



a&b

The Contraband Shore

DAVID DONACHIE

Allison & Busby Limited
12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2017.

Copyright © 2017 by DAVID DONACHIE

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*All characters and events in this publication,
other than those clearly in the public domain,
are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by
any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a similar
condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

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

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2165-8

Typeset in 12.25/16.25 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication
has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

PROLOGUE

With Elisabeth Langridge returned from the West Indies, Cottington Court had come back to life. A mansion and extensive estate which, in her absence, had rarely held a sizeable dinner was this day hosting a fete in the grounds; the guests, people who made up a goodly selection of the quality families of East Kent: parents as well as sons and daughters of an eligible age, but no small children, given their propensity to run riot.

As far as those attending were concerned, this early springtime gathering was being hosted by Elisabeth's brother, Henry Tulkington, but he failed to be present to greet them. When he was finally dragged outdoors and away from his paperwork, he did his best to appear as though he was appreciating the activity. In truth, to a person who held himself to be a serious man of business, it was all so much frippery.

No one remarked on his coat and hat on a day reasonably mild; those who had known Henry for years were well aware he was inclined to be very careful of his constitution. Others, less conscious of his concerns, were either too polite to mention it or so busy enjoying themselves they barely noticed.

All were invited to play bowls on the lawn or skittles on a wooden track fetched in from a local tavern, to throw horseshoes at a stake or try their hand at archery on targets set up against the backdrop

of a tall and tight hayrick. When not engaged in such activities, they could repair to a marquee and partake of the rum punch and cordials provided, this a concoction of some strength.

Elisabeth, known as Betsey to her friends was, in contrast to many of her female guests, soberly dressed, as befitted her situation. Being a widow imposed upon her certain social and sartorial restraints; there could be no colourful and extravagant silks or gaudy turbans. It was a sadness to her that the mother of her late husband had declined an invitation – indeed she had been made to feel uncomfortable visiting her at nearby Sholden. She was, no doubt, still grieving the loss even after a period of over two years, as was, if not to the same crippling extent, her daughter-in-law.

Elisabeth suspected the Widow Langridge had always found her a tad frivolous. It was certainly the case she had never seen her as a fitting bride for her son; what mother ever does? She would have had no cause for concern on this occasion. To ensure the bounds of proper and acceptable behaviour were never crossed, Betsey's Aunt Sarah was always close by, especially when any male showed an intention of acting in too familiar a fashion. This was a distinct likelihood, her niece being both a beauty, as well as a young woman of substantial independent means.

It was impossible, however, for the aunt to carry out her watchful duty in the archery butts as men, both married and single, took the rare opportunity, by tutoring their aim, of physical contact with women to whom they were neither married, engaged nor related. Sarah Lovell was not alone in her gimlet eye when it came to ensuring no liberties were allowed to go unremarked. Several wives could be seen storing up a later reprimand for an errant spouse, who, having imbibed more punch than was wise, took to exhibiting an excess of familiarity.

One who was certainly in for a later roasting, and this had nothing to do with manhandling women, was the Reverend Doctor Joshua

Moyle, who had probably been at the bottle before he arrived. The Vicar of Cottington, a man hard to find sober, sought to hide his broken-veined cheeks with thick whiskers, which left his cratered nose and rheumy eyes ever watering as the most prominent features.

His wife took less pleasure in his antics than the rest of the guests, as he sought to line up and plant an arrow on the bull, his aim obviously unsteady merely from the fact he struggled to avoid a slight stagger as he released his projectile. As a result, it thudded into a neighbouring target, not his own. The gales of laughter this produced was not taken as an affront; indeed, Moyle turned to those watching and bowed.

‘Does not the sound of laughter cheer you, Henry?’ Betsey asked, as she dipped a cup into the huge silver bowl before handing it to her brother.

‘Of course, Elisabeth, most certainly.’

The reply, given after a mere sip of the brew, failed to satisfy. Betsey felt slightly frustrated for, despite her best efforts to place her brother within the orbit of the unwed females present, he had yet to fully engage any of them in a meaningful conversation. Her quip when pushing him into this event, which had not been easy in itself – that a chateau required a chatelaine – had engendered a response, which, while politely delivered, told her to mind her own business.

‘We can always rely on our good vicar for amusement, if not example.’

Betsey questioned the word ‘good’, and as for example, Moyle to her was a bad one, the only saving grace she could recall his ability to deliver ferocious sermons promising hell and damnation for sins numerous, in many of which he was himself a transgressor. The living he occupied was in the gift of the Tulkington family, in reality her elder brother, and she could never fathom why such an endemic soak was tolerated. Comment on that was also not taken well.

Henry had always been hard for her to connect with; a twelve-year difference in age, added to a birth that had taken from them their

mother, was only one factor to affect their relationship. He had been sent away to a school noted for its hard discipline; she had been tutored at home by a benign governess, as well as fussed over by servants.

In attitudes they were chalk and cheese, Betsey with her optimistic nature and love of the outdoors, contrasted with her brother's addiction to business, aversion to fresh air or outdoor pursuits and what she called his hypochondria. If he was genuinely ill, she could and would show sincere sympathy, but most of his supposed ailments were the product of his imagination. Often these were prompted by things he had read of in avidly consumed medical tomes.

If they had quarrelled in the years gone by, it had arisen from his controlling nature, as well as an absence of anything approaching gaiety. With their father also gone by the time she grew to maturity, he had been the head of the household and so sought to act *in loco parentis* to a sister intending marriage – one who was having none of it. That, however, was all in the past. She was determined, home again and older, that things between them would be different.

‘Will you aid me in the butts?’

‘I reckon your aim would be best without it, Elisabeth. It is not a sport at which I have any skill, if indeed a thing of that nature exists. I would make Moyle look like Robin of the Hood.’

‘While I have none at all with the bow,’ Betsey insisted. ‘You know you are the only person I can ask.’

That remark seemed to please her brother, though the twitch of his lips quickly disappeared. She thought to mention it, only to conclude a misreading of the expression. Her situation did not permit for even the most restrained of the male guests to hold her elbow, place a second hand around her waist and whisper closely in her ear to tell her when to release the bowstring. Skittles she could play, as long as no excessive exuberance was demonstrated if all the pins tumbled, likewise success in the other entertainments.

‘Perhaps,’ she added, ‘if you are seen assisting me, it might encourage

some of the other ladies present to ask for a touch of tutoring.’

‘Which would surely dampen their enthusiasm. That is, if they demonstrate any in the first place.’

She tried and failed to avoid a cross look, but Betsey Langridge possessed a brow that did not furrow unobtrusively. Back in England due to unforeseen as well as unfortunate circumstances and with half a mind to remain, she longed for her childhood home to be like her house in Jamaica: a place of social repute, an estate of which people talked, if not in wonder, then at least in appreciation of the amusements, table and sparkling conversation it provided.

This would surely never happen with Henry unwed and, she had to admit, it would take a singular creature of a wife to change him: he was too solemn of disposition and worked too hard for his own good. If anything of that nature were to transpire, it must be down to her to bring it about, which led her to ignore his obvious reluctance and adopt a chastising tone.

‘They will not if you fail to engage with them.’

‘I agreed to your request to hold this and have met the expense. Settle for that, dear sister, and accept that whatever kind of life you enjoyed in the Caribbean is unlikely to be replicated here.’

‘So you will not even take my arm and a tour to be introduced?’

‘That would be too churlish, but please, Elisabeth, no romantic effusions.’

It was obvious, as they circulated, she was the object of more interest than her brother. Or was it that Henry produced in the younger women present a degree of reserve, brought on by a rather uncompromising countenance? This was not helped by his constant recourse to his handkerchief, while Betsey’s radiant smile encouraged the eligible males to hope their attentions were more than merely politely received.

The time came to consume the roasted pig, which had been cooking over a charcoal pit since early morning and was now being carved, to

be eaten sitting at tables freshly set up by the estate servants in the marquee. There was a certain amount of jockeying amongst the young men to secure a place beside her, all seen off by the basilisk stare of her aunt, who ensured that, at each elbow, Elisabeth was obliged to converse with an elderly couple, long wedded to each other and thus no threat to propriety.

By now a number of the more mature male guests were drunk; Roger Colpoys, married to her good friend Annabel, was loud as the inebriated tend to be, one of telling prominence but not alone amongst many who'd overindulged at the punch bowl. Dr Moyle exceeded others even in this; the vicar was face down in his plate and snuffing through apple sauce, luckily at a place far enough away from Betsey for her to be able to ignore it.

Her brother was clearly taken by it – enough, anyway, to produce a rare bout of laughing. He called for a couple of servants to lift the divine from the danger of suffocation and carry him back to the vicarage. As they lifted his head, it came away with a long piece of crackling entangled in his white whiskers, already stained by gravy. Once more this occasioned laughter; Henry rocked in his chair, as did a majority of the men. The women, especially those married, showed overt sympathy for Moyle's long-suffering wife.

The meal, consumed, including a syllabub and a choice of cheeses and with port doing the rounds, allowed several of the bachelors, at least those who were sober, to circulate. One by one they manoeuvred to come within Betsey's orbit. Sat opposite, Aunt Sarah's expression was enough to make any approach stiffly formal and definitely non-tactile.

Only in the departure could those who wished to pay court to her be allowed any physical contact, no more than a touch of her fingers and a brush of a kiss on the back of her hand. If that proved to be more than perfunctory, a cough from the same relative would bring on a swift termination.

Guests gone and alone in her bedroom, Betsey, in reprising the day, was not sure to what extent she had truly enjoyed herself, given the constraints on her behaviour. In summation, she saw it as only a beginning, a first dip of the social toe. Cottington Court, in time, would be as she wished it, never mind Henry and his misanthropy. When the period of mourning for her late husband was over, perhaps she could put her mind to her own future and cease to concern herself with that of her brother.

Inevitably that took her thoughts back to Jamaica, to its warm climate and life of ease. If there was sad recollection of a spouse lost to the endemic fevers of the region, there were more recent memories of a warmer nature to help her over into sleep.