



The King of the Castle

Victoria Holt

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Dallas Lawson came alone to the legend-haunted chateau, the castle of the notorious Comte de la Talle, deep in the wine country of France. When she set eyes on the handsome Comte, she knew she would never leave willingly. What she didn't know was that she might never leave ...alive.

The King of the Castle Details

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Misfit says

Dallas Lawson was trained to follow in her father's footsteps restoring old paintings but when he dies she's left at a crossroads - take a position as governess, take charity from relatives or try to continue the career she's trained for in a man's world. A commission comes in for her father from the Comté de la Talle of Chateaux Galliard and she accepts, although she "forgets" to mention her father is dead and she's coming in his place, much to the chagrin of everyone at the Chateaux.

Dallas settles in to life at the Chateaux and begins work on the paintings, but in typical Holt fashion our heroine soon finds things amiss in the household. The Comté is dark and brooding (of course) and suspected of killing his first wife. His daughter Genevieve is a spoiled fourteen year old brat with a penchant for shutting doors at the most inappropriate times (remember that), a mystery surrounding some Emeralds lost during the Revolution along with Dallas' discovery of a long hidden wall painting that may reveal a clue to the location of those emeralds.

On paper that all sounds appealing to fans of Holt and the romantic suspense genre, but unfortunately this one fell flat as a pancake - at least for this reader. I just did not warm to Dallas; I found no chemistry whatsoever between Dallas and the Comté, Genevieve pretty whiny and irritating, a mystery that wasn't much of a mystery at all, and worst of all a baddie was pretty easy to guess. Meh. Only for die-hard fans of Holt set on reading all of her books, otherwise I suggest you pass.

HÜLYA says

Bu kitabi biraz daha vasatti.

Jess The Bookworm says

This is a gothic novel, set in the French countryside. It has all of the elements which I love in a gothic novel: the beautiful old chateau, which has dark passageways and secret dungeons, an innocent impressionable girl who arrives at said house, only to discover that the owner of the house is dark, brooding, full of secrets and irresistible.

Dallas has always followed in her father's footsteps in the profession of restoring old paintings. Her father has just passed away, and she has nowhere to go, and so she takes up the job offer received by her father from the Comté de la Talle of Chateau Galliard, without telling the Comté that her father is dead and she is taking his place. Obviously, she meets with resistance when she arrives, but is given the chance to prove herself.

After beginning her work, she becomes obsessed with the Chateau, and explores all of its hidden nooks and crannies. She also becomes obsessed with the Comté, even after hearing all of the dark rumours surrounding the death of his wife.

This isn't a masterpiece of a book, however, it is thoroughly enjoyable, filled with mystery and suspense, and I battled to put it down. I will definitely be looking out for more of this author's books in the future.

Dean Cummings says

I was reading Victoria Holt's description of Dallas Lawson's first glimpse of Chateau Gaillard when I was struck by this passage:

"There are occasions in life when reality is more exciting, more enchanting than the picture the imagination has supplied – but they are rare; and when they come they should be savored to the full."

Admittedly, these are the musings of a fictional character, the product of Holt's creative writing talents. But even so, I couldn't help but reflect on how true this statement is, or at least true in part for me. As soon as I read the statement I paused and reflected on those occasions when the "reality" was better than I could have "imagined." I'll agree with Holt's character that this does indeed occur, but I'll have to disagree with her assertion that these experiences are rare.

Within minutes I'd thought of a list of "real life" experiences that were more exciting and more enchanting than I'd previously imagined. Here are a few I came up with:

Hiking the inspiringly scenic Johnston's Canyon trail in Banff National Park.

Experiencing the visually breathtaking "Alice in Wonderland" Ride at Disneyland.

The youthful awakenings I experienced when I first read "Great Expectations" as a teenager.

That summer of '77 when I first saw "Star Wars" leaving the theater an awestruck 10 year old.

The first time I listened to The Thompson Twins '84 album "Into the Gap."

The first time I kissed the woman who would later become my wife.

The first (and second) time I saw Gwen Stefani in concert - witnessing performing excellence.

The first time I heard a recording of RFK's "MLK" Indianapolis speech – moved beyond belief.

The first time I held each of my sons in my arms – when it dawned on me I was their dad.

Witnessing Maria Sharapova's spellbinding run to win the ladies singles at the '08 Aussie Open.

Seeing the magnificent Garden Island of Kauai for the very first time.

It was the speed by which I mentally amassed this list that I began to appreciate how many of these "beyond expectation" experiences I've had. I suspect that this may be true for most of us. But maybe the real value in Miss Lawson's statement is not in how "often" reality exceeds "imagination" but how well we remember each of these occasions. Perhaps they might not be so "rare" if we got better at the remembering part.

It is with this in mind that I ask myself how the reality of reading "The King of the Castle" compared with what I'd imagined it might be. Here's what I have to say about that:

Firstly, the fact that the main setting is a chateau in Wine country France is easy to discover, since we're told

this in the back cover synopsis. Knowing this, I was anticipating a “vitalization” of the ambiance by way of architectural descriptions of the chateau. In my opinion, Victoria Holt outdid herself on this count. Here were a couple of wonderful examples of this that really stood out for me:

“The aspect was purely medieval; and the solid buttresses and towers gave an air of having been built for defense. A fortress surely. As my eyes went from the keep overlooking the drawbridge, to the moat – dry, I caught a glimpse of rich green grass growing there. Excitement gripped me as I gazed up at the corbeled parapet supported by numerous machicolations about the outer façade.”

And then there was this exquisite description of part of the chateau’s interior:

“A clock with carved cupid posed above its face stood on the mantelpiece, and on either side of it were two delicately colored Sevres vases. The chairs were upholstered in tapestry and their framework was decorated with flowers and scrolls.”

The imagery of the chateau’s exterior, especially the locations of the machicolations, had me imagining the family defending the chateau under attack, the family fighting back the marauders by firing arrows, then perhaps even pouring hot oil through the machicolations.

The description of the room had me imagining one of the Comte’s aristocratic descendants standing among other members of the aristocracy, discussing world affairs or perhaps even an audience with a Marquis or even a Duke.

I always appreciate when authors add sufficient detail so I can visualize the surrounding the characters find themselves in. Victoria Holt did a superb job of this!

Another highpoint of the early part of this story was the way Miss Dallas Lawson’s “mission” was presented to the reader. The premise was unique and appealing. Basically, Dallas worked with her father in his restoration business, where he specialized in repairing fine art and renovation of medieval architecture. After a brief stay in art school, Dallas’s father convinced her that she would learn so much more by quitting school and apprenticing under his direct guidance.

It turned out that Dallas had a natural ability for the work, and as a result, her father turned over much of the painting restoration assignments to Dallas, while he focused on the architectural work for those clients.

One day a letter arrived from the Comte de la Talle of the Gaillard Chateau. The Comte informed Dallas’s father that he was in possession of a collection of fine paintings which required restoration. Could Mr. Lawson come to the chateau, estimate what work was necessary, and if satisfactory arrangement could be reached, stay until completed?

Her father was delighted with the proposed project and informed Dallas that if he successfully landed the job, he would have her join him to stay at the chateau until the work was finished. Unfortunately, another letter soon followed, in which the Comte informed Dallas’s father that the project would have to be delayed and that he would be in touch when he was ready.

Two years after the letter, Dallas’s’ father passed away and shortly after, another letter arrived from the Comte in which he said he was now ready to reengage Mr. Lawson in the project. By this point Dallas was a skilled restorer of paintings with years of experience. Despite her achievements, Dallas feared that she would more than likely be dismissed as a restoration candidate for the chateau job if the Comte were to discover it was her alone, and not her father, offering the services. It was with this in mind that Dallas decides to simply show up at the chateau, rather than writing the Comte in advance. She knew she was qualified and thought her appearance might give her a better chance than would an engagement through written correspondence.

I really liked this plot point because it showed that this character was willing to stand up to any discrimination that may have come to her. She is determined to show the Comte that she is capable and she is passionate about her work. I thought that this premise was excellent and I knew it would present unique challenges to our protagonist. This is always good news for a story.

Another part I enjoyed was the scene of Dallas's first "interview" at the chateau. The scene and dialogue were well written, witty and entertaining. This was especially true when Dallas learns that she's being interviewed not by the great Comte himself, but by his young cousin Phillippe de la Talle.

The conversation itself was "tactically elegant", like a conversational form of fencing.

In the following dialogue, Phillippe has learned that Mr. Dawson has passed away and that this young lady (about his age coincidentally) is claiming that she is qualified to do the restoration work of his uncle's collection of priceless art. While Dallas is asserting herself, the Comte's nephew is still reeling from the fact that a young woman has appeared instead of Mr. Lawson.

"Did you think, Mademoiselle Lawson, that had you explained that your father was dead we should have declined your services?"

Dallas replies:

"I believe that your object was to have the pictures restored and was under the impression that it was the work which was important, not the sex of the restorer."

Phillippe's brow furrows as it appears he's trying to make a decision.

"It seems strange that you did not write to tell us." He says, pressing the issue.

Dallas rises to her feet, striding haughtily toward the door.

"One moment Mademoiselle" Phillippe calls out, then continues in a softer tone:

"You see, you have placed yourself in a very awkward situation" he begins to explain.

"I did not think that my credentials would be slighted without scrutiny. I have never worked before in France and was unprepared for such a reception."

To use a fencing term, this was a good "thrust" by Dallas. Phillippe rose to it.

"Mademoiselle, I assure you, you will be treated as courteously in France as anywhere else." Phillippe pauses, then went on...

"You spoke of credentials."

Dallas begins retrieving the letters from her attaché.

"I have recommendations from people who are very pleased with my work...in England. I have worked in some of our great houses and have been entrusted with masterpieces...but if you're not interested..."

He holds the letters.

"That is not true, Mademoiselle...I am interested" Phillippe replies.

This conversation seemed to reinforce the idea that Dallas hails from the “impoverished gentry.” In this way, she’s a woman completely alone, not fitting in with the servants, nor is she of the class to enjoy the comforts, security and associations of the wealthy families. But she does possess sufficient dignity and comports herself with adequate poise and confidence as to catch the attention of the Comte’s cousin.

In my opinion, this is a shining example of how to “show” the reader the context of the situation as opposed to “telling us.”

“The King of the Castle” is a novel I read with great enthusiasm. The enigmatic teen daughter of the Comte, the deceptively provincial grape growing families, and the incredible way in which Victoria Holt shows us a love, so gradually building. History reignited through the restoration of paintings, some of which are in plain view and some of which are hidden, daring the artisan to try to find and unveil them.

As an expert in the restoration of fine paintings, our character Dallas is able to spend an extended amount of time in the “company” of the great painters in history: Nicolas Poussin, Claude Lorrain and Jean-Antoine Watteau to name a few. She was able to immerse herself in the masterpieces of fine art.

In this way, as I read “The King of the Castle” I felt a bond with Holt’s protagonist. Indeed, I was reading a masterpiece of the Gothic Romance genre!

V.L. Holt says

Suspense, romance, history, a chateau, a vineyard, a wild child, ah bliss. The heroine was no wilting flower. She had pluck, intelligence. She was amused upon discovering her weaknesses, but didn't try to justify them. My favorite quote from the book; "I did not love him for his virtues." A fantastic read.

Tria says

I don't usually have any interest in romance fiction (though I do enjoy romantic fanfiction, for very different reasons), so it surprised me the first time I read this to actually enjoy that aspect of the story.

The mysteries of the plot don't feel like they were created just to have something to hang the romance upon, which is a pleasant and refreshing difference from most books of this "historical romance" type that I've encountered in the past. (Please note, romance fans, I'm NOT saying ALL romance is like that, so please don't get defensive!)

I wouldn't have chosen this book on my own, I don't think -- it's one I inherited as a part of my late mother's library, which I'm trying to read through piece by piece -- but I did enjoy it, and think I'll move on to the other Holt book in Mum's collection without anxiety.

(Please note: I have a **duplicate copy of this available** through BookMooch and registered on BookCrossing -- please do feel free to comment to this review if you'd care to claim it! Thanks.)

Sophie says

I used to love Victoria Holt's books, so when I found *The King of the Castle* buried in the back of one of my bookshelves, I had to reread it to see if I would love it still. In many ways, it did hold up for me, but I suspect that this time I was more aware of the author's formula than I used to be. Many of the clues the heroine missed about what was really going on in the castle seemed obvious to me, although I never felt like she was stupid because she didn't see them too. I liked that the heroine of the story is a woman of education and skills and I like how she finds her way to the chateau and demands that the Comte respect her abilities as an art restorer, just as he would have her father. I think the Comte must have been one of Holt's less sinister heroes. He is certainly mysterious, and there is plenty of gossip about him, but the reader never sees him doing anything too suspect. In fact, he's notable more for his absence than his presence in the book, and the contact between hero and heroine is so scant it's a little hard to understand why they fall in love. But of course they do, because that's the formula, and it works. All in all, I enjoyed the story and may browse around for more of Ms. Holt's gothic novels to reread.

Julz says

3.5 rounded up to 4

This was a good book but didn't turn out to be the nail biter that some of Holt's other stories were for me. Maybe it would have if it was the first, but now I know her style.

This one was about an art restorer coming in her deceased father's place without a head's up to the Ol' Comte. He's dark and dangerous and probably murdered his wife but of course she falls in love with him. There's a cousin who is to be his heir who gets married off to the H's mistress so you get all that spiteful OW goodness with this one. There's also the handsome neighbor and a scissor wielding daughter with their own issues that spices up the pot.

The setting is a huge, creepy old castle, complete with a dungeon and trap door where many an unsuspecting peasant met their doom. If the place isn't haunted, it should be.

For some gossipy non-gothic spoilers...The H in this story is a manwhore (he uses the word "promiscuous" so no denial there), and doesn't promise he'll forever leave his old ways behind him. Pretty interesting concept, especially since he said it (view spoiler) Pretty scary, huh?

If you like all that dark and creepy stuff mixed in with your romance, then you might like this one. Not her very best but still pretty good.

Pam Walker says

This year I began re-reading Victoria Holt's books that I had first read as a teenager and because I had a sketchy list of ones I had read, I just started from the beginning again and find that I am enjoying them just as much as I did the first time. Holt is the master of the Gothic romance/mystery, and she never fails to not disappoint. This one has Dallas Lawson, art restorer, going to France to the chateau of the Comte de la talle

in the place of her father who had recently died. The household was surprised to find a female instead of a male, and she had to prove herself. I will not spoil the plot for anyone, but Holt throws in a mystery along with the romance and keeps you guessing until almost the end of the book. Anyone who likes this genre should read Holt's books.

Crystal says

This is a reread for me. I'm slowly rereading all my old favorite authors from high school, to see if it's worth retaining them in my library. I was pleasantly surprised by rereading another Victoria Holt novel recently, so I thought another of her books, set in French wine country, would be perfect for a vacation in (German) wine country. In a way it was. It was an appropriate vacation read. Just not a great book.

I feel like every time I reread a gothic romance that I read as a teen, I see the similarities to Jane Eyre, and this story was no exception. The first wife was dead, but otherwise there were so many similarities. In theory, I love Jane Eyre, so realizing a book is in the same lines isn't a problem for me. But it still needs to be well written and enjoyable, and this story simply didn't do that for me. Dallas is an impulsive, emotional, inconsistent, and even reckless character, impulsive and impetuous in her emotions as well as her actions. I appreciate that Victoria Holt didn't try to make her a standard shrinking violet romantic heroine, but how she was portrayed wasn't very likable, and often left me wondering how historically accurate and appropriate her life was. There were sections of text detailing the castle and the lands and communities around and in it that suggested Ms. Holt did a lot of research, and I mostly enjoyed those parts, even when they verged on info dumps. And I realize that a woman trying to gain acceptance and respect in a trained profession at that time would have had to be a strong character. But I just couldn't buy into the story. Dallas' internal narrative is simply too erratic. Instead of creating romantic and suspenseful tension, it just annoyed me. Lothair isn't a very appealing hero either, despite certain revelations that certainly shed a different light on his character. So I didn't love any characters in the book, and had a hard time believing or investing in the romance, so while I finished it, and really couldn't remember whodunit (and what they done) until the end of the story, I can't say I enjoyed myself a lot. The book did keep me occupied during boring travel times via plane and bus, but mostly I'm glad it's finished, and I'm going to give away my old copy and move on to something more enjoyable.

Urszula says

I have always been a fan of historical mystery/romance novels, thus I liked this book from the first page. I like Victoria Holt's style – strong female lead, juicy mystery, misunderstood male characters and unexpected villains.

This book is a very light read. The story is easy to follow, with great and interesting information about the main characters thrown in. The chateau made a perfect setting for a mystery novel.

I also liked learning more about the work involved in art restoration and wine making.

It was good to see Dallas being of strong character, working hard to become independent and believing that she can achieve anything. This story is set in times when women depended on men and/or their families and long before feminism empowered them.

Rubeena says

One of my favorite novels. When I get totally depressed, I often read this book.

I recently came to know that there is a genre called Gothic romance and Victoria Holt is among the best. She knows how to tell a story- it has everything- romance, suspense, mystery, old world charm, French chateaus..

I just love the way she has portrayed the lead lady character. If I ever get a chance to be a book character, I want to be Dallas Lawson in 'King of the Castle'.

I value this book as the best in my collection as I got a copy from my late Uncle's and it has the real vintage look- hard bound and calligraphic script.

Nancy says

I read all of Victoria Holt mystery/romance books in my 30s. Holt books are a higher caliber of romance fiction than something like Harlequins. Historically accurate. Good recreational reading with something to keep you turning pages.

Sarah says

This book checks off all the gothic essentials (big old house, domineering man, dead wife, morally ambiguous other guy) plus the Victoria Holt added bonus of "kid in trouble". A part that stood out to me was the heroine's profession as a restorer of antique paintings and buildings. I liked that she had a trade besides "governess" (even though all the other characters keep saying what a good governess she'd be). I had trouble pinning down when it took place since it was never explicitly stated, but I'm fairly sure it was the 1890s. Fun times in wine country with dungeons and mysterious missing jewels.

Read as part of my gothic kick while on vacation.

Kristy says

I think Victoria Holt is my favorite author. She writes mysteries that have a touch of romance. She wrote back in the 60's and 70's so they are clean and good ol' fun.
