

**A MARRIAGE
OF ATTACHMENT**

**a sequel to
*A Contrary Wind***



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Also by Lona Manning

**A CONTRARY WIND:
A VARIATION ON MANSFIELD PARK**
Available in e-book and paperback, 2017

“The Address of a Frenchwoman”
A short story about Tom Bertram of *Mansfield Park*, in
**DANGEROUS TO KNOW:
JANE AUSTEN’S RAKES & GENTLEMEN ROGUES**
Editor: Christina Boyd, The Quill Collective, 2017
Available in e-book, paperback, hardcover and audio

Coming in October 2018

A short story about Mrs. Clay of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, in
RATIONAL CREATURES
Editor: Christina Boyd, The Quill Collective

PRAISE FOR *A CONTRARY WIND*

Austen-esque Reviews: Brava to Lona Manning for her thoughtful twists and skilful execution in this variation. This story was in no way predictable and it kept me guessing almost until the end!

Historical Novel Society: *A Contrary Wind* is well-written, keeping close to the style of Austen. I thoroughly enjoyed it and highly recommend it.

JustJane1813 blog: Lona Manning has a very engaging writing style, while her writing also captures the essence of Austen's style and the time period in which she wrote her stories. She artfully wove text from canon into her own prose... Her creative storylines were bold enough to make this story a real page-turner.

First Impressions podcast: Her writing is not Austen, of course, but it is so good that she manages to blend it seamlessly with actual passages from *Mansfield Park*. Her grasp of the vernacular of the Regency era is incredibly well-researched and accurate.

Lost Opinions.com: This is an excellent read. Rich storylines, authentic characters (old and new), and writing I found hard to discern from the original (truly that good).

BlueInk Reviews starred review: *A Contrary Wind* is an impressive feat... Many try to emulate Austen; not all succeed. Here, Manning triumphs. She has retained Austen's spirit, while providing a stronger Fanny who will surely win today's readers.

PRAISE FOR “The Address of a Frenchwoman” AND *DANGEROUS TO KNOW*

Diary of an Eccentric: What surprised me is the ability of these authors to make me feel some compassion for the characters I love to hate, like the heartache experienced by George Wickham and Tom Bertram in their stories, which emphasized the complexity of Austen’s characters.

JustJane1813: As a fan of Jane Austen Fan Fiction, I can’t imagine a lover of Austenesque fiction not wanting to devour each and every one of these stories. Simply stated, these stories are, from start to finish, insightful, brilliantly plotted, and layered with that terrific combination of emotive tension and dry humour that Austenesque readers find so entertaining.

“...whose views of happiness were all fixed on
a marriage of attachment...”

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

Author’s note: *A Contrary Wind* concluded in the fall of 1809. *A Marriage of Attachment* commences in April 1811. A few Jane Austen phrases and references, from *Mansfield Park* and other writings, are included in this book. Devoted Janeites should have fun spotting them.

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CHAPTER ONE

April 1811

Thornton Lacey, Northamptonshire

“I AM NOT ANGRY.”

“Forgive me if I dispute that assertion, my dear. After twenty-seven years of marriage, I recognize this frosty silence.”

“This is merely resignation, sir. The resignation of a much-tried woman whose husband believes what he is told by any random stranger while refusing to give credence to the same information offered by his wife.”

“I simply enquired of the man mending the hedge if this was the road to Thornton Lacey.”

“And I told *you*, not a moment ago, ‘this is the road to Thornton Lacey,’ and then you talked to the man mending the hedge, and asked *him* if this was the road to Thornton Lacey, then you graciously informed *me*, ‘this is the road to Thornton Lacey’ —I, who went to great pains to obtain—”

“And there, I think, is the parsonage.”

“A parsonage-house? Surely not. Not for a village of such limited extent as this. It must be the country home of some independent gentleman. Edmund Bertram would have to wring a guinea from every parishioner for marrying and burying to maintain so handsome an establishment.”

“I think you do him an injustice there, my dear. I think, left to his own devices, Mr. Bertram would not have attempted half so much. Mary and her brother commissioned a great many improvements, she told me so herself.”

“That accords more with the character of Mr. Bertram as I knew him in London,” Lady Delingpole acknowledged. “And in the end, Mary did leave him to his own devices. He deserves better! But, I can never scold Mary as she deserves, not when I remember her dear mother.”

“I believe I see our host stepping out to greet us, Imogen. So, now that you see his house, are you content to stay here for the night, in preference to an inn? I think we shall be tolerably comfortable, though it is a bachelor establishment.”

“Yes, Miss Bertram is in town, so we shall have no hostess tonight. But I believe we may do very well.”

The carriage pulled up to the handsome front portico of the dwelling of the young clergyman, where every servant of his modest establishment was assembled.

Edmund swiftly glanced over his shoulder to see how his housekeeper, Mrs. Peckover, was bearing up. She had spent the last week in a quiet frenzy of preparation; the prospect of a visit from an Earl and his lady had alarmed her into near-insensibility. Thankfully, and unexpectedly, Baddeley had appeared that morning with a basket of apricot preserves and his usual imperturbable air. The old butler from Edmund’s boyhood home ‘had learned from Mrs. Grant, that exalted guests were expected at Thornton Lacey, and he ventured to presume he might be of some assistance.’

Mrs. Grant was not the only old friend to come to Edmund’s aid on this momentous occasion. His parishioners, viewing the noble visit as something that reflected upon the credit of the entire village, came forward with their contributions—one family sent a brace of hare, another a fine large trout, another some early wisps of salad from their greenhouse, all to uphold the proud name of Thornton Lacey and to burnish this new and illustrious chapter in the annals of the town.

However, were it not for Baddeley’s timely arrival, Edmund suspected Mrs. Peckover might now be lying prostrate in the pantry instead of waiting on the stairs, wearing a fresh apron and cap. He could see the details of the evening to come chasing themselves across her forehead, even as he greeted his guests.

“Lady Delingpole, Lord Delingpole, you do me great honour. I trust your journey was pleasant.”

Firstcourse-calves'headsoup-mashedturnips-dressedsalad-pottedhare-troutwithonionsauce —

“Not at all, Bertram. What cursed weather we are having for April, hey? Where is that charming sister of yours?”

“Julia is visiting our cousins in Bedford Square, sir. She will greatly regret not being here to welcome you both.”

“A great pity. Imogen, my dear, it seems Miss Julia will not be here to keep you company tonight. She is in London.”

Secondcourse-bakedcelerywithraisins-carrotswithhoney-roast beef with pepper sauce-creamed potato—

“Is she indeed? I had no idea. Mr. Bertram, thank you for inviting us to break our journey here. I never saw such a charming country parsonage—very elegant, indeed!”

Lastcourse-cheeseboard-applesinmadeira-apricottart-orangebrandy-ladyfingers.

“Well, therein lies a tale. My home is yours, Lady Delingpole. Baddeley and I will look after your husband and Mrs. Peckover will escort you to your room.”

“This way, oh, this way, your ladyfingers—oh no! *Your ladyship!*”

In due course, Baddeley took his station by the sideboard, and Edmund’s housekeeper and several other able women from the village, all at the highest pitch of excitement and anxiety, toiled in the kitchen.

Edmund escorted Lady Delingpole to her seat, and surveyed with some complacency the elegant table Baddeley had laid out for his guests. Even in the absence of a wife to direct the proceedings, he thought his household had done tolerably well, consistent with his desire to demonstrate his respect and affection for the noble couple, but without that ostentatious show which would betray an overly-servile disposition, a too-eager wish to please. This was why he had not brought his aunt from Mansfield to serve as his hostess. Aunt Norris had met the Delingpoles in London and it would not be impertinent to invite her, but she would have destroyed whatever of tranquillity his home offered in her zeal to demonstrate her deference and gratitude.

Instead, the host and his guests sat down together with every evidence of satisfaction, ease, and enjoyment. They were all of superior understanding and information. The youngest of them, Edmund Bertram, was in fact the most subdued in manner, and tended to formality in his address. He was tall, well-made and handsome, and in his dark blue eyes there gleamed a subtle, understated wit.

His Lordship, spare of figure and angular of feature, was clearly accustomed to having the full attention of his audience. His countenance was mobile and alert, and his address forceful and decided. Lady Delingpole’s quickness of speech and sometimes of temper tended to disguise her essentially kind-hearted nature. She was fashionably and richly attired; but anyone who made the mistake of thinking her a mere London fashion plate, was soon set to rights. She was shrewd, well-informed, and as deeply engaged in the public matters of the day as was her husband.

“You must be well pleased, your ladyship, to enjoy your husband’s company away from the unceasing demands of Parliament,” Edmund offered.

Lady Delingpole almost replied “evidently, you have not been married for very long, Mr. Bertram,” but just in time she recollected, and she only smiled and nodded.

“It is in fact politics which calls us to Northamptonshire. We make for Castle Ashby in the morning,” said her husband. “Do you know it, Bertram?”

“Not I, sir. My father attended there frequently when he was the member for Northampton. He often remarked on the elegant grounds.”

“I am looking for some little home-stall in this area myself, you know, since our family seat in Wales is so remote. I want some place where I can leave public affairs behind for a few days, while the House is in session.”

“Leave public affairs behind! Life would be an arid desert for both of us, without politics. What my husband means, Mr. Bertram, is that he is excessively fond of fox-hunting. He is determined to risk his neck, even at his age.”

“Well, and here I am, and my tailor hasn’t altered the waist to my breeches for these twenty years. Still as fit and hearty as I was in my youth, and how many can say the same?”

“If you are looking for something in this county, sir, would your Lordship care to examine Mansfield Park? The house is well situated on rising ground and is not more than forty years old. I can personally attest to the excellence of the supply of game in my father’s woods, and we are but five miles from the kennels at Brixton.”

His Lordship's formidable eyebrows shot up. "The Pytchley hunt? So, your family home is for let, sir?" Lady Delingpole gave her host a compassionate look, to let him know she, at least, remembered how the Bertram family's fortunes miscarried two years ago.

But Edmund said only, "Yes, my father and mother moved to Norfolk to live with my widowed sister Maria."

"Ah, yes of course, and how is dear Sir Thomas and—I do not recall ever having the pleasure of meeting your mother—but I trust she is well? And content, residing in a place so remote from her native home? I believe she was not inclined to travel so far as London before."

"They are both tolerably well, I thank you, ma'am, and tolerably content, especially since Maria gave them a grandson."

"Yes—yes," interjected his lordship. "And your estate stands empty, does it?"

"Yes, sir. Mansfield Park is nothing like the size of Castle Ashby, of course, but I fancy your Lordship is not looking for anything so grand by way of a hunting-lodge."

"Are the roads at Mansfield any better than those hereabouts, Bertram?"

"Somewhat superior, sir, for the coaching inn is there. The neighbourhood is a pleasant one. Dr. Grant, the vicar, is a learned man, he takes all the papers, and his very agreeable wife is half-sister to—to my wife."

A number of questions swiftly followed—from his Lordship, concerning the land, the deputation, the stables, and the kennels, and from her Ladyship, wanting a description of the offices, the drawing rooms, and the surrounding society, and Edmund's answers inspired in both husband and wife a strong inclination to examine Mansfield Park with a view to taking it for their country retreat.

The war against Napoleon, the public debt in consequence of that war, and the rumoured insanity of the King, all formed the balance of the dinner conversation until Lady Delingpole retired, leaving the gentlemen to themselves.

Baddeley was dismissed, and that worthy man bore away the platters with a silent dignity which gave no hint of the ideas now teeming in his imagination—Mansfield Park alive and alight once again, quietly humming from garret to cellar with servants, the housemaids chasing away every speck of dust, the blindingly white table linens fluttering in the sun where the laundry maids toiled, the gardeners pouncing upon every weed, the kitchen filled with steam and good smells, and himself presiding over it all, serving an Earl and his lady.

* * * * *

Same Day
Stoke Newington to Camden Town

Fanny Price could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times she had been given the best seat in the carriage, facing forward, in the direction of travel. When she lived at Mansfield Park, she always sat with her back to the horses because her cousins took precedence, or, as her Aunt Norris would say, she was "the lowest and the last."

She wondered if only being able to see what she had left behind—not what she was moving toward—had left its mark on her character. She was feeling extremely anxious about her future on this particular day, but then, hadn't that been true of all the important journeys of her life?

The first time she rode in a carriage was the day she left her family to go live with her wealthy cousins. Her father had picked her up like a rag doll and stuffed her into the crowded mail coach, calling: "well, goodbye then, Fan my girl, and be a good girl and obey your aunt and uncle, for if they send you back to us I shall give you a proper hiding! Do not move and do not make a sound—not a sound, mind you—and don't get out 'til you reach Northampton." Years later, she learned that her uncle, Sir Thomas, had supplied sufficient funds for a companion to escort her, but her father had pocketed the difference and sent her on the journey by herself.

She had watched silently while Portsmouth and everything she knew disappeared from view. Her father's warnings kept her frozen in her seat, but the trip was lengthy, and her bladder was nearly bursting well before they reached Newbury. A kindly merchant's wife, also making the journey, observed her distress, guessed its cause, and came to her aid at the next stop of the coach.

The parents who sent her away, and the aunt who met her at the end of her journey, admonished Fanny to be always good, and always grateful. If she failed to show sufficient goodness and gratitude, she would be a very wicked girl indeed, and would be packed back home to Portsmouth in disgrace. These warnings, working on a sensitive, docile temperament, left so indelible an impression upon Fanny's character, that she was still, at the age of one-and-twenty, afraid of disobliging anyone and anxious not to give offense.

And today she was in the carriage of her friend and benefactress, Mrs. Harriet Butters. The brusque but kindly widow had been a constant friend and advisor ever since Fanny had escaped her unhappy home situation at Mansfield Park. Mrs. Butters had introduced Fanny to a large circle of intelligent, benevolent people who fought slavery abroad and the miseries of the poor at home. More significantly for Fanny, Mrs. Butters had lovingly teased and scolded her into overcoming her timidity.

Fanny and Mrs. Butters' lady's maid were both in their usual places, travelling backwards as the carriage jolted and bumped along the muddy lane for the four-mile journey from Stoke Newington to Camden Town. Another phase of her life was ending, and she could not see, could not fully imagine, what awaited. For, after months of discussion, preparation and delay, the long-awaited sewing academy, the project so dear to Mrs. Butters' heart, would finally open.

"Oh! Fanny! Did we remember to bring the application papers?"

"Indeed, ma'am, they are here in my portmanteau. And quills and ink bottles."

"And the instructions for the parents? Not that half of them will be able to read it."

"Yes ma'am. We collected everything from the printer yesterday."

Mrs. Butters leaned back and sighed. "Of course you did, my dear. How silly of me. It must come of spending so much time with Laetitia—she is so inclined to mistrust everyone's competence but her own."

Fanny smiled in response, but out of politeness, she refrained from heartily agreeing with the assessment of Laetitia Blodgett, Mrs. Butters' sister-in-law. Laetitia Blodgett was of an age with Mrs. Butters, and both were outspoken, active, managing sorts of women, but there, Fanny reflected, the similarity ended.

Before her marriage forty years ago, Mrs. Butters had been Miss Harriet Blodgett, of the prosperous and well-known family of linen-drapers in Bristol, a busy sea-port that had profited from the African slave trade. The Blodgetts foresaw that the government's edict outlawing the slave trade would mean the wives of ship captains and the wives of merchants would have to curtail their spending on silk, satin, muslin, and lace. And they were correct: the factories and the dockyards of the city were quiet, and the shopkeepers of Bristol waited in vain for customers.

The Blodgetts resolved to expand their business into London while at the same time establishing a school for instructing impoverished girls of good character in the needle trade. This was to be both a charitable and a commercial enterprise, the profits from the latter providing the funds for the former. The school was under the supervision of a committee of lady patrons, all members of that reputable organization, the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor.

Mrs. Butters attended many lengthy meetings of the ladies' committee, and Fanny acted as their secretary, taking excellent notes in her neat handwriting, while the charitable ladies debated and discussed every detail of the enterprise. They examined and rejected possible locations, eventually selecting a spacious brick warehouse in Camden Town, but it was found to need many more alterations and fittings-up than first anticipated, and all in all, it was such a complex and drawn-out business, requiring so much in the way of talkings-over, second and third thoughts, and polite disagreement and irritated feelings, that Fanny could only wonder how other, truly ambitious operations were ever successfully conducted. How did ordinary mortals put aside their petty vanities and uneven tempers to construct canals, or build cathedrals or invade countries?

Even the most appropriate name for the enterprise had been debated at length. One lady had proposed "The Academy for the Needle Arts," others protested that "Academy" was too... well, verging on being pretentious, and another suggested the "Camden Town Needlework School and Emporium operated by the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor."

A polite silence followed, and eventually Laetitia Blodgett observed that, of the half-a-dozen names put forward, none of them included the name of "Blodgett," that is, the name of the family sponsoring the scheme, and perhaps it was not too presumptuous to expect, etc., so in the end it was agreed, or rather, some ladies resigned themselves to the fact, that the school would be called "Blodgett's Charitable Academy."

Thereafter everyone called it, simply "the Academy," including the Blodgetts.

Fanny wholeheartedly supported the benevolence of the scheme; her strong sense of gratitude to Mrs. Butters alone assured her participation. Thanks in large measure to Mrs. Butters, Fanny believed she acquired confidence and wisdom. She could recall the past, and her difficult childhood, with forbearance. Her stern uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, used to frighten her, and her cousins Tom, Maria, and Julia alternately bullied or neglected her as they grew up together. Her aunt, Lady Bertram, was too indolent to take an interest in raising her children. Fanny remembered them all, and Mansfield Park, with fondness. She could even feel pity for her Aunt Norris when she imagined that lady living all alone in Mansfield village, no longer able to direct and advise, to scold and warn, to bustle about the great house engaged in the important little nothings which had given purpose to her existence.

As for the fourth cousin, Edmund....

Her wish to avoid thinking about Edmund helped, just a little, in quelling the doubts that assailed her, for she realised that plunging her mind, heart and hands into this new enterprise was the best way to put the past behind her.

“So, here we are at last, ladies,” exclaimed Mrs. Butters as the coachman drew up to the three-storied brick warehouse which was to be Fanny’s new place of employment. A scaffolding was erected across the front of the building, and a man was perched up high, painting “Blodgett’s Charitable Academy” and “Blodgett & Son, Linen-Drapers” in large gold letters above the door. “What a busy day is in front of us! And we breakfasted so early—I am already feeling famished. I hope Matron has got some tea ready.”

“I shall examine the shop, Madame, if you please,” announced her lady’s maid Madame Orly.

The ground floor shop was presided over by Mr. Blodgett and his son Horace, who were brother and nephew to Mrs. Butters. They would display and sell the fabrics which the students would learn to ornament with embroidery in the upstairs classroom, and on the top floor, the dressmakers would assemble the finished garments. Madame Orly was to assist in the shop, while Laetitia Blodgett supervised the dressmakers.

The excitement and bustle of the day would inevitably draw forth Mrs. Blodgett’s most querulous reactions and anxious imaginings. Fanny was arguably too young, gentle, and yielding to make a creditable instructress; the asperity of Mrs. Blodgett more than made up the balance.

As Fanny descended from the carriage, she saw a long line of fidgeting, hopeful girls standing in the lane, waiting to be called in and interviewed, some with their mothers or grandmothers, others with a sister or dear friend to hold their hand and whisper encouragement. Some clutched small pieces of cloth which Fanny knew to be samples of their skill with a needle.

Fanny gave the applicants a brief, self-conscious smile before she hurried inside, passed through the shop, greeted Mr. Blodgett, and climbed the wooden steps to the classroom.

The upstairs room was cold, bare and musty-smelling. Fanny walked to one of the tall windows which overlooked the street, the broad wooden planks of the floor creaking beneath her feet, and counted the waiting girls below. At least sixty girls waited to apply for four-and-twenty vacancies in the school.

Looking down the street to her right, Fanny saw the veterinary hospital—not a very likely source for customers—and beyond, thankfully out of sight, was the large and formidable St. Pancras workhouse, where the destitute of the parish were consigned, where young and old toiled at picking oakum and breaking up rocks, in exchange for a vermin-ridden bed and a hot meal.

To the north, Fanny could see a street of newly-built town homes, looking strangely out of place in the midst of the surrounding fields and pastures. There were very few gentlemen’s families living here. She wondered who would patronize the new shop. Would fashionable gentlewomen journey to the farthest outskirts of London to buy fabric and gowns?

The matter had been much debated by the charitable committee, who chose the Camden Town location because they had obtained the lease on highly advantageous terms.

“It is no farther to go to Camden Town than to go to Cheapside,” Mrs. Wakefield had argued.

“That is so,” Mrs. Blodgett had agreed. “And we will be offering our garments at an advantageous price, so the ladies will come flocking to our door.”

“I often travel to town to shop or visit,” said Mrs. Butters, “but in my experience, when I ask someone from London to come out to Stoke Newington for dinner, they react as though I had invited them to Botany Bay. Any place beyond Moorfields is a howling wilderness to a Londoner.”

“Harriet, I come from London every day,” argued Mrs. Blodgett. “The journey is a trifle—I should even call it a pleasant one.”

“Very true, Laetitia. I do not dispute the point. But you are a transplant from Bristol, not a true Londoner. I am speaking of habit and custom, not of logic and reason, and you may be assured of it—we would draw more business if we were in Cheapside or near Covent Garden. However, this is not to say for a certainty that Camden Town will fail to draw adequate trade...”

Time would tell, Fanny thought.

Mrs. Renfrew, the school’s new matron, appeared at her elbow. “Miss Price, when should we call in the applicants?”

Fanny was startled at being applied to for her opinion. “Yes —or, no—I think, ma’am, we should wait for word from Mrs. Blodgett. And there is Mr. Edifice coming up the street.” Fanny pointed to a tall, slender man, dressed all in black, walking in their direction. The broad brim of his round black hat shielded his face from view, but she and Matron recognized him as Mr. Frederick Edifice, the local curate.

Fanny turned from the window and began setting out papers, ink, and quills on one of the large, broad tables. She was to interview each of the applicants for the academy, assisted by Mrs. Renfrew and Mr. Edifice. Fanny was to concentrate on their sewing skills, Matron was to evaluate them for deportment, cleanliness and neatness, and Mr. Edifice was to question them upon their knowledge of the catechism.

Fanny had feared that Mr. Edifice, Mrs. Renfrew, and even the young applicants, would sense she was at least as nervous as they. But as soon as all was in readiness, and the first slender little urchin came in and executed her awkward curtsey, Fanny’s own innate kindness and sympathy came to her aid, and she soon forgot herself when enquiring into the backgrounds and needs of the girls before her.

The prospective students were between nine and twelve years of age. Only a few of the girls were lucky enough to have an active, healthy, employed father at home; some fathers were disabled for work, others so long away in the army that it was not known if they were alive or dead, some families were one misfortune away from being sent to debtors’ prison or disappearing into the workhouse.

These girls knew they lived near “Lunnon,” and that there was a King and a Queen, but beyond that, they knew almost nothing that could be learnt from books. In vain did Mr. Edifice ask each applicant, “what then is your duty towards God?” or “how shall we overcome temptation and sin?” The poor girls would goggle at him, eyes wide and mouths hanging open helplessly, and a few burst into tears. By the time the last two dozen girls were ushered upstairs, one at a time, they had obviously profited from some hints from the ones who had gone before, so they could tell Miss Price they knew how to do cross stitch and chain stitch, they could show their clean hands and their smallpox inoculation scar to Matron, and they could loudly declaim a mangled version of the Lord’s Prayer, whenever Mr. Edifice asked them anything.

If Fanny had been free to follow her own inclinations, she would have engaged everyone. In fact, she had timidly suggested to Mrs. Blodgett: “Should we not enlist two or three superfluous students, ma’am? I should fancy that on any given day, some students will be absent, owing to illness, or family responsibilities, and we could—”

“Miss Price, there are four and twenty places in the school.”

“Yes ma’am, but we should expect some degree of—”

“The committee assigned us to select four-and-twenty students, Miss Price.”

And Fanny had to turn away more than half of the applicants, to her regret.

* * * * *

“NO PROSPECT, THEN, of a reconciliation?”

Edmund looked down at his wine glass, slowly turning it in his hands. He was acquainted with Lord Delingpole’s directness of manner, and in fact, welcomed an opportunity to speak candidly on a subject that he could not, out of discretion, discuss with most of his acquaintance.

“She is still my wife, my Lord. And will be until death us do part. I have made no enquiries about Mary’s doings because I do not wish to know—I believe I may call myself very reluctant to know—what I may be required to forgive. Were she genuinely desirous of returning to me, it would be my duty to try to forgive her. But my parishioners, the good people of Thornton Lacey—they would tie her to a cart’s tail and flog her through the village. She could never return here.”

“Humph. No doubt their disapproval of her is in proportion to their affection and esteem for you.”

A silence followed, broken only by the crackling of the fire in the grate and the distant sound of servants washing up in the kitchen. At length, Edmund sighed and continued.

“The situation is a complicated one. To effect a reconciliation, I would have to give up this living—the one thing I told her I would never do. Furthermore, I provide a home for my sister Julia. My father feels that the notorious circumstances surrounding Maria’s marriage preclude the possibility of Julia residing with her in Norfolk. Our family name has been injured by Maria’s indiscretion, and my father thinks it best for Julia to stay apart from her sister.”

“What about leaving England entirely? Your wife would welcome a sojourn abroad, no doubt. And you could leave the past behind you.”

“Yes, should the war on the continent ever be successfully concluded, Mary and I might go to live in Italy or Switzerland. The idea is not unattractive to me, either. But were I to do so, I would abandon every duty and family tie that keeps me here. My parents are growing older, my oldest brother has left England, never to return—what am I to do?”

“Does Mary know you would not put an absolute negative on a reconciliation? Do I understand you correctly?”

“Yes, but as for her—I have not received one word from Mary since she left me. Her actions conveyed the message that the separation was to be a permanent one. I do not say this to lessen her in your opinion, only to explain—she emptied this house of its contents, as well as my stables. I was left with my own clothes and the horse I was riding on when I came back from visiting my parents. The furnishings you see with me today are all from Mansfield Park. This table used to sit in the breakfast room there.”

“And I was informed you gave Mary very generous marriage articles—she retained entire control of her fortune. I knew Mary had a mercurial temper, but I did not imagine she could be so ungenerous.”

“One suspects the influence of her uncle, there. He holds me in utter detestation. At any rate, knowing of your long-standing kindness to my wife, I do not ask you to render judgement on Mary or me. Nor have I resorted to the courts, for that matter. I have not asked for a legal separation nor brought suit against anyone for criminal conversation with her—”

Edmund coughed awkwardly, at the acknowledgement that his wife was rumoured to be the lover of Lord Elsham. Lord Delingpole picked up the decanter and refilled his own glass, then Edmund’s, and waited for the young man to continue.

“While I do not hold myself blameless for the rift in our marriage, I think in the eyes of the world, sir, I am the injured party. Yet, if I reunite with her and leave my position here, she gains everything she desired, while I lose everything I built my life upon. She didn’t want to be a clergyman’s wife and she didn’t want to live in the country. Everything and everyone else would have to give way to her inclinations. Would my forgiveness be truly answered by her repentance, in such a case?”

“Mary knows she is still my wife, and I am still her husband. I remain frozen in place, sir. I cannot move backward or forward. She knows I am here. Of *her* whereabouts and her current sentiments, I know nothing.”

And perhaps, I never knew her, he added to himself.

Lord Delingpole leaned back in his chair, and sighed. “Well sir, *my* wife may be able to shed some light on this question. She has a letter for you from your wife, but it was given to Imogen on the condition you not even be told of its existence unless you demonstrated yourself to be amenable to talk of a reconciliation. I fancy Mary rather expected you to be implacably opposed. She must acknowledge that she abandoned you in the most unfeeling manner.”

“Lady Delingpole has a letter for me—?”

“I believe she has retired early, though. As should I. Good night, Bertram.”

* * * * *

The following morning, Lady Delingpole was extremely vexed to discover she had been defrauded of the opportunity to reveal the existence of Mary’s letter, a matter she deemed much better left in her own hands rather than her husband’s. But upon Edmund’s applying to her at they sat at breakfast, she parted with it, with the whispered words, “Mary will not own to it, but I have known her for years, Mr. Bertram, and it is my belief she loves you still. You may not be aware, she has not been living for pleasure in London; she

has spent much of her time in the countryside in Wales, shunning all company and, I think, eating her heart out.”

Edmund tucked the letter into his waistcoat and resolved not to look at it until his guests were gone, even though the anticipation of reading it had cost him a sleepless night. And even after his guests’ horses, driver, grooms, valet, and maid had all been assembled in front of the parsonage, and after his lordship and ladyship had been bowed out to the road, and waved along to the next stage of their journey, Edmund called all his servants together and congratulated and thanked them, and he poured glasses of wine for Baddeley and Mrs. Peckover, and left them to toast each other. Only then did he retreat to his study and break open the seal to see the familiar handwriting of his wife.

Dear Edmund, the note began:

Since the day I left you without a single word, I have begun with a fresh sheet of paper over a hundred times, and tossed it into the fire, and on more occasions than I can give number to, I have written to you in my head, or my heart. Now, finally, this letter may reach your hands, and I know you will read it, because I rely upon your goodness.

It may not be necessary for me to describe the feelings and motives which impelled me to leave Thornton Lacey eighteen months ago, but I never explained my thoughts at the time, nor have since, and you are certainly entitled to hear them.

After my poor brother’s death, my uncle importuned me repeatedly to return to London. He blamed you entirely for Henry’s accident and could not endure to see me reconciled with you. Henry was my other self, my chief consoler in the loss of our parents, my source of joy, pride, and delight. He was the most vividly alive person I ever knew. It is still exceedingly difficult to accept that he is dead, that he walks the earth no more, that I shall not see him again. I told myself I could mourn Henry in private without burdening you. Edmund, you cannot know what it is to lose someone so dear to you, so abruptly, so unexpectedly, so unjustly.

My uncle sent me frequent, lengthy letters which I cried over, all alone in my chamber. He said I was disloyal to my family, that my brother’s spirit would curse me for living with his murderer—and oh! I do know Henry’s recklessness was the foremost cause of his death. Had he not been racing to the duelling grounds, he would not have come to grief! Also, had my uncle not taken him home when he was too weak to be moved, perhaps Henry might have survived and lived to hold his son in his arms.

But knowing that Henry and my uncle were not blameless in this matter has not spared me a moment’s torment from the fact your challenge for the duel should never have been issued.

At any rate, my uncle’s unrelenting pressure upon me to be revenged upon you was a secret canker upon our marriage.

Then came the catastrophe that befell your father, followed by his decision to leave Mansfield Park. You knew my sentiments, you knew my wishes, you knew I was able to endure living at Thornton Lacey only so long as I could believe we would one day end our dreary exile. But, without consulting me, without even acknowledging my feelings, you told me you thought we should never live at Mansfield Park, and that you intended to live, work, and die at Thornton Lacey!

Was I not justified in thinking I had been imposed upon? We have every reason to believe the baronetcy would revert to you and your—may I say, ‘our’—descendants, yet you were determined to live like an anchorite in the desert and force me to do the same!

I have since learned, to my sorrow, that having Thornton Lacey for a home is in every way preferable to having no home at all! I cannot live with my sister at Mansfield Parsonage, as her husband would never permit it, I cannot live with my uncle, not so long as his mistress is in residence there, and there is no tranquillity to be found with Janet Fraser or Lady Stornoway. I know you always disapproved of them.

At least dear Lord and Lady Delingpole have been extremely kind; they put a cottage on their estate at my disposal. I have come to be a little envious of the Delingpoles’ capacity for finding fresh matters to quarrel about every day. It is the opposite of indifference, you must allow, when a long-married couple can still contrive to aggravate each other as they do. It is something very like love, and perhaps it is love. Lady Delingpole is one of the few people who encourages me in my wish for—

But I can hardly bring myself to hint. Why? Chiefly pride, I fear. Pride and a refusal to be the kind of wife who has no will or thought of her own apart from her husband’s. But you, Edmund, you gave me to believe you did not want that sort of a wife. Do you recollect?

Thus far, you have made no recourse to the law, which tells me you are too merciful to ruin my reputation with a bill of divorce. But everything is in your power, not mine. Do you wish to continue as we have done—living apart and estranged? Or do you, my dear Edmund—can you propose some solution to this impasse?

I shudder at the thought of entrusting our correspondence to the public post. A line directed to Lady Delingpole will reach me.

Your sorrowful wife,

Mary

CHAPTER TWO

JULIA BERTRAM AROSE early to work in her garden on the morning after her return to Thornton Lacey from town.

Her mother used to sit in the shade, playing with her pug dog, as the gardeners at Mansfield Park dug and trimmed, and her Aunt Norris flitted about, directing and admonishing. But as there was no army of servants at her command at Edmund's house, Julia taught herself to weed and plant, and found she rather enjoyed it, for the activity soothed her restless spirit.

Her flower garden was on a sunny slope behind the house, her own private retreat. She was exceedingly proud of her new hedge. At present her yew trees barely reached her waist, but with the mind and eye of a gardener, she saw the day when an imposing green avenue would trace the path of a gravel walkway, leading to the winding stream at the foot of the garden.

As she examined the promising new growth on her rose trellis, Julia indulged in recollections of a warm autumn day two years ago when her cousins William and Susan Price were visiting at Mansfield Park. The three of them went to pick rose hips in the hedgerows. It was the day she knew she was in love with William Price.

Julia closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun, summoning up the moment when young Susan, enjoying the freedom of the outdoors, went running on ahead, looking for a better patch of rose bushes, and she was left alone with William. She saw William's face; the look in his eyes when he took her hand and asked her if she could wait for him. She had whispered 'yes,' and his face lit up with joy, and he embraced her. His radiant smile, the feel of his strong arms around her—this was her most precious memory, the most exciting and wonderful moment of her young life.

His pledge of love, and her acceptance, was a promise jointly given and taken with a sweet, lingering kiss. Neither one said another word. There was no need to. They stepped apart before William's sister Susan returned, and if she suspected, she gave no sign. A few days later, William was gone to resume his duties as a lieutenant with His Majesty's navy. Julia gave him all the dried rose hips to take with him to Africa.

As far as good intentions spoke for her future conduct, Julia believed she would only marry with her parents' consent. In the meantime, she lived on the memory of one moment, one kiss. While her father respected William for his talents and industry, she feared he would not be pleased to welcome his nephew as a son-in-law. The Prices were poor and undistinguished.

During her visits to London, Julia had met many highly born, prosperous, eligible young men, and perhaps with a little more enterprise on her part, a greater willingness to please and be pleased, she might have attached one of them. But the lieutenant had conquered her heart.

Julia waited at Thornton Lacey while William sought promotion, prizes, and distinction in the West African Squadron. The lovers agreed to keep their understanding a secret until the day he could step forward as an eligible claimant for Julia's hand. William would not even correspond with her directly. Instead, he wrote long letters to her brother Edmund, recounting the success of his crew in apprehending slave ships along the African coast. With every ship captured and every slave freed, he was promised his share of prize monies. And the subject of rose hip tea often figured in his correspondence.

"Julia, are you out here?" Her brother's voice pulled Julia out of her reverie.

"Yes, here I am, Edmund. I was just going to water my peonies."

Edmund strolled down the path and picked up his sister's heavy clay garden pot for her. "How well your daffodil cuttings are growing, Julia!"

"Bulbs are grown by division, not cuttings, Edmund." Julia corrected him, proud of her acquired gardening knowledge.

"Well, at any rate, I remember these daffodils from our old garden. Could you accompany me to Mansfield this Wednesday? Lord Delingpole has sent us a note from Castle Ashby. He asks if we are at leisure to show him around Mansfield Park. I suppose he would rather talk to me than the steward. Could you attend on Lady Delingpole, or would you find it too painful?"

"I'm afraid I might weep, just a little, when I see our familiar old rooms silent and empty. But after all, I am a woman, we sometimes cry for pleasure. Otherwise, we would not speak of 'having a good cry.' I will go with you on Wednesday, Edmund."

If so amiable a young lady as Julia Bertram might be said to have a fault, it was that she tended to think only of herself and her own concerns. But, as she watched her brother absently-mindedly drowning a peony bush with the full contents of the watering jug, she thought to ask: "Edmund? Will you give Lady Delingpole a reply for Mary?"

"Yes, of course, but... I cannot help wondering, Julia, why is Mary writing to me now? Why now? What does she want?"

"What else but to come back to you, Edmund dear?"

"But, shall I take this purely as a compliment to me," Edmund said drily, "or is there something else? What has occurred, or what has changed, to impel her to break her silence? Mary always has a motive for her actions."

* * * * *

*At sea, off the African coast
March, 1811
Lt. William Price to William Gibson*

DEAR FRIEND:

We shall put in at Freetown in a few days, and I rely upon finding a letter or two from you waiting for me there. I hope to read news of your book—perhaps it is published by now. Captain Columbine desires to be remembered to you and he, too, is looking forward to reading your narrative.

I am not with the Captain at present, for I am currently in command of a captured slaver, the Volcano, which we boarded about a fortnight ago, with 300 Negroes packed aboard, in the usual miserable conditions, and a Spanish captain and crew.

Captain Columbine put me in charge of the prize crew—you will remember how envious I was of the other lieutenants who were given this distinction—and we set out for Sierra Leone and the Admiralty Court.

As the brig was very heavy laden with its human cargo, we set about jettisoning surplus supplies (for, of course, the ship was no longer going to make the Atlantic crossing), spare sails, and everything we thought we could do without, to speed the journey. All of the cursed manacles and branding irons were tossed overboard, with the greatest satisfaction and cheers from the crew!

I wanted to keep a few of the manacles to lock up the slave-ship captain and his crew, so they could feel all the torments they subject the Africans to, but it is not permitted. We stowed the captives in the wardroom under the guard of a few Marines—but this proved to be an error.

A few days out from Freetown, I was in my cabin, updating the log book, when the door slammed open and there stood Midshipman Castle, very agitated, telling me that when the cabin boy had brought victuals to the prisoners, they overpowered their guards and seized their weapons—the lad had barely time to form a single intelligible sentence when, to my horror, I saw a bayonet emerge through his chest—blood spurted from his mouth—he slid to the ground, and there stood one of the escaped Spaniards pulling out the blade and preparing to come at me.

I jumped to my feet—I picked up my little round table and used it as a shield, as he came at me with the bayonet, and in the small quarters of the cabin, he was unable to get at me, as the table effectually blocked his way, but I was equally unable to draw my sword. We struggled, on top of poor Castle's body; until I managed to pin the Spaniard against the wall, pressing with all my strength, wrest the bayonet from him, and turn that same weapon on him.

I then ran out to the deck with my sword in hand. I saw two of our sailors hanging dead in the rigging, killed, as I later learned, by musket balls, while the rest of my prize crew, recovering from the initial surprise, were mounting a spirited counter-attack. I joined in the fight, but we were outnumbered three to one and the outcome might have been in some doubt, had not our cook, an African of the Kru tribe, flung open the grate and allowed the captive Africans to come swarming up on the deck. More than one of the Spaniards jumped overboard rather than face the vengeance of the persons whom they had recently abducted from their native country.

Thankfully, this decisively turned the tide in our favour, without further loss of life to my remaining crew. As it is, I lost half of what I had—the two marines, the midshipman (only fourteen years of age), and

two sailors. Their loss grieves me. When I close my eyes, I can see poor Castle's face and the surprise in his eyes when the killing thrust pierced his body. So, Gibson, I don't close my eyes! We are all working double shifts at any rate. Writing to you has provided some relief to my feelings.

I thought this incident would be of interest to you, but have refrained from sending the same particulars in my letter to Fanny, as I don't want to alarm her, or anyone else who is anxious about me. If you see my sister when you return to London, please don't mention this note from,

*Your friend,
William Price*

* * * * *

Mrs. Butters' carriage, driven by her laconic coachman, Donald McIntosh, conveyed Fanny and Madame Orly to the academy every morning by nine o'clock. Madame Orly enlivened the store on the ground floor—the voluble Frenchwoman darted swiftly around the more stolid Blodgett clan, expressing her delight or her abhorrence for the various fabrics and ribbons and laces under consideration by the customers. Spending half of her time as a lady's maid to Mrs. Butters and half in the shop was very agreeable to her, for Mrs. Butters wanted very little in the way of fashionable primping, and, while at the shop, Madame Orly could enjoy sugar in her tea—for sugar, made as it was by slaves, was forbidden at Mrs. Butters' house.

Fanny's realm was upstairs in the classroom, where her students practised their skills; acquiring the discipline to make perfectly regular and minute straight stitches, or learning how to decorate fabric with ribbon and beads, while a few senior girls worked at the embroidery frames, making simple designs with silver thread upon white muslin bands, which would be sewn on to hems and bodices. In time, the girls would be allowed to try their hands at birds, and leaves and vines and more elaborate needlework.

Fanny found her new charges to be both exasperating and endearing. Her pupils were cynical and sentimental and superstitious by turns, easily moved to the wildest effusions of happiness and sorrow. She did not suppose the scantiness of their education meant they were lacking in native cleverness—or indeed, as she was to discover—native cunning. Many of them knew more about the world and its vices than she. Of education, of reason, of security, they knew little; of privation, they knew too much.

Fanny quickly won their affection and loyalty, but she had to temper her natural gentleness to earn their respect as well. In fact, Fanny's greatest shortcoming as a teacher was that she had been an extraordinarily docile child herself, for whom obedience and submission were second nature. It never had occurred to her that a girl might bring someone else's needlework and present it as her own, or another might plead ill-health and a need to visit the outhouse as an excuse to shirk.

Within a fortnight, Fanny was able to rank the girls in order of ability and diligence. She wanted to rearrange the seating in the classroom, so they sat together in small work teams, with the most experienced girls presiding over four or five younger ones. But Mrs. Blodgett would not agree—the ladies' committee had decided the students would be seated in alphabetical order, the better to call the roll in the morning, and that, accordingly, was that.

The charitable ladies of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor understood that securing the future welfare of the girls comprised more than teaching embroidery, which would merely improve their material well-being. They were obliged to attend to the students' moral improvement and religious knowledge.

“It would be much better to omit much of the Old Testament,” declared Mrs. Wakefield at one of their regular committee meetings. “Except for the Psalms—but not of course those referring to the situation of David. It would be best to confine the children chiefly to the New Testament, I think. And some other improving works intended for young persons.”

“Oh, indeed, my dear Priscilla,” answered Mrs. Blodgett. “We have agreed to engage Mr. Edifice to read aloud, every morning. A most respectable and worthy young man.”

Therefore they engaged Mr. Edifice to commence each day of instruction with a prayer, to be followed by the reading aloud of improving literature. Mrs. Blodgett urged him to keep the prayer as “short as may be, for the girls cannot be at their sewing while you pray, but they will sit and sew while you read.”

Thereafter, every morning, the students stood next to their work stools with bowed heads while Mr. Edifice prayed over them, enjoining the Almighty to instil their hearts with gratitude and obedience.

Then there was a general clamour and bustle as the girls settled down with their needles and thread. Once order was restored, Mr. Edifice would open his book, stand with his back to the tall windows which filled the room with natural light, and read aloud to them for an hour with the utmost gravity.

“...We are next enjoined, girls, to submit ourselves to all our governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters. By our ‘teachers, spiritual pastors and masters,’ are meant all those who have the care of our education and of our instruction in religion; whom we are to obey, and listen to, with humility and attention, as the means of our advancement in knowledge and religion.

“The lower orders of men have their attention much engrossed by those employments in which the necessities of life engage them; and it is happy that they have. Labour stands in the room of education, and fills up those vacancies of mind, which, in a state of idleness, would be engrossed by vice. It is an undoubted truth that one vice indulged, introduces others; and that each succeeding vice becomes more depraved.”

It was more entertaining than not to have Mr. Edifice’s voice filling the high-ceilinged room, even if some girls didn’t listen and some didn’t understand. They were otherwise commanded to keep strict silence during working hours, enforced with the slap of a ruler on their back from Mrs. Blodgett or Matron, but no admonitions could entirely suppress the collective urge to communicate of four and twenty young persons.

Despite his clerical garb Mr. Edifice was, self-evidently, a man, and he could not appear in the classroom, that place so dominated by the feminine, without setting off waves of whispers and giggles. Most of the students would not pronounce him to be handsome; his face was too cadaverous, and his lips were too thin, but his sallow complexion was thought by many to be pale and interesting.

Before long, the active imaginations of the girls contrived a match between the curate and Miss Price. She seemed born to be a clergyman’s wife, and Mr. Edifice must be in need of one. Further, they observed he would often find some excuse for lingering in the schoolroom after Fanny’s arrival every morning. Whenever she and Mr. Edifice chanced to speak together, there was much grinning and nudging of elbows and suppressed laughter amongst her pupils.

Mr. Edifice’s manner was excessively formal, and he was so alarmed at the thought of saying something indelicate or overfamiliar, that his manners, while privately amusing to Fanny, could not give offence.

“Well, Miss Price, I fear the air has been exceptionally smoky these past few days—I trust you are well? You look very well—that is, you do not look ill—no, that is—but I was alarmed to hear you cough yesterday,” he ventured on one grey morning.

“I am tolerably well, Mr. Edifice, I thank you. Mrs. Butters threatens to send me to the countryside for a few weeks, but I could not imagine deserting my responsibilities here.”

“Your devotion is admirable, Miss Price, but please, do not neglect your health—your friends would agree you must not injure your health, and if I may be so bold as to count myself among your well-wishers—that is, as curate of the parish, your well-being is—that is, a spiritual leader is also...”

“You are all consideration, Mr. Edifice. Perhaps in a while, matters will be in such a train that I could pay a short visit to my cousins in Northamptonshire. But I should not like to leave Mrs. Butters.”

“Oh, certainly, you could be in no doubt you would be very much missed—very much—and if I may venture to add, your absence would be felt, not only by the worthy lady you have named, but also by your other friends—that is, by these young sempstresses, whose devotion I believe you have secured—and it is not to be wondered at, not at all. And it is not merely as an instructress of the needle arts that you have benefited them. You are, if I may quote the poet, the pattern of a gentlewoman. ‘Unobtrusive, serious and meek, the first to listen and the last to speak.’”

A half-smile and a nod was her best response here, for if Mr. Edifice approved of her tendency to be ‘the last to speak,’ she could easily oblige him.

Alas for Mr. Edifice’s hopes! He could not know that Fanny had loved another clergyman before she ever met him, and further, he stood no comparison with Edmund Bertram, her cousin—not in understanding, nor in address, nor in true benevolence and integrity.

Fanny’s love for Edmund was a carefully guarded secret. When she was a child, he had opened the world to her through reading and conversation. His good principles were her guide. But, convinced of her own lowliness and unworthiness, she never presumed to hint of her attachment. She had watched helplessly when he fell in love with the beautiful and fascinating Mary Crawford. Even though he and Mary were estranged, he was still a married man. Fanny harshly reproved herself for entertaining any thoughts of Edmund which

were not entirely cousin-like. She knew it was wrong to think of the touch of his hand, or his embrace when they last parted, or the feel of his lips brushing her cheek.

She missed him, every day, his friendship, and his company. She longed for him even as she recognized it was best to stay far away from him. He filled a place in her heart, that no-one else ever could.

* * * * *

Edmund dipped his quill in his ink, and paused, looking up from his blank sheet of paper to gaze out of the window. He recalled when Mary's brother Henry suggested they build a garden "*at what is now the back of the house; which will be giving it the best aspect in the world, sloping to the south-east. The ground seems precisely formed for it.*" Henry used to pique himself on his abilities as a landscape designer, and the Crawfords and Bertrams once travelled together to the country home of his sister's fiancé Mr. Rushworth, so Henry could advise on improvements to his grounds. The visit to the gardens of Sotherton turned out to be anything but innocent for all of the young people hovering on the brink of love or desire. Henry had flirted with Julia all the way there, and, once arrived, had transferred his attentions to Maria. And Mary had discovered that Edmund intended to be a clergyman. Her reaction to this news, ought to have taught Edmund to guard his heart from her. Instead, she had bewitched him.

Edmund recalled, with painful clarity, how delightful Mary had been, when he and she and Fanny strolled through the patch of forest known as the Wilderness. When Fanny, pleading fatigue, had asked to rest for a while, he immediately found a bench; he warmly urged the ladies to sit down, and his heart beat faster when Mary declined, saying, in her delightfully contrary way, that 'resting fatigues me.'

The opportunity was so fair and so was she. They left Fanny behind and walked along the secluded footpaths, which curved and wound about until they found themselves at a side gate which led to a broad oak avenue, one of the approaches to the manor itself. Mary was still playfully arguing with him about how long they had been walking in the Wilderness, and how far they had come.

"You may put your watch away, Mr. Bertram. I have now walked long enough to want some rest—so, since I am never tired, it does follow that we have covered a prodigious distance," she said.

"If my watch does not refute you, perhaps the poet will." Edmund recalled some lines from Cowper:

*We tread the wilderness, whose well-roll'd walks,
With curvature of slow and easy sweep—
Deception innocent—give ample space
To narrow bounds.*

"Ample space to narrow bounds," Mary repeated. "One is reminded of Hamlet: 'I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space.' Not I. I should hate to be confined. Even these noble trees crowd in upon me."

Mary spread her shawl on the grass under one of broadest oaks, and they sat down together in its welcome shade.

"You are correct in what you said, Mr. Bertram," said she, pointing down the avenue. "The house is ill-placed. If only it had been situated at the crest of the valley, instead of the bottom! How much more could be done to improve the setting! Sotherton must have a decidedly gloomy aspect in winter."

"It is highly pleasing to *me*, just at present."

A sideways smile awarded his attempt at gallantry.

"I think you *have* almost blundered upon some repartee, Mr. Bertram, and I will own myself flattered."

"You are generous to admit the sentiment while overlooking the lack of eloquence which clothed it. Well then, Miss Crawford, do you think your brother will recommend that this avenue be taken down?"

"I think he would sweep everything away—the gates, the walls, the hedges, to open up the view as much as possible. He would return it to a state of untouched nature—which is an exacting business, as you know, for these so-called natural landscapes are the product of artifice."

"And how about you, Miss Crawford?" Edmund could not resist asking. "Would a scene of rustic simplicity please you? Could *you* be satisfied to contemplate such a view every morning, or would you prefer to look out at a busy London street, thronged with carriages, wagons, bawling costermongers, pushing throngs? I think I see your eyes brighten at the thought."

“You must allow there is more variety to be found in the city, Mr. Bertram—more variety of company, more diversions of all sorts—plays, concerts, lectures—and more opportunities to distinguish oneself—more avenues for happiness, in short. Here I see only one avenue—this heavy and respectable line of oaks marching sedately along. The quiet and the peace is enchanting at present, and will do very well, just for the moment that is—not for a lifetime, certainly!”

“Cowper disagrees with you there,” said Edmund, taking a mock-heroic pose and declaiming:

*He is the happy man whose life e'en now
Shows somewhat of that happier life to come
Who, doomed to an obscure but tranquil state
Would make his fate his choice—*

“Fiddlesticks! If the poet really believed that obscurity breeds felicity, he would not have sought fame by publishing his poem! It is in our natures to seek immortality, Mr. Bertram.”

Edmund smiled. “I will concede, the notion that the greatest happiness is to be found in rural simplicity, is a too-common poetic conceit amongst our men of letters.”

“And amongst educated men who ought to—” Mary stopped herself and laughed. “The day is too lovely for quarrelling, Mr. Bertram. Although disputing with you has brought me more pleasure than I’ve known while exchanging compliments with many another gentleman. Why should this be?”

Edmund wondered if she knew how ardently he wished to fold her in his arms there and then, how he wanted to kiss her with passionate intensity. And no wonder cousin Fanny was completely forgotten on her park bench, for quite some time longer!

Ah, well. They had talked and quarrelled and quarrelled and talked for the better part of a year, and then she married him. And then she left him.

In an upswelling of bitterness, Edmund briefly contemplated letting a long silence elapse before he sent his answer, another year perhaps, as long as *her* silence had been, for it would be no more than she deserved, but of course he had been prompt in composing a reply in his head. He knew his tone was forbiddingly formal, that his letter might almost have come from his father’s pen, but, being himself, he could not write in a cavalier manner on such a topic.

Dear Mary, (he wrote)

Lady Delingpole will be calling on us in a few days, which gives me the opportunity to send my answer through her hands, as you requested. Your recent letter invites me to suggest any means by which we may be reconciled.

A reconciliation would comprise many things—that we would once more be in charity with one another, the errors of the past repented, forgiven and forgotten. We would live together under one roof. We would be of one accord as to how and where to live out the rest of our days. I could desire nothing more—if such a thing were possible.

I can change nothing about my former actions, Mary. Misunderstanding and not malice led to my challenging Henry to a duel, if you could only choose to believe it. My regrets will not restore your brother to you and you have already heard me apologize many times for my part in the tragedy.

As for Mansfield Park—my father feels, as every good man must feel, how discreditable it would be, to place a lesser estate into the hands of his heirs, than the one he received from his father. It is for this reason he and I agreed to make Mansfield available for lease, and for my parents to live with my sister in Norfolk. In my opinion, this economical resolution lends more honour and dignity to the name of “Bertram,” than living in a style that his income no longer justified, could ever do.

However strongly felt my own inclinations are, they must be subordinate to my duties. Julia has no other home, but with me. We have determined it is not appropriate for her to live at Everingham with Maria. And the same considerations which preclude her going to live with my sister, apply to her sharing a home with you.

Edmund threw down his pen.

My g-d! How does a man say to his wife, *you have been in another man’s bed, and I know it*, as casually as though he were making arrangements for a weekend party in the country, he thought. Mary, what have you brought me to!

He would have paced about his study, but it was too small for the exercise. Already cramped in dimension, owing to Mary’s desire for a larger sitting-room, it had become even more confined when

Edmund installed bookcases on three walls, to accommodate his father's library from Mansfield. Now there was barely room for his desk and two chairs. He instead bounded up the staircase, went to his dressing-room, tore off the Geneva bands which chafed at his neck, and put off the rest of his clergyman's attire. He splashed cold water on his head, ran his fingers through his curling hair, and pulled on a loose lawn shirt and doeskin breeches before returning to his study and his letter.

...Until Julia is respectably settled in her own establishment, she is my responsibility.

You have upbraided me for choosing a life in the country, contrary to your wishes. I had persuaded myself that when you accepted me, you also accepted the limits my circumstances imposed upon me. Did I surprise or disappoint you so much, Mary, after we had lived together for a fortnight, a month, six months? Was I not the person you thought you had married? And, what do you suppose I might say, were the same question to be posed to me?

I need not explain why you cannot return and resume your role here at Thornton Lacey. To be re-united with you elsewhere, I would be compelled to hire a curate to take my place, something I vowed I would never do. To accept the income from this parish and be an absentee clergyman is as abhorrent to my feelings, as it is scandalous to my principles.

What alternatives do we have which would be consistent with my profession and my duty to my family? Under such constraints as have been imposed by past events, there appear to be no simple solutions. If you have any ideas, Mary, I would be—

(I would be what? Pleased? Eager? Curious? He scratched it out and started again.)

However, you must understand me, Mary. I will not consent to resume living as husband and wife as though nothing had occurred, as though there was nothing to discuss, nothing to repent, nothing to atone for.

*Your husband,
Edmund*