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The Mischief of the Mistletoe

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First published in Great Britain in 2011 by
Allison & Busby Limited
13 Charlotte Mews
London, W1T 4EJ
www.allisonandbusby.com

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First published in the US in 2010.
Published by arrangement with Dutton,
a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-4007-9

Typeset in 11/15pt Adobe Garamond Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

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has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced
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Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4Y

*An excerpt from the Dempsey collection:
Miss Jane Austen to Miss Arabella Dempsey*

*Sydney Place, Bath
25 November, 1803*

My dear Arabella,

Your letter took me quite by surprise this morning. I believe I drank too much wine last night; I know not else how to account for the shaking of my hand today, unless it be the shock of your news. You will kindly make allowance therefore for any indistinctness of writing by attributing it to this venial error.

We are all delighted at the prospect of having you again among us, but under such circumstances! What has the world come to when elderly aunts are so profligate of their fortunes as to squander them on half-pay officers? It saddens me to see you disappointed in your expectations, however much you may claim you expected nothing of the sort. A pretty piece of work your Aunt Osborne has made of it!

Mr Hoare straightaway said that a woman should not

be trusted with money; that your aunt ought to have settled something on you as soon as her husband died. To my remark that that would have been to trust you with money, and you a woman, too, he had nothing to say . . . But I must say no more on this subject.

What must I tell you of your sisters? Truth or falsehood? I will try the former and you may choose for yourself another time . . . Margaret you will find assiduously courting all accomplishments except that of good humour. As for Olivia, I suspect she does not exist; every time I call, her head is in a book, leaving only a set of limbs sprawled on the hearthrug. I have hopes for Lavinia, who goes on as a young lady of fifteen ought to do, admired and admiring, but for a certain boisterousness of spirit that time and care will cure.

Your father was to have dined with us today, but the weather was so cold he dared not venture forth.

You deserve a longer letter than this, but it is my unhappy fate to seldom treat people so well as they deserve. God bless you! And may God speed your journey to Bath.

Yours very affectionately,

J. Austen

Everybody's love.

Bath
December, 1803

“So Emma,” said he, “you are quite the stranger at home. It must seem odd enough for you to be here. A pretty piece of work your Aunt Turner has made of it! By heaven! . . . What a blow it must have been upon you! To find yourself, instead of heiress of eight or nine thousand pounds, sent back a weight upon your family, without a sixpence . . . After keeping you from your family for such a length of time as must do away all natural affection . . . you are returned upon their hands without a sixpence.”

– Jane Austen, *The Watsons*

“Poverty is a great evil, but to a woman of education and feeling it ought not, it cannot be the greatest. I would rather be a teacher at a school (and I can think of nothing worse) than marry a man I did not like.”

“I would rather do anything than be a teacher at a school,” said her sister.’

– Jane Austen, *The Watsons*

Chapter One

‘I am for teaching,’ announced Miss Arabella Dempsey. Her grand pronouncement fell decidedly flat. It was hard to make grand pronouncements while struggling uphill on a steep road against a stiff wind, and even harder when the wind chose that moment to thrust your bonnet ribbons between your teeth. Arabella tasted wet satin and old dye.

‘For what?’ asked Miss Jane Austen, swiping at her own bonnet ribbons as the wind blew them into her face.

So much for grand pronouncements. ‘I intend to apply for a position at Miss Climpson’s Select Seminary for Young Ladies. There’s a position open for a junior instructress.’ There. It was out. Short, simple, to the point.

Jane screwed up her face against the wind. At least, Arabella hoped it was against the wind. ‘Are you quite sure?’

Sure? Arabella had never been less sure of anything in her life. ‘Absolutely.’

Jane hitched her pile of books up under one arm and shoved her ribbons back into place. ‘If you rest for a moment, perhaps the impulse will pass,’ she suggested.

‘It’s not an impulse. It’s a considered opinion.’

‘Not considered enough. Have you ever been inside a young ladies’ academy?’

Arabella made a face at the top of Jane’s bonneted head. It was very hard having an argument with someone when all you could see was the crown of her hat. Jane might be several years her senior, but she was also several inches shorter. The combination of the two put Arabella at a distinct disadvantage.

Six years older, Jane had always been as much an older sibling as a playmate, telling stories and bandaging bruised knees. Arabella’s father had been at one time a pupil of Mr Austen’s at Oxford, when Mr Austen had been a young proctor at St John’s. Back in the golden days of childhood, Arabella’s father’s parish had lain not far from Steventon, and both books and children had been exchanged back and forth between the two households.

This happy state of affairs had continued until Arabella was twelve. She remembered her head just fitting on Jane’s shoulder as she had cried on it that dreadful winter, as her mother lay still and cold among the grey sheets on the grey bed, everything hued in ice and shadow. She remembered the clasp of Jane’s hand as Aunt Osborne’s carriage had come to carry her away to London.

‘And what of your Aunt Osborne?’ Jane added. ‘I thought you were only visiting in Bath. Aren’t you to go back to her after Christmas?’

‘Mmmph.’ Arabella was so busy avoiding Jane’s eyes that she stumbled. Flushing, she gabbled, ‘Loose cobble. You would think they would keep the streets in better repair.’

‘How singular,’ said Jane. ‘The cobbles are perfectly

stationary on this side of the street. Why this sudden desire to improve young minds?’

That was the problem with old friends. They saw far too much. Arabella developed a deep interest in the cobbles beneath her feet, picking her steps with unnecessary care. ‘Is it so unlikely I should want to do something more than be Aunt Osborne’s companion?’

‘You have a very comfortable home with her,’ Jane pointed out. ‘One ageing lady is less bother than fifty young girls.’

‘One ageing lady and one new uncle,’ Arabella shot back, and wished she hadn’t.

Jane looked at her, far too keenly for comfort. But all she said was, ‘It is final, then?’

‘As final as the marriage vow,’ said Arabella, with an attempt to keep her voice light. ‘My aunt and Captain Musgrave were married last week.’

‘But isn’t he . . .’

‘Half her age? Yes.’ There was no point in beating around the bush. It had been all over the scandal sheets. ‘But what are such petty things as numbers to the majesty of the human heart?’

Jane’s laughter made little puffs in the cold air. ‘A direct quotation?’

‘As near as I can recall.’ Arabella hadn’t been in a position to memorise specific phrases; she had been too numb with shock.

Captain Musgrave had made a pretty little speech out of it, all about love defying time, all the while holding Aunt Osborne’s jewelled hand in an actor’s practised grip, while she fluttered and dimpled up at him, her own expression more eloquent than any number of speeches. In the half-dark dining room, the candle flames created little pools of light in the polished surface of the dining table, oscillating off Aunt Osborne’s rings and the

diamond pendant in her turban, but nothing shone so bright as her face. In the uncertain light, with her face lifted towards Captain Musgrave, tightening the loose skin beneath her chin, one could almost imagine her the beauty she once had been. Almost. Even candlelight wasn't quite that kind.

One of her aunt's friends had dropped a wine glass in shock at the announcement. Arabella could still hear the high, tinkling sound of shattering crystal in the sudden silence, echoing endlessly in her ears like the angry hum of a wasp. Arabella had made her way through the wreckage of shattered crystal, spilt claret staining her slippers, and wished them happy. At least, she assumed she had wished them happy. Memory blurred.

He had never made her any promises. At least, none that were explicit. It had all been done by implication and innuendo, a hand on her elbow here, a touch to her shoulder there, a meeting of eyes across a room. It was all very neatly done. There had been nothing concrete.

Except for that kiss.

'It would make an excellent premise for a novel,' said Jane. 'A young girl, thrown back on her family after years in grander circumstances . . .'

'Forced to deal with carping sisters and an invalid father?' The wind was beginning to make Arabella's head ache. She could feel the throb beginning just behind her temples. It hurt to think about what a fool she had been, even now, with two months' distance. 'If you must do it, at least change my name. Call her . . . oh, I don't know. Elizabeth or Emma.'

'Emma,' said Jane decidedly. 'I've already used Elizabeth.'

Arabella smiled with forced brightness. 'Did I tell you that I finished a draft of my novel? I call it *Sketches from the Life of a*

Young Lady in London. It's not so much a novel, really. More a series of observations. Sketches, in fact.'

Jane ignored her attempts to change the subject. 'Your father said you were only home until the holidays.'

'I was. I am.' Arabella struggled against the wind that seemed determined to wrap her skirt around her legs as she laboured uphill. What madman had designed the streets of Bath on a nearly perpendicular grade? Someone with a grudge against young ladies without the means to afford a carriage. 'Aunt Osborne expects me back for Christmas. I am to spend the twelve days of Christmas with her at Girdings House at the express command of the Dowager Duchess of Dovedale.'

The invitation had been issued before Captain Musgrave had entered onto the scene. An invitation from the Dowager Duchess of Dovedale was something not to be denied. The Dowager Duchess of Dovedale possessed a particularly pointy cane and she knew just how to use it.

Arabella's aunt attributed the invitation to her own social consequence, but Arabella knew better. The house party at Girdings was being thrown quite explicitly as a means of marrying off the dowager's shy granddaughter, Charlotte. The dowager needed to even the numbers with young ladies who could be trusted to draw absolutely no attention to themselves. After years as her aunt's companion, Arabella was a master at the art of self-effacement.

She had been, to Aunt Osborne, the equivalent of a piece of furniture, and to her aunt's friends something even less.

The first person to have looked at her and seen her had been Captain Musgrave.

So much for that. What he had seen was her supposed

inheritance. His eyes had been for Aunt Osborne's gold, not for her. 'And after Twelfth Night?' Jane asked.

She wasn't going back to that house. Not with them. Not ever. 'What newlyweds want a poor relation cluttering up the house?'

Jane looked at her keenly. 'Has your Aunt Osborne said as much?'

'No. She wouldn't. But I feel it.' It would have been so much simpler if that had been all she felt. 'It seemed like a good time to come home.'

Except that home wasn't there anymore.

When she thought of home, it had always been of the ivy-hung parsonage of her youth, her father sitting in his study, writing long analyses of Augustan poetry and – very occasionally – his sermons, while her rosy-cheeked sisters tumbled among the butterflies in the flower-filled garden.

To see them now, in a set of rented rooms redolent of failure and boiled mutton, had jarred her. Her father's cheeks were sunken, his frame gaunt. Margaret had gone from being a self-important eight-year-old to an embittered twenty. Olivia had no interest in anything outside the covers of her books; not novels, but dusty commentaries on Latin authors dredged from their father's shelves. Lavinia, a roly-poly three-year-old when Arabella left, was all arms and legs at fifteen, out-going and awkward. They had grown up without her. There was no place for her in their lives.

No place for her in London, no place for her in Bath. No place for her with her aunt, with her father, her sisters. Arabella fought against a dragging sensation of despair. The wind whistled in her ears, doing its best to push her back down the hill up which she had so laboriously climbed.

Absurd to recall that just three months ago she had believed herself on the verge of being married, living every day in constant expectation of a proposal. It was a proposal that had come, but to Aunt Osborne, not to her.

A lucky escape, she told herself stoutly, struggling her way up the hill. He had proved himself a fortune hunter and a cad. Wasn't she better off without such a husband as that? And she wasn't entirely without resources, whatever the Musgraves of the world might believe. She had her own wits to see her through. Being a schoolmistress might not be what she had expected, and it certainly wasn't the same as having a home of one's own, but it would give her somewhere to go, something to do, a means of living without relying on the charity of her aunt. Or her new uncle.

Uncle Hayworth. It made her feel more than a little sick.

'She must not have been able to do without you,' said Jane.

Arabella wrenched her attention back to her friend. 'Who?'

'Your aunt.' When Arabella continued to look at her blankly, Jane said, 'You hadn't heard?'

'Heard what?'

Jane shook her head. 'I must have been mistaken. I heard your aunt was in Bath. A party came up from London. There's to be an assembly and a frost fair.'

'No. I—' Arabella bit her lip. 'You probably weren't mistaken. I'm sure she is in town.'

Captain Musgrave had expressed a desire to go to Bath. He had never been, he said. He had made serious noises about Roman ruins and less serious ones about restorative waters, making droll fun of the invalids in their Bath chairs sipping sulfurous tonics.

Jane looked at her with concerned eyes. 'Wouldn't she have called?'

'Aunt Osborne call at Westgate Buildings? The imagination rebels.' No matter that Arabella had lived under her roof for the larger part of her life; Aunt Osborne only recognised certain addresses. Pasting on a bright smile, Arabella resolutely changed the subject. 'But Miss Climpson's is within easy distance of Westgate Buildings. I'll be near enough to visit on my half days.'

'If you have half days,' murmured Jane.

Arabella chose to ignore her. 'Perhaps Margaret will like me better if she doesn't have to share a bed with me.' She had meant it as a joke, but it came out flat. 'I don't want to be a burden on them.'

It was as close as she could come to mentioning the family finances, even to an old family friend.

Jane made a face. 'But to teach . . .'

'How can you speak against teaching, with your own father a teacher?'

'He teaches from home, not a school,' Jane pointed out sagely. 'It's an entirely different proposition.'

'I certainly can't teach from my home,' said Arabella tartly. 'There's scarcely room for us all as it is. Our lodgings are bursting at the seams. If we took in pupils, we would have to stow them in the kitchen dresser, or under the stove like kindling.'

Jane regarded her with frank amusement. 'Under the stove? You don't have much to do with kitchens in London, do you?'

'You sound like Margaret now.'

'That,' said Jane, 'was unkind.'

Arabella brushed that aside. 'If I ask nicely, perhaps Miss Climpson will agree to take Lavinia and Olivia on as day students.'

It was a bit late for Olivia, already sixteen, but would be a

distinct advantage for Lavinia. Arabella, at least, had had the advantage of a good governess, courtesy of Aunt Osborne, and she knew her sisters felt the lack.

‘It will not be what you are accustomed to,’ Jane warned.

‘I wasn’t accustomed to what I was accustomed to,’ said Arabella. It was true. She had never felt really at home in society. She was too awkward, too shy, too tall.

‘It is a pretty building, at least,’ she said as they made their way along the Sydney Gardens. Miss Climpson’s Select Seminary for Young Ladies was situated on Sydney Place, not far from the Austens’ residence.

‘On the outside,’ said Jane. ‘You won’t be seeing much of the façade once you’re expected to spend your days within. You can change your mind, you know. Come stay with us for a few weeks instead. My mother and Cassandra would be delighted to have you.’

Arabella paused in front of the door of Miss Climpson’s seminary. It was painted a pristine white with an arched top. It certainly looked welcoming enough and not at all like the prison her friend painted it. She could be happy here, she told herself.

It was the sensible, responsible decision. She would be making some use of herself, freeing her family from the burden of keeping her.

It wasn’t just running away.

Arabella squared her shoulders. ‘Please give your mother and Cassandra my fondest regards,’ she said, ‘and tell them I will see them at supper.’

‘You are resolved, then?’

Resolved wasn’t quite the word Arabella would have chosen.

‘At least in a school,’ she said, as much to convince herself

as her companion, 'I should feel that I was doing something, something for the good both of my family and the young ladies in my charge. All those shining young faces, eager to learn . . .'

Jane cast her a sidelong glance. 'It is painfully apparent that you never attended a young ladies' academy.'

