



THE DOCTOR'S WIFE

MYRA HARGRAVE MCILVAIN

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*Stroud, your strength and love keep me going.
This is for you.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THE DOCTOR'S WIFE

MYRA HARGRAVE MCGILVAIN



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Chapter One

Dear Papa and Helga, doors open and close...

November 5, 1845

The ship's gangplank slid into the fog obscuring the Galveston dock. Amelia Anton scooped Frau Regina von Ewald up in her arms, practically carrying the grieving woman as they made their way down the narrow wood walkway onto the pier. Herr von Ewald ignored them both, shoving ahead to the waiting carriage. The hood of Amelia's cape protected her blonde braids from the chill and offered a hidden place from which to stare at black men who appeared and disappeared into the mist, heaving bales of cotton off a nearby freight wagon. The heavy air muted their slow work song and sweat drenched their ragged clothing, even in the bone-aching cold. Southern slavery—as described in the immigrant guidebooks—had been one of her first lessons for her pupil, young Otto.

The boy's papa, Amelia's turnip-shaped employer, clambered into the enclosed carriage without turning back to look for his wife, the dear lady responsible for Amelia being hired. Her reason for being in this strange land—as the boy's private tutor—had died along with her student. Amelia, shuddering at the thought that she may have made a huge mistake, pulled her cape tight against her body and glanced through the back window of the carriage toward the mournful sound of slaves, invisible in the white haze.



The three of them rode in silence, squeezed into the lurching coach, its wheels making slushing sounds in the rutted street. Freight wagons clanked past and coarse voices shouted commands in English. From under her hood, Amelia watched Herr von Ewald, aspiring merchant prince, staring sullenly at the faded, low-slung buildings, so different from his family's sprawling estate. Was he hating his older brother for inheriting the family fortune? For sending him to seek his own way in Texas? He leaned forward expectantly when the Tremont House, a broad white expanse hugging the mud street, loomed out of the fog. Black men dressed in spotless white uniforms stood on each side of double doors. Herr von Ewald, who had ignored Amelia throughout the three-month ocean voyage, turned toward her, "If they can't speak German, you'll have to get us registered." He bolted into the hotel, ignoring his wife.

Dear Papa and Helga, all the months speaking English may be about to pay off. Amelia clenched her jaw and stepped from the carriage without waiting for von Ewald's instructions. She laid her hand on Frau von Ewald's shoulder as the doormen gently lifted the trembling woman from the carriage.

"Amelia, come talk to these people," von Ewald shouted.

"Please move madam into the hotel," she kept her voice low as she spoke to the doormen who averted their eyes as though they were not aware von Ewald was stomping

up and down on the hotel's broad wood porch.

She lowered her head to avoid gazing like a peasant at the sprawling lobby circled by thick white columns. Candles lit a large chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. She nodded to the doormen who settled Frau von Ewald on a long red sofa.

"There you are, Stein," von Ewald bellowed. "Tell these people who I am."

Amelia turned to see Dr. Joseph Stein, the ship physician who had cared for Otto and for his mama, rush through the hotel's broad front doors.

"I asked you not to leave the ship until I could join you." The doctor kept his voice low; his wiry black hair tousled as usual, his disheveled jacket hanging loose as he bent almost double to glare—eye level—at Herr von Ewald.

Amelia watched a thin man with slick black hair and a pencil-wide mustache rushing across the lobby, clasping his hands at his chest, and nodding at the two men. "Pardon me, gentlemen. I'm Oscar Wilhite, manager of the Tremont House."

Dr. Stein turned quickly and surprised Amelia by switching into perfect English, "We want to get Frau von Ewald settled very quickly."

Oscar Wilhite looked around like a man hoping something would happen to call him away from his difficult task. "Please explain to her husband that when a foreign ship comes in, we seclude our guests who are ill until we are sure they aren't carrying a contagious disease. You understand? It's just a precaution."

Amelia was torn between feeling sorry for the manager and wanting to laugh, as his eyes darted toward von Ewald, pacing the lobby like an over-heated bull.

"An isolated room will be fine. Please place her husband in separate quarters." Dr. Stein's brows rose, commanding the hotel manager's understanding. "She needs rest. And send for a local doctor. I want to arrange for her care before my ship sails in the morning for Indian Point."

Oscar Wilhite nodded, glancing toward von Ewald. Then, holding his head high—eyes avoiding the little German's angry gaze—he fled toward a door leading off the lobby.



Frau von Ewald's room was small, at the end of the hallway and on the backside of the hotel. The only window looked out on a narrow alley. A single straight-back chair sat next to a matching dark oak table supporting a porcelain bowl and pitcher. The dark bed frame towered above the frail woman.

Dr. Stein turned to Amelia. "Will you stay with her? You'll be in quarantine."

Quarantine? I thought the poor woman was dying of grief. Papa and Helga would be frantic. I don't know the first thing about caring for sick people. She sucked in a breath to compose herself. "Do you have to leave? She became so attached to you on the ship."

"I'm employed by the *Adelsverein* to travel with the immigrants all the way to Indian Point on Matagorda Bay. The noblemen who organize these immigrant groups assure them that a physician will accompany each vessel. I'll stay with you as long as possible."

She turned to answer a soft knock at the door. A young black woman wearing a fluffy white cap and a white apron over a black dress nodded solemnly. "I'm Fannie, your chambermaid. I'll get what you need and bring you food." She stepped into the room, a tiny body with strong, over-sized hands folded at her waist, waiting for instructions.

Dr. Stein smiled at the chambermaid, the look in the giant man's eyes as gentle as when he had spoken to young Otto during his illness. "Please bring enough hot water for

a mustard plaster.” He nodded toward Amelia, “and hot tea for Fraulein Anton.”

Just as Dr. Stein finished showing Amelia how to apply the mustard plaster to draw out toxins, a diminutive man with receding black hair, swept into the room. “I’m Dr. Ashbel Smith.” He shook Dr. Stein’s hand, peering all the while with piercing bead-eyes at Frau von Ewald. He bowed slightly to the chambermaid. “Good morning, Fannie. I’m glad you’re here.”

He appeared not to notice her curtsy as if she were greeting royalty. “I hear the patient came in on the brig *Johann Dethardt* from Bremen.”

“She was our only sick passenger when we arrived early this morning,” Dr. Stein said.

Dr. Smith gazed at Frau von Ewald’s flushed face, murmuring softly, comforting the listless form. He turned abruptly, looked up at the towering doctor. “It’s rare that we have an arrival from Germany with yellow fever. Did you come into another southern port?”

“A brief stop in New Orleans. Not even overnight.”

“If it’s yellow fever, we’ll know soon enough. She’s already very weak.”

“She lost her only child at sea,” Dr. Stein said.

Dr. Smith glanced sharply at Amelia, then turning to Dr. Stein, raised his chin like he was ready for an argument. “I’m convinced yellow fever’s not contagious. Quarantining her is useless. I ate some of the black vomit several years ago. Didn’t harm me in the least. Most people think I’m crazy. Many of them work at this hotel.”

Dr. Stein clasped his hands behind his back, bending slightly at his waist, appearing unmoved by the doctor’s revelation. “In Germany, we’ve had no experience with yellow fever. What treatment, in addition to quinine and mustard plasters, do you recommend?”

“Quinine. Plenty of quinine to lower the fever, keep down the muscle aches. No sense bleeding her. She’s too weak.” Dr. Smith suddenly smiled. “I understand you’re going on to Indian Point. Give my regards to Dr. Reuss and his bride. They married here last month. Made quite a stir in this hotel.” He placed his hand on Frau von Ewald’s head in a farewell gesture or maybe a blessing. Then, he strode from the room saying, “I’ll check on the patient each day.”

Fannie stared at the door through which the doctor had passed.

“You have great respect for Dr. Smith?” Amelia asked.

“He’s the best doctor in the world. He saved me from yellow fever.” Fannie’s black eyes flashed with pride. “That’s why I’m called to help. I’m immune.”



Dr. Stein spent the afternoon pacing in long strides across the floor and smiling reassuringly at Amelia as she tried to follow his instructions. When he spoke, which was rare, his voice remained so low that she had to draw near. He had been the same nearly silent presence after little Otto died. Day after day he had stood beside Amelia and Frau von Ewald as she gripped the ship’s railing where the boy’s body had been lowered into the sea. For brief periods, as the ship’s only doctor, he slipped away to care for other passengers. But he always returned to stand vigil with the grieving woman.

The evening grew late, and he motioned for Amelia to follow him into the hall. “I’m sorry to leave you alone. May I write to you?” He ducked his head and then stammered, “To inquire after your mistress.”

“I’m happy to keep you informed.”

“I hope to see you again,” he backed away, then turning to leave, banged his black

case into the wall as if the passageway had shrunk.



The hotel fell silent except for an occasional drunk stumbling down the alley. The first time one of them knocked a greeting on the shuttered window, Amelia had jumped, and Fannie rolled her eyes. “They won’t hurt you. They’d like for you to return their knock, but if you do, they’ll make it a game of tempting you to open the window and give them enough money for another bottle.”

Amelia laughed. “The drunks in our village loved a good time.”

I can never tell Papa and Helga that continuing to teach in our village’s little school offered no better choice for a husband than Helga found in Max—a drunk who loves to have a good time, but can’t hold a job—or one of the local peasants who will toil forever in the von Ewald’s extensive fields.



Fannie had placed both candles near the bed offering plenty of light for Amelia to apply the mustard plasters and bathe Frau von Ewald’s feverish body with cool rags. When Fannie returned with a fresh pitcher of water, she whispered, “I remember where it hurts to be touched. I’ll lift her real easy, and you slip the spoon of quinine between her lips.”

This is the closest I’ve ever been to black flesh. The skin on her face looks soft as warm chocolate. Amelia nodded and watched Fannie’s calloused hands move with the gentleness of a feather around the whiteness of Frau’s body.

“Fannie promises this quinine will help,” her voice soothed like powder.

“Otto, where’s Otto?” Frau’s blue eyes, paled to a dull gray, searched a far off place.

“He’s right here. Next to you.” Amelia caressed the trembling fingers, then blew out one candle and watched the other fade to a flicker. She and Fannie worked in silence, applying cool rags without ever slowing the raging fever cooking its victim from the inside.



Light had crept through the shutters, casting a frame around the drawn face of their patient, and sending Fannie for a fresh pitcher of water. Herr von Ewald stuck his head in the door and quickly backed away. Amelia hurried into the hallway and called, “She needs to see you, sir.”

He stopped and raised an eyebrow toward Amelia.

“She’s calling for Otto. She needs you.”

“I’ll handle my affairs without your comments.” He turned, and his bulk almost knocked Dr. Smith to the floor. “*Dummkopf*,” he snorted and rushed into the lobby.

“That fat man called me a blockhead,” Dr. Smith announced, as he brushed past Amelia and stood in the center of the room, staring at his patient. “Continue making her as comfortable as possible.”

“Is there nothing else I can do?”

“Expect the black vomit. Pray it doesn’t last long.”

“Fannie said you cured her of yellow fever.”

“Fannie’s different. She’s young, and she’s got mule strength. This lady started from a position of weakness. Probably why she was the only one on the ship to get sick.” He walked to the bedside, bent over Frau von Ewald and murmured, “You are in good hands, madam.”

“Otto? Is that Otto?”

Amelia clasped Frau von Ewald’s hands. “Otto’s right here. He’s next to you.”

She held these soft palms together as though offering a prayer to her husband, pleading with him to employ me. She said I was the village’s best teacher, that I spoke English, that Pastor Anton had taught Helga and me to love the classics and religion. She said I would be a blessing. Amelia bent to kiss the fevered fingers. “Thank you, my lady.”



Late that afternoon, just as a welcome streak of sunlight moved along the alley painting the room—for a moment—in its rosy glow, Frau von Ewald roused toward the light, her eyes searching, “Dr. Stein....” The gurgle began like a low moan that grew into convulsive retching. Amelia anchored the woman in her arms, steadying her as Fannie held the basin. The slimy black bile spilled from her lips in acrid gushes.

Father in Heaven, take this woman. Amelia cradled her lady and watched the room grow dark. She did not know when Fannie lit a candle and eased onto the other side of the bed to take the convulsing woman into her arms. The noises from deep inside had stopped, and her breath came in shallow, slowing gasps. Then, she heard Fannie’s hoarse whisper, “Bless her soul; it’s over.”

Fannie came around the bed, clutching Amelia against hard little breasts, patting her like a baby as they both cried from exhaustion and relief.

“No reason that poor woman had to die with only you and me. Where’s that good-for-nothing man?”

“Hiding somewhere. Afraid he’ll get sick.”

“If he does, I ain’t taking care of him.”

Amelia laughed, pulled away to sop at her tears and blow her nose on some of the clean rags. “Neither am I.” *But what if I do have to care for him? I have no choice.*



She had assumed the tiny space on the backside of the hotel’s first floor was hers, and that she would remain there after she and Fannie washed Frau von Ewald’s skeletal body and dressed it for burial. Instead, before the graveside service, von Ewald sent one of the hotel slaves to announce that she would be moving across the alley to the servants’ quarters.



The knock at the door that night was sharp, insistent, and well past the decent hour for an unannounced caller. Amelia held her candle high as she peered into the narrow hallway. The yellow light from Herr von Ewald’s lantern made his smirk look almost menacing. His eyebrows rose sharply toward the smooth spot where hair had once grown. His pink jowls shook when he spoke.

“My dear Fraulein Anton, I’ve borne the expense of your passage from Germany. With the loss of my son Otto, I no longer need your tutoring services. The passing of my wife has freed me of all my obligations to you. I’ve secured passage on a riverboat at daybreak for Houston. From there I’m destined for my new mercantile business in the village of Industry.”

Amelia leaned her slender frame against the door for support and stared down at the pudgy little man, trying to grasp what she was hearing.

He held up one finger, indicating that he had not finished. “Do not give in to self-pity, my dear, for I have spoken to the manager of this fine hotel. You are young and strong and will be well received as a chambermaid.” Sucking in his breath, which caused his nostrils to flair like bellows, von Ewald waved the lantern toward a black man, more than a head taller than the German, standing in the shadows at rigid attention. She recognized the uniform of the Tremont House slaves. Light from the lantern made the man’s black skin glow against his white linen jacket encrusted with gold epaulettes.

“This gentleman was kind enough to deliver my wife’s travel trunk. You’re a good fit for her clothing, even her slippers. Von Ewald stroked the goatee darkening his chin. I’ve left a token of my appreciation for your service.”

“A token?” Amelia was disgusted to hear the tremble in her voice. She cleared her throat, and in a rush of fury over being cheated out of what she was due, she held up *her* finger. “Sir, you hired me to tutor your son. You said 100 Prussian Thalers a month and my keep.”

I didn’t listen when Papa reminded me that my teacher’s pay was 400 Thalers. I was willing to accept anything to avoid living like Helga. Besides, the articles in all the newspapers quoted settlers raving about success in Texas. “I did not claim my pay on shipboard or after we reached Galveston. I thought you were too burdened over Otto’s death and—”

“Report to the kitchen in the morning at 4:30. Good evening, Fraulein Amelia Anton. Do well in your new position.” Wheeling away from her, Herr Gustav von Ewald practically bounced down the hall—a man freed of his last burden.

“Ma’am?” The uniformed slave bowed toward the glimmer of Amelia’s candle. He slid Frau von Ewald’s travel trunk into the room. His voice was a deep baritone. “I’ll come in the morning to move your trunk to our chambermaids’ quarters.”

Amelia nodded. Was she supposed to curtsy?

The slave bowed again, his face a blank slate, as he backed into the darkness.

Amelia knelt beside the barrel-top trunk. Her fingers stroked the painted cluster of Alpine roses that Frau von Ewald had painted along the top and sides of her trunk, explaining that they would help her remember the beauty of her homeland. On shipboard, after Otto died, Amelia had had to look away when his mama retrieved something from the trunk and remained kneeling, caressing the image of the spring flowers.

Placing the dwindling candle high on the windowsill, she gently unpacked the little trunk. Frau von Ewald had followed the advice of the Adelsverein, the trip managers, and brought mostly practical clothing for the Texas heat—cotton dresses, white stockings, and work shoes for long days in her husband’s new mercantile store. In the very bottom of the trunk lay the cotton suits selected for Otto, clothing he had never worn.

Her fingers curled around *Galopp*, Otto’s horsehair pony that he slept with every night, tucked between them in their narrow upper berth. She clutched the stiff little horse to her lips.

She remembered that first day when Frau von Ewald brought Otto to meet her. He

had stepped from the von Ewald's fine carriage, removed his narrow-brimmed hat, and bowed formally from his waist, a gesture that Amelia discovered his papa demanded Otto perform for every adult. "Good day, Fraulein Anton."

"Good day, Herr von Ewald." Amelia bent to one knee to offer Otto her greeting. "Your English is very good."

The boy smiled broadly and asked in German if that little house was where she lived.

"It is my *vater's* home. I live there with him."

"And where is your *mutter*?" Otto's brown eyes occupied most of his slender, white face.

"She has gone to live with our Heavenly Father."

"When?" Otto leaned close.

"She took ill last spring and died very quickly."

"Did you cry?"

"Yes. I still miss her very much."

Otto nodded, and with Amelia still facing him at eye level, he laid his hand on her shoulder. "I'll try not to make you cry. I'll be a good student."

She wanted to throw her arms around the serious little boy, but she sensed that affection would have to grow slowly with this child. "I am confident you will be an excellent student."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myra Hargrave McIlvain is a sixth generation Texan and a storyteller who began her career writing a family humor column while she raised her two children. After the nest emptied, her background in Texas history led to Austin where she wrote Texas historical markers that line the highways, designate historic homes, and chronicle the lives of cemetery residents.

McIlvain's love of a good story prompted her to write six nonfiction books about famous and infamous Texas sites and characters. Her most recent, *Texas Tales, Stories that Shaped a Landscape and a People*, is a collection of 113 of her favorite Texas history blog posts.

After several years offering Texas seminars, Myra and her husband began taking her classes on one-day historic trips that led to a worldwide tour business. When she retired, McIlvain lectured for the continuing education program at the University of Texas and other venues across the state. She published her first historical fiction in 2012 and is currently working on her fifth, *The Reluctant Bride*.

Whether she is telling stories in her books, her blogs, or her lectures, Myra McIlvain views history as the story of a people, and the people she knows best have made Texas home.