

Chapter One

Belsfield Hall,
Monday, 23rd September 1805

My dear Eliza,

I must begin another letter to you, although it is not six hours since I sent my last. I have some news to communicate which I think will surprise you not a little.

Miss Dido Kent hesitated, her pen suspended over the page. All her education and almost thirty years' experience of writing letters had not quite prepared her for this situation. As well as she could recall, the rules of etiquette said nothing about the correct way in which to convey the news that she now had to impart. However, her governess had once told her that the very best style of writing was that which gave information simply and clearly without any excess of sensibility.

She dipped her pen into the ink and continued.

There has been a woman found dead here – in the shrubbery – this evening.

She read what she had written, thought for a little while, then added:

It was the under-gardener who found her.

Her sister would wish to be reassured that it was not a member of the family, or one of their guests, who had made the horrible discovery.

Looking at the words gleaming blackly in the light of her candle, Dido thought for a moment how strange it was that something so extraordinary should be contained within the familiar, flowing pattern of the script, looking no more strange than a report upon the weather or an account of a sermon heard in church. Then she continued, her pen beginning to move more steadily as she found herself drawn away from the simple giving of information to that commentary upon men and women which seemed to come most naturally to her whenever she had a blank page before her.

No one knows who the dead woman can be. Sir Edgar and Lady Montague are quite sure that they know nothing of her. They are both, of course, deeply shocked. He, as you may imagine, is very much exercised over 'what people will think,' and how a dead woman in his shrubbery is likely to reflect upon 'the honour of the family name'. Altogether, I think it is the novelty of the event which

distresses him more than anything else; if only his ancestors – those innumerable previous Sir Edgars who stare at one from dark portraits in every conceivable corner of this house – had suffered the shock before him, then dead women in shrubberies would be a family tradition and hold no horrors for him at all. Meanwhile, her ladyship sits upon her sofa and wrings her hands and declares that ‘one does not know what to think’, hoping, I suppose, that someone will tell her what to think and so save her the trouble of forming an opinion of her own.

Her sister-in-law, Mrs Harris, is quite as animated upon the subject as my lady is languid and has been occupied with relating every shocking detail which she has been able to gather or can imagine – details which a woman of more sense would not give credit to, and one of more breeding would certainly not retail in the drawing room. Her husband, though one must believe he is a sensible man – or at least a clever one, or else how would he have made such a fortune in India? – instead of trying to check her, hangs upon her words and laughs over her extravagances as if they were the pinnacle of feminine wit and vivacity – a very disgusting display of conjugal affection which I think we might be spared from a husband and wife with more than twenty years’ married life behind them – and two grown daughters into the bargain.

The daughters in question are, I believe, as undecided as her ladyship over ‘what one should think’ and want to know whether interest, horror or indifference would be most becoming – or at least which Colonel Walborough

would find most becoming. Although I think it might be a kindness to just mention to them that neither Miss Harris's pursed-lip silence, nor Miss Sophia's excessive sorrow over the death of 'the poor, poor unfortunate woman,' are likely to charm a sensible man.

The colonel himself seems to have expressed all that he feels upon the subject with a long, rather dull story which he told us at dinner about a similar incident that occurred when he was stationed in Bahama – at least I think it was Bahama. It was somewhere that has very hot weather and odd diseases. The colonel has not quite that power of narration which chains the listener's attention. And then, when the story was done, Mr Tom Lomax must try to enliven our dessert by calling on Mr Harris to better it, since he was sure, from all he had heard from his numerous acquaintance in the place, that India was 'as full of strange and shocking events as ever Bahama was.' That sally did not amuse anyone, least of all Mr Harris, who seemed to be extremely discomposed by it; though I confess I liked it rather better than Mr Tom's next attempt at wit, which was to lament that his friend Richard was not at home to 'see all this carry on, which by G__ is as good as play!' Which distressed poor Catherine terribly and I thought it quite unpardonable of him to draw attention to Mr Montague's absence in that way. I was glad when Mr William Lomax – his father – spoke the only bit of sense we had heard all evening, calling him to order and reminding him to show a little respect for the dead. By the by, I am excessively fond of Mr William Lomax; he is so kindly and so well made

and he has a very fine profile. He has also the very great recommendation of being a widower. And, all in all, I am rather sorry that I gave up the business of falling in love some years ago.

Well, I have given you a picture of them all now – except those who, I make no doubt, you most wish to hear of. And I expect to be thoroughly called to order by you in your next letter for abusing my fellow creatures so dreadfully. Remember that I quite rely upon your strictures, for why else do I allow my pen to run on so cruelly, but that you may prove yourself my superior in candour and liberality as you are in everything else?

And as for our nearest relations, well, they are as you have probably imagined them. Margaret is almost as concerned for the health and welfare of the name of Montague as Sir Edgar can be, for, ever since Catherine's engagement to Mr Montague, she has considered the name as pretty much her own. And I daresay Francis feels the same; though I have not seen him. He left on business to town some hours before I arrived here. And dear Catherine? Well, to own the truth, she is too distressed over the business I explained in my last to notice much what happens around her. And yet, if this matter is not settled soon, I fear it will hurt her dreadfully.

You see, there is to be an inquest. It seems it cannot be avoided because of no one here even knowing who the dead woman is. Even the servants – and I have spoken to most of them myself – cannot guess who she might be. Though I suppose they may be lying.

* * *

She lifted her pen and smiled wryly at the last words, reflecting that she had not, as she wrote, thought to question the truth of the account which the baronet and his wife had given. She wondered whether to scratch the last words out, but decided that there was no need to spoil her neat white page, for Eliza would certainly see nothing amiss in what she had written. It was only her own strange mind which noticed such things. She continued.

So how she came to be in the shrubbery is almost as much of a mystery to us all as how she should be shot. For she was shot.

Another pause, for such details seemed indelicate. But Eliza would, quite naturally, wish to know, so: give the information simply and clearly and, of course, avoid excessive sensibility.

Well, it seems there was a great deal of shooting here today for the men from the house were out above three hours with their guns this morning. As is usual in these places, shooting is very much the order of the day and the gentlemen regard the birds as a kind of enemy army upon which they must wage a continual war. However, they are quite sure that there can have been no accident, for they were at the top of Cooper's Spinney and there is the hill and the Greek Temple and the ha-ha too between there and the shrubbery.

We understand that the body was not to be seen at

nine o'clock this morning when two of the gardeners were on the very spot trimming the laurels, and no strangers are known to have come to the house. No one from the house set foot in the shrubbery all day. I do not believe that this is much of a walking household. The Misses Harris are too much engaged in being accomplished to take a great deal of exercise and their mother must save all her breath to gossip with. Catherine, as you know, lost her taste for gardens when she lost her taste for dirt. Lady Montague does, I understand, usually walk out in the shrubbery at about three, but today she was indisposed and spent the whole morning in her dressing room.

And, by the by, this isolation of her ladyship did arouse the delightful fancy in my mind that perhaps she had found from somewhere the energy to creep out into the shrubbery with one of her husband's shotguns and commit murder. However, I was obliged to abandon this intriguing idea when I discovered that her maid was with her all the time and the footman visited her repeatedly to take, at different times, logs for her fire, a letter and chocolate.

So, the main point is that no one has been able to give any information about what happened. The constable was here above an hour and searched the shrubbery with enthusiasm; but, finding no murderer concealed among the laurels, he has gone away again declaring that it is a mighty strange business and he 'never saw the like of it before, and that's a fact!'

And now Sir Edgar, who is the magistrate here, has told the coroner, Mr Fallows, that an inquest must be held – which will be of great interest to the

whole neighbourhood, I don't doubt, for no one can remember when there was last an inquest held here. Poor Catherine. I would hope that such an event, terrible though it is, might at least serve to divert the gossips from her sad affair; but with the woman dying within the very grounds of this house, I fear it may only fix their minds upon her. And...

She stopped and this time decided that the smoothness of the page must be sacrificed. She scratched out the last word. Some things were best left unsaid and her fear that the idle chatter of the neighbourhood might connect this dreadful event with Catherine's disappointment was one of them.

She did not want to think that such a connection was possible.

She finished her letter with a hasty promise to write again as soon as there was more to tell, and blew out her candle – for she was a thrifty woman and wax candles were too costly to be wasted. Then she turned to the hearth where – even though this was the smallest and humblest of all the guest bedrooms in the house – there was a fire burning. It was but a small grate, and a small fire, giving little light and throwing long shadows from the old bed-curtains and turning the cloak and bonnet hanging on their peg behind the door into a hunched little fairy-story witch. But it was a fire nonetheless and a fire in a bedroom was a wonderful luxury. Dido held her hands to it gratefully as she turned matters over in her mind.

It was Catherine that she worried about. Which did not seem quite right with that unfortunate woman lying dead somewhere out in the stables. But, she reflected, it was

really very hard to care for someone you did not know. One tried, of course – it was a Christian duty to show compassion for all God’s creatures; but the truth was that a dead woman without a name was more a puzzle than a grief. And Catherine’s anguish was much more immediate. After all, Catherine had asked for her help; she would not be here at all – she would have known nothing about the dead woman – if her niece had not asked for her.

Or ‘summoned’ her, as she had said herself to Eliza when she first received the letter.

For an invitation to Sir Edgar Montague’s country seat would most certainly not have found its way to Miss Dido Kent at Badleigh Cottage if the woman that Sir Edgar’s only son was engaged to had not demanded her presence.

Catherine had told her father, ‘I want Aunt Dido.’ The invitation had been requested, and Francis had sent off an express informing his sister of the precise hour at which the carriage would be at the door to bring her here. No one, least of all Dido herself, had considered that she might refuse to come. For family was family, she loved her niece dearly and, besides, since Francis paid as large a share of her allowance as any of her other brothers, he considered, like the rest of them, that her time was entirely at his disposal when it came to illnesses, lyings in, funerals, house removals or, as in this case, wayward daughters.

Catherine has always been difficult, he had written, and now, when she is at last to make us proud of her, I would not have anything go wrong through one of her strange fits of temper. This morning she has done nothing but

weep and shut herself away from us all. You must talk to her, Dido, and, if there is any danger at all of her breaking off this engagement, get her to see sense. Make her see how foolish she would be to give up such an alliance.

Alarmed for her niece's happiness, Dido had travelled in some uneasiness. It was a wretched journey and the final stage, enlivened as it had been by the company of Margaret, Catherine's stepmother, was the worst part of all. For in between a lecture on Sir Edgar's extreme wealth and a minute description of Belsfield and its grounds which encompassed almost the history of every window in the house and every tree in the parkland, Margaret repeated very determinedly, 'She must not give up this engagement. I tell you, she must not!'

But, on arriving at the Hall, Dido had quickly discovered that Catherine had no thoughts of ending her engagement. The difficulty lay in quite a different quarter.

'I think,' Catherine had wailed tearfully within minutes of the two of them being alone together, 'I think that he does not love me any longer.'

And then, before the distressed Dido could say a word about the danger of holding a man to a promise when his affection was lost, the girl had contradicted herself.

'But he does love me,' she sobbed. 'I know he does. It is only...'

'Only what, my dear?'

'Only that he has taken a foolish idea into his head about it being better if we part.'

'But why should he do that?'

'I don't know!' Catherine thrust out her bottom lip,

reminding Dido irresistibly of the three-year-old Catherine who, on the death of her mother, had been entrusted to the inexpert care of her young aunts. She used to look very much like this whenever they had had to drag her from rolling about and making mud pies in the garden to be scrubbed and presented to company in the parlour.

‘I don’t know,’ repeated Catherine, her blue eyes shining through her tears and her curls trembling with every little sob. ‘That’s what you have got to find out for me, Aunt.’ She mopped at her eyes and gave the smile which she had learnt could usually get her whatever she wanted. ‘You’re so clever. I know you can do it.’

The fire was burning low. Sighing deeply over the task she had been set, Dido bent to replenish the grate from the basket which was piled high with logs.

It was a curious fact that just at that moment Colonel Walborough, far away at the front of the house in the grandeur of the very best guest chamber, was reaching into *his* log basket and finding it empty. As he went shivering and cursing to his cold bed, the colonel would have been mortified to learn that the shabby little maiden aunt whom he had not thought worth talking to at dinner was comfortably toasting her toes before her fire, secure in the knowledge that there were two hot, flannel-wrapped bricks warming her small bed. But then, Colonel Walborough had had woodcock to kill today; he had not been able to spend any portion of *his* valuable time in talking to the housemaids, or administering cough mixture to the footman, or writing a letter for the kitchen maid to send to her brother in the army.

Dido had long ago learnt the trick of being comfortable in a great country house, and she usually enjoyed her visits to them very much indeed. But this time things looked bad and she doubted very much whether she would look back on her visit to Belsfield with much pleasure. For the story which half an hour's questioning had got from Catherine had an unpromising sound to it.

Things did not bode well for her niece's future happiness, even if – as she prayed would be the case – the late discovery in the shrubbery should prove to be quite unconcerned with her affairs.