could remember was tossing and turning in the bed beside the window, my nurse talking to me in Italian and sponging me off. I knew my parents were sick, and Charles too. I woke one night from fevered dreams of sacrifices and funeral pyres, shivering and calling out, My lady, dear lady, dont let him go. The omens are bad, the fire dies in the brazier. Dear lady, do not let him go! Shhhh, my nurse whispered. I saw her face in the firelight, heard her speak to someone behind her: She is burning up. Iras! I cried. Come on! Bring the child! The priest stepped into the light of the candle. Shes raving, he said, and made the sign of the cross over me. He leaned down. Dear child, do you understand that I am about to give you Extreme Unction? I struggled with the bedclothes. Iras! Come on! Aurelianus cant hold them forever! I felt the priests cool hand on my brow, heard him speaking the Latin words softly. It only made me wilder. He could not get the wafer in my mouth. Requiescat in

pacem, the priest said. The candle flared, illuminating a face like that of a knight on a tomb, then plunging me into darkness. My nurse sponged me with a cool cloth. There, sweet child, she said. There, sweet child. The boy, the boy . . . I whispered. It seemed to me that her voice broke. Rest now, child. Rest now. You can do nothing for him. I cant? No, she said, drawing cool water across my lips. Sleep, little one. Sleep. I must get to him, I insisted, curling onto my side. Sun and moon and the sons of gods. I have failed in every charge and I shall know no peace. Youve done nothing wrong, she said. Rest now, little one. There is nothing you must do. I lay by the window half-open on the Roman night, streets quiet and still. I fell into fevered dreams and woke in the chill hour before dawn. My sheets were damp and twisted, but I was not cold. My hands shook as I sat up, but I did not shiver. In the night, the fever had left me. Giulia? I said. I heard her voice in the hall talking to someone. It was my father who answered. He sounded shaken, and his voice was thready. Shes sleeping now, my nurse said. Her fevers broken, praise to all the saints! But she was that close, I tell you, sir, that close to heaven. And at the worst of it, she was calling for her brother. My father was weeping.

And he will never answer, he said, and his voice choked on a sob. Charles had died, and I lived. In our second week at the spa, Cousin Louisa arrived. She was my mothers first cousin, raised with her. Like my mother, she was fair, but shorter and plump, with pink cheeks, as lively as my mother was quiet. I was by then incredibly glad to see her. Louisa embraced me, and then the three of us sat down to the serious business of luncheon and all of the stories about cousins I had hardly sorted out. My mother picked at her food and at last said she was too tired from taking the waters that morning, and that she believed she would retire. I returned to Louisas rooms instead. Her maid was still busy unpacking. Louisa traveled with at least ten trunks, all filled with frills and robes and little lawn ruffles. She didnt even wait for us to be seated before she asked, Well, how is she? The doctor hoped that she would improve. I shrugged. Shes better than she was in Amsterdam. She knows who I am half the time. And Charles? No change, I said. I sat down on Louisas bed. Surely you dont expect one. Not really, Louisa said. No going out lurking as Charles tonight. You have to stay here and bear your old cousin company! I smiled in spite of myself. Cousin Louisa, it will be a pleasure. Louisa rang for a collation in her rooms that evening, and we sat beside a comfortable fire that took the chill out of the air, munching on bread and cheese and tiny sausages wrapped in pastry. There was a box of cards on the side table, and I suggested a hand. Louisa laughed. You cant play cards with those! Well, I suppose you could, but someone would die! Seeing my confusion, she took up the box. Its an Italian deck for fortune-telling. A friend gave them to me. Parlor tricks, but fun. Will I marry a handsome man? That sort of thing. I thought you already did, I said. Her husband, Ernst, was fifty and as wide as he was tall, but he and Louisa seemed to get along. She laughed again. Very well, then. Will you find a handsome lover? She looked at me and raised both plucked eyebrows. Now, thats something Id like to find out, I said. Ill play. Louisa lit more candles so we could see better, and I spread the cards out in the light. Round gold coins. Swords interlocked in intricate patterns, printed in blue and green and gold and red. Knights and kings holding the globe in their hands. Youre supposed to lay out three piles, like this, Louisa said. You ask a question, and then you shuffle and cut three times. The first one is what, the second one is how, and the third one is why. I can never make them work at all, not even enough to be funny. I shrugged. They were beautiful. I ran my fingers over them, feeling them warm in my hands, creamy paper flowing like water. Chalices and staves, pages and queens. I pulled one out. A woman sat enthroned, her blue robe flowing around her feet. Roses surrounded her, and behind her were two pillars with a veil between. She wore a crown surmounted by the horned moon, and her face was serene. Louisa squinted at it. So are you going to see about a lover or not? I cut the card back into the deck and shuffled, my hands enjoying the familiar feel of the cards. If there was one thing I had learned from my father, it was how to shuffle. Tell me then, I said to them, will I find a lover whom I truly love? The cards flashed, colors bright and gleaming. Tell me what will happen, I repeated, bending my whole will toward them. Whom will I find, and how, and why? I cut them and laid them out in three, then turned the first one over. The King of Chalices looked up at me, his red hair garish on the printed paper, a golden cup in his hand. Behind him was the sea, and in his other hand was a sword ornamented with pearls. A red-haired man, Louisa said. Quick in emotion, in anger or love, I said, peering at the picture carefully, the storm waves tossing behind him. I felt distinctly odd. Thats what the waves mean. Generous and dangerous too. I flipped the second card over. Fortunes Wheel, I said. See, Louisa? How the poor souls bound to the wheel go up to fame and riches and then tumble down to the grave, only to go around again? That doesnt look very nice, Louisa said. Do you think your fortunes will tumble? Does your husband have any risky financial transactions? I shrugged again. Not that I know of. But with the revolution in France and all, even kings are going to the guillotine. And peasants are coming up. My eyes

ran over the wheel. Up, up, up on the wheel of fortune to the dizzying pinnacle, and then suddenly tumbling over. Over and over, up and down, cradle to grave. Elzelina? Louisa touched my shoulder. Are you all right?

Fine, I said. I felt odd, as if the pictures were drawing me into them, unnaturally bright. I smiled at Louisa reassuringly. Im fine. I turned the last card over. An emperor rode in triumph in a chariot, his hair wreathed in victory, his arms extended, holding the reins. One black horse and one white horse drew the chariot, fine, prancing steeds, but they pulled in different directions, the black one stamping at the ground. Only the Emperors strength kept them yoked together. Behind him the artist had suggested the slave at his shoulder, the one whose task it was to whisper that all glory is fleeting. The Chariot, I said. Thats why. The wind through the world. Its starting again. Its already started. What are you talking about? Louisa said. . . . A pyre on a beach, the flames rising to the sky, a prince of a people who were no more, his face washed in firelight. A pyre glittering with gilded ornament and bright with silks beginning to smolder while elephants trumpeted and incense fumed, the smoke rolling over his body beneath its magnificent pall, his eyes weighted with coins, long red hair swept back from a face that was still young. A red-haired girl turning suddenly, her face lit by flaring torches, illuminating the pale lines of her throat and her old black velvet dress Louisas hand on my wrist. Elzelina? Are you all right? I think wed better put the cards away. I focused on her face. It was real and close, concerned blue eyes, skin a little blotchy along her chin. Yes, I said. I think wed better. Im sorry. I just felt a little faint for a moment. I scooped the cards together and put them in the box without looking at them. I should have been frightened, but I wasnt. I wanted to touch them again. I wanted to see. Would you mind if I kept these for a while, Louisa? She shrugged, though she still looked at me a little strangely. Not at all. I went back to my room. Mother was asleep in hers. She would never wake, not with her laudanum every night. I lit one candle and took off my shoes and stockings, garters and all. I unfastened my dress, removed it, and hung it neatly. The stays were next, and then my chemise. In the candlelight, the body in the glass certainly did not belong to Charles. Honey-blond hair fell over my shoulders, not quite covering white breasts, rose-tipped and soft. My thighs were long and muscled, my stomach rounding forward just a little over a mound of Venus covered in gold curls. One hand rose, traced the circle of my navel. I traced it with my finger, round and round. My hand slid lower, entangled in soft hair. I bit my lip. Abruptly, I turned from the mirror and opened the box, shaking out the cards onto my white bed. Gold and scarlet, garish blues and greens, falling like leaves. Crossed swords entwined with roses. Cups ranged in rows. The golden sun shining over boy and girl twins who stood together hand in hand. A tower fell and the sea lapped about it. I threw myself on top of them. The soft paper crinkled under my weight. I shook the covers, and the cards fell around me like blossoms. Tell me, I whispered, but I did not know what question I was asking. Prsentation de l'diteur A Dutch woman flees her marriage to become a courtesan against the backdrop of the French Revolution in this steamy historical novel described as Girl with a Pearl Earring meets Dangerous Liaisons. Libert, Egalit, Sensualit. . . . As a spirit of change overturns Europes old order, strong-willed Elzelina Versfelt enters her own age of revolution. Married as a romantic young girl to a man who wanted only her money, but neither loves nor desires her, Elza refuses to be chained any longer. Leaving Amsterdam, her marriage, and her home, she flees to France where the old rules no longer apply, debauchery is not a sin . . . and nothing is forbidden. Yet Elza finds herself bound in a new way, to the ambitious General Moreau. And while they share pleasure, pain, and carnal adventures, she dreams of another man, an unruly red-haired soldier she first saw in the promise of a Tarot card. Drawn by this half-real, half-imagined hero, Elza defies her relationship with Moreau, and begins a perilous search across war-torn Europe. . . . But will this woman with the instincts of a survivor, the passion of a courtesan, and the gift of second sight ever find the destiny for which she has risked it all? This stunning novel blends history with the language of the heart to tell a sensual story of an era of upheaval . . . and of the clamoring, dangerous desires of a womans soul.