Chapter LII

It was a very great relief to Emma to find Harriet as desirous as herself to avoid a meeting. Their intercourse was painful enough by letter. How much worse, had they been obliged to meet!

Harriet expressed herself very much as might be supposed, without reproaches, or apparent sense of ill-usage; and yet Emma fancied there was a something of resentment, a something bordering on it in her style, which increased the desirableness of their being separate.—It might be only her own consciousness; but it seemed as if an angel only could have been quite without resentment under such a stroke.

She had no difficulty in procuring Isabella's invitation; and she was fortunate in having a sufficient reason for asking it, without resorting to invention.—There was a tooth amiss. Harriet really wished, and had wished some time, to consult a dentist. Mrs John Knightley was delighted to be of use; any thing of ill health was a recommendation to her—and though not so fond of a dentist as of a Mr Wingfield, she was quite eager to have Harriet under her care.—When it was thus settled on her sister's side, Emma proposed it to her friend, and found her very persuadable.—Harriet was to go; she was invited for at least a fortnight; she was to be conveyed in Mr Woodhouse's carriage.—It was all arranged, it was all completed, and Harriet was safe in Brunswick Square.

Now Emma could, indeed, enjoy Mr Knightley's visits; now she could talk, and she could listen with true happiness, unchecked by that sense of injustice, of guilt, of something most painful, which had haunted her when remembering how disappointed a heart was near her, how much

might at that moment, and at a little distance, be enduring by the feelings which she had led astray herself.

The difference of Harriet at Mrs Goddard's, or in London, made perhaps an unreasonable difference in Emma's sensations; but she could not think of her in London without objects of curiosity and employment, which must be averting the past, and carrying her out of herself.

She would not allow any other anxiety to succeed directly to the place in her mind which Harriet had occupied. There was a communication before her, one which she only could be competent to make—the confession of her engagement to her father; but she would have nothing to do with it at present.—She had resolved to defer the disclosure till Mrs Weston were safe and well. No additional agitation should be thrown at this period among those she loved—and the evil should not act on herself by anticipation before the appointed time.—A fortnight, at least, of leisure and peace of mind, to crown every warmer, but more agitating, delight, should be hers.

She soon resolved, equally as a duty and a pleasure, to employ half an hour of this holiday of spirits in calling on Miss Fairfax.—She ought to go—and she was longing to see her; the resemblance of their present situations increasing every other motive of goodwill. It would be a secret satisfaction; but the consciousness of a similarity of prospect would certainly add to the interest with which she should attend to any thing Jane might communicate.

She went—she had driven once unsuccessfully to the door, but had not been into the house since the morning after Box Hill, when poor Jane had been in such distress as had filled her with compassion, though all the worst of her sufferings had been unsuspected.—The fear of being still unwelcome, determined her, though assured of their being at home, to wait in the passage, and send up her name.—She heard Patty announcing it; but no such bustle succeeded as poor Miss Bates had before made so happily intelligible.—No; she heard nothing but the instant reply of, 'Beg her to walk up;'—and a moment afterwards she was met on the stairs by Jane herself, coming eagerly forward, as if no other reception of her were felt sufficient.—Emma had never seen her look so well, so lovely, so engaging. There was consciousness, animation, and warmth; there was every thing which her countenance or manner could ever have wanted.—

She promised, however, to think of it; and pretty nearly promised, moreover, to think of it, with the intention of finding it a very good scheme.

It is remarkable, that Emma, in the many, very many, points of view in which she was now beginning to consider Donwell Abbey, was never struck with any sense of injury to her nephew Henry, whose rights as heir-expectant had formerly been so tenaciously regarded. Think she must of the possible difference to the poor little boy; and yet she only gave herself a saucy conscious smile about it, and found amusement in detecting the real cause of that violent dislike of Mr Knightley's marrying Jane Fairfax, or any body else, which at the time she had wholly imputed to the amiable solicitude of the sister and the aunt.

This proposal of his, this plan of marrying and continuing at Hartfield—the more she contemplated it, the more pleasing it became. His evils seemed to lessen, her own advantages to increase, their mutual good to outweigh every drawback. Such a companion for herself in the periods of anxiety and cheerlessness before her!—Such a partner in all those duties and cares to which time must be giving increase of melancholy!

She would have been too happy but for poor Harriet; but every blessing of her own seemed to involve and advance the sufferings of her friend, who must now be even excluded from Hartfield. The delightful family party which Emma was securing for herself, poor Harriet must, in mere charitable caution, be kept at a distance from. She would be a loser in every way. Emma could not deplore her future absence as any deduction from her own enjoyment. In such a party, Harriet would be rather a dead weight than otherwise; but for the poor girl herself, it seemed a peculiarly cruel necessity that was to be placing her in such a state of unmerited punishment.

In time, of course, Mr Knightley would be forgotten, that is, supplanted; but this could not be expected to happen very early. Mr Knightley himself would be doing nothing to assist the cure;—not like Mr Elton. Mr Knightley, always so kind, so feeling, so truly considerate for every body, would never deserve to be less worshipped than now; and it really was too much to hope even of Harriet, that she could be in love with more than three men in one year.

Walking away from William Larkins

She came forward with an offered hand; and said, in a low, but very feeling tone,

'This is most kind, indeed!—Miss Woodhouse, it is impossible for me to express—I hope you will believe—Excuse me for being so entirely without words.'

Emma was gratified, and would soon have shewn no want of words, if the sound of Mrs Elton's voice from the sitting-room had not checked her, and made it expedient to compress all her friendly and all her congratulatory sensations into a very, very earnest shake of the hand.

Mrs Bates and Mrs Elton were together. Miss Bates was out, which accounted for the previous tranquillity. Emma could have wished Mrs Elton elsewhere; but she was in a humour to have patience with every body; and as Mrs Elton met her with unusual graciousness, she hoped the rencontre would do them no harm.

She soon believed herself to penetrate Mrs Elton's thoughts, and understand why she was, like herself, in happy spirits; it was being in Miss Fairfax's confidence, and fancying herself acquainted with what was still a secret to other people. Emma saw symptoms of it immediately in the expression of her face; and while paying her own compliments to Mrs Bates, and appearing to attend to the good old lady's replies, she saw her with a sort of anxious parade of mystery fold up a letter which she had apparently been reading aloud to Miss Fairfax, and return it into the purple and gold reticule by her side, saying, with significant nods,

'We can finish this some other time, you know. You and I shall not want opportunities. And, in fact, you have heard all the essential already. I only wanted to prove to you that Mrs S. admits our apology, and is not offended. You see how delightfully she writes. Oh! she is a sweet creature! You would have doated on her, had you gone.—But not a word more. Let us be discreet—quite on our good behaviour.—Hush!—You remember those lines—I forget the poem at this moment:

> For when a lady's in the case,
> You know all other things give place.

Now I say, my dear, in our case, for lady, read——mum! a word to the wise.—I am in a fine flow of spirits, an't I? But I want to set your heart at ease as to Mrs S.—My representation, you see, has quite appeased her.'

And again, on Emma's merely turning her head to look at Mrs Bates's knitting, she added, in a half whisper,

'I mentioned no names, you will observe.—Oh! no; cautious as a minister of state. I managed it extremely well.'

Emma could not doubt. It was a palpable display, repeated on every possible occasion. When they had all talked a little while in harmony of the weather and Mrs Weston, she found herself abruptly addressed with,

'Do not you think, Miss Woodhouse, our saucy little friend here is charmingly recovered?—Do not you think her cure does Perry the highest credit?—(here was a side-glance of great meaning at Jane.) Upon my word, Perry has restored her in a wonderful short time!—Oh! if you had seen her, as I did, when she was at the worst!'—And when Mrs Bates was saying something to Emma, whispered farther, 'We do not say a word of any assistance that Perry might have; not a word of a certain young physician from Windsor.—Oh! no; Perry shall have all the credit.'

'I have scarce had the pleasure of seeing you, Miss Woodhouse,' she shortly afterwards began, 'since the party to Box Hill. Very pleasant party. But yet I think there was something wanting. Things did not seem—that is, there seemed a little cloud upon the spirits of some.—So it appeared to me at least, but I might be mistaken. However, I think it answered so far as to tempt one to go again. What say you both to our collecting the same party, and exploring to Box Hill again, while the fine weather lasts?—It must be the same party, you know, quite the same party, not one exception.'

Soon after this Miss Bates came in, and Emma could not help being diverted by the perplexity of her first answer to herself, resulting, she supposed, from doubt of what might be said, and impatience to say every thing.

'Thank you, dear Miss Woodhouse, you are all kindness.—It is impossible to say—Yes, indeed, I quite understand—dearest Jane's prospects—that is, I do not mean.—But she is charmingly recovered.—How is Mr Woodhouse?—I am so glad.—Quite out of my power.—Such a happy little circle as you find us here.—Yes, indeed.—Charming young man!—that is—so very friendly; I mean good Mr Perry!—such attention to Jane!'—And from her great, her more than commonly thankful delight towards Mrs Elton for being there, Emma guessed that there had been a

The subject followed; it was in plain, unaffected, gentlemanlike English, such as Mr Knightley used even to the woman he was in love with, how to be able to ask her to marry him, without attacking the happiness of her father. Emma's answer was ready at the first word. 'While her dear father lived, any change of condition must be impossible for her. She could never quit him.' Part only of this answer, however, was admitted. The impossibility of her quitting her father, Mr Knightley felt as strongly as herself; but the inadmissibility of any other change, he could not agree to. He had been thinking it over most deeply, most intently; he had at first hoped to induce Mr Woodhouse to remove with her to Donwell; he had wanted to believe it feasible, but his knowledge of Mr Woodhouse would not suffer him to deceive himself long; and now he confessed his persuasion, that such a transplantation would be a risk of her father's comfort, perhaps even of his life, which must not be hazarded. Mr Woodhouse taken from Hartfield!—No, he felt that it ought not to be attempted. But the plan which had arisen on the sacrifice of this, he trusted his dearest Emma would not find in any respect objectionable; it was, that he should be received at Hartfield; that so long as her father's happiness—in other words, his life—required Hartfield to continue her home, it should be his likewise.

Of their all removing to Donwell, Emma had already had her own passing thoughts. Like him, she had tried the scheme and rejected it; but such an alternative as this had not occurred to her. She was sensible of all the affection it evinced. She felt that, in quitting Donwell, he must be sacrificing a great deal of independence of hours and habits; that in living constantly with her father, and in no house of his own, there would be much, very much, to be borne with. She promised to think of it, and advised him to think of it more; but he was fully convinced, that no reflection could alter his wishes or his opinion on the subject. He had given it, he could assure her, very long and calm consideration; he had been walking away from William Larkins the whole morning, to have his thoughts to himself.

'Ah! there is one difficulty unprovided for,' cried Emma. 'I am sure William Larkins will not like it. You must get his consent before you ask mine.'

actually resolve to break with him entirely!—She felt the engagement to be a source of repentance and misery to each—she dissolved it.—What a view this gives of her sense of his behaviour!—Well, he must be a most extraordinary— '

'Nay, nay, read on.—You will find how very much he suffers.'

'I hope he does,' replied Mr Knightley coolly, and resuming the letter. '"Smallridge!"—What does this mean? What is all this?'

'She had engaged to go as governess to Mrs Smallridge's children—a dear friend of Mrs Elton's—a neighbour of Maple Grove; and, by the bye, I wonder how Mrs Elton bears the disappointment?'

'Say nothing, my dear Emma, while you oblige me to read—not even of Mrs Elton. Only one page more. I shall soon have done. What a letter the man writes!'

'I wish you would read it with a kinder spirit towards him.'

'Well, there is feeling here.—He does seem to have suffered in finding her ill.—Certainly, I can have no doubt of his being fond of her. "Dearer, much dearer than ever." I hope he may long continue to feel all the value of such a reconciliation.—He is a very liberal thanker, with his thousands and tens of thousands.—"Happier than I deserve." Come, he knows himself there. "Miss Woodhouse calls me the child of good fortune."—Those were Miss Woodhouse's words, were they?— And a fine ending—and there is the letter. The child of good fortune! That was your name for him, was it?'

'You do not appear so well satisfied with his letter as I am; but still you must, at least I hope you must, think the better of him for it. I hope it does him some service with you.'

'Yes, certainly it does. He has had great faults, faults of inconsideration and thoughtlessness; and I am very much of his opinion in thinking him likely to be happier than he deserves: but still as he is, beyond a doubt, really attached to Miss Fairfax, and will soon, it may be hoped, have the advantage of being constantly with her, I am very ready to believe his character will improve, and acquire from hers the steadiness and delicacy of principle that it wants. And now, let me talk to you of something else. I have another person's interest at present so much at heart, that I cannot think any longer about Frank Churchill. Ever since I left you this morning, Emma, my mind has been hard at work on one subject.'

little show of resentment towards Jane, from the vicarage quarter, which was now graciously overcome.—After a few whispers, indeed, which placed it beyond a guess, Mrs Elton, speaking louder, said,

'Yes, here I am, my good friend; and here I have been so long, that anywhere else I should think it necessary to apologise; but, the truth is, that I am waiting for my lord and master. He promised to join me here, and pay his respects to you.'

'What! are we to have the pleasure of a call from Mr Elton?—That will be a favour indeed! for I know gentlemen do not like morning visits, and Mr Elton's time is so engaged.'

'Upon my word it is, Miss Bates.—He really is engaged from morning to night.—There is no end of people's coming to him, on some pretence or other.—The magistrates, and overseers, and churchwardens, are always wanting his opinion. They seem not able to do any thing without him.—"Upon my word, Mr E.," I often say, "rather you than I.—I do not know what would become of my crayons and my instrument, if I had half so many applicants."—Bad enough as it is, for I absolutely neglect them both to an unpardonable degree.—I believe I have not played a bar this fortnight.—However, he is coming, I assure you: yes, indeed, on purpose to wait on you all.' And putting up her hand to screen her words from Emma—'A congratulatory visit, you know.—Oh! yes, quite indispensable.'

Miss Bates looked about her, so happily—!

'He promised to come to me as soon as he could disengage himself from Knightley; but he and Knightley are shut up together in deep consultation.—Mr E. is Knightley's right hand.'

Emma would not have smiled for the world, and only said, 'Is Mr Elton gone on foot to Donwell?—He will have a hot walk.'

'Oh! no, it is a meeting at the Crown, a regular meeting. Weston and Cole will be there too; but one is apt to speak only of those who lead.—I fancy Mr E. and Knightley have every thing their own way.'

'Have not you mistaken the day?' said Emma. 'I am almost certain that the meeting at the Crown is not till to-morrow.—Mr Knightley was at Hartfield yesterday, and spoke of it as for Saturday.'

'Oh! no, the meeting is certainly to-day,' was the abrupt answer, which denoted the impossibility of any blunder on Mrs Elton's side.—'I do

believe,' she continued, 'this is the most troublesome parish that ever was. We never heard of such things at Maple Grove.'

'Your parish there was small,' said Jane.

'Upon my word, my dear, I do not know, for I never heard the subject talked of.'

'But it is proved by the smallness of the school, which I have heard you speak of, as under the patronage of your sister and Mrs Bragge; the only school, and not more than five-and-twenty children.'

'Ah! you clever creature, that's very true. What a thinking brain you have! I say, Jane, what a perfect character you and I should make, if we could be shaken together. My liveliness and your solidity would produce perfection.—Not that I presume to insinuate, however, that some people may not think you perfection already.—But hush!—not a word, if you please.'

It seemed an unnecessary caution; Jane was wanting to give her words, not to Mrs Elton, but to Miss Woodhouse, as the latter plainly saw. The wish of distinguishing her, as far as civility permitted, was very evident, though it could not often proceed beyond a look.

Mr Elton made his appearance. His lady greeted him with some of her sparkling vivacity.

'Very pretty, sir, upon my word; to send me on here, to be an encumbrance to my friends, so long before you vouchsafe to come!—But you knew what a dutiful creature you had to deal with. You knew I should not stir till my lord and master appeared.—Here have I been sitting this hour, giving these young ladies a sample of true conjugal obedience—for who can say, you know, how soon it may be wanted?'

Mr Elton was so hot and tired, that all this wit seemed thrown away. His civilities to the other ladies must be paid; but his subsequent object was to lament over himself for the heat he was suffering, and the walk he had had for nothing.

'When I got to Donwell,' said he, 'Knightley could not be found. Very odd! very unaccountable! after the note I sent him this morning, and the message he returned, that he should certainly be at home till one.'

'Donwell!' cried his wife.—'My dear Mr E., you have not been to Donwell!—You mean the Crown; you come from the meeting at the Crown.'

prove more and more the beauty of truth and sincerity in all our dealings with each other?'

Emma agreed to it, and with a blush of sensibility on Harriet's account, which she could not give any sincere explanation of.

'You had better go on,' said she.

He did so, but very soon stopt again to say, 'the pianoforte! Ah! That was the act of a very, very young man, one too young to consider whether the inconvenience of it might not very much exceed the pleasure. A boyish scheme, indeed!—I cannot comprehend a man's wishing to give a woman any proof of affection which he knows she would rather dispense with; and he did know that she would have prevented the instrument's coming if she could.'

After this, he made some progress without any pause. Frank Churchill's confession of having behaved shamefully was the first thing to call for more than a word in passing.

'I perfectly agree with you, sir,'—was then his remark. 'You did behave very shamefully. You never wrote a truer line.' And having gone through what immediately followed of the basis of their disagreement, and his persisting to act in direct opposition to Jane Fairfax's sense of right, he made a fuller pause to say, 'This is very bad.—He had induced her to place herself, for his sake, in a situation of extreme difficulty and uneasiness, and it should have been his first object to prevent her from suffering unnecessarily.—She must have had much more to contend with, in carrying on the correspondence, than he could. He should have respected even unreasonable scruples, had there been such; but hers were all reasonable. We must look to her one fault, and remember that she had done a wrong thing in consenting to the engagement, to bear that she should have been in such a state of punishment.'

Emma knew that he was now getting to the Box Hill party, and grew uncomfortable. Her own behaviour had been so very improper! She was deeply ashamed, and a little afraid of his next look. It was all read, however, steadily, attentively, and without the smallest remark; and, excepting one momentary glance at her, instantly withdrawn, in the fear of giving pain—no remembrance of Box Hill seemed to exist.

'There is no saying much for the delicacy of our good friends, the Eltons,' was his next observation.—'His feelings are natural.—What!

He began—stopping, however, almost directly to say, 'Had I been offered the sight of one of this gentleman's letters to his mother-in-law a few months ago, Emma, it would not have been taken with such indifference.'

He proceeded a little farther, reading to himself; and then, with a smile, observed, 'Humph! a fine complimentary opening: But it is his way. One man's style must not be the rule of another's. We will not be severe.'

'It will be natural for me,' he added shortly afterwards, 'to speak my opinion aloud as I read. By doing it, I shall feel that I am near you. It will not be so great a loss of time: but if you dislike it— '

'Not at all. I should wish it.'

Mr Knightley returned to his reading with greater alacrity.

'He trifles here,' said he, 'as to the temptation. He knows he is wrong, and has nothing rational to urge.—Bad.—He ought not to have formed the engagement.—"His father"s disposition:'—he is unjust, however, to his father. Mr Weston's sanguine temper was a blessing on all his upright and honourable exertions; but Mr Weston earned every present comfort before he endeavoured to gain it.—Very true; he did not come till Miss Fairfax was here.'

'And I have not forgotten,' said Emma, 'how sure you were that he might have come sooner if he would. You pass it over very handsomely—but you were perfectly right.'

'I was not quite impartial in my judgment, Emma:—but yet, I think—had you not been in the case—I should still have distrusted him.'

When he came to Miss Woodhouse, he was obliged to read the whole of it aloud—all that related to her, with a smile; a look; a shake of the head; a word or two of assent, or disapprobation; or merely of love, as the subject required; concluding, however, seriously, and, after steady reflection, thus—

'Very bad—though it might have been worse.—Playing a most dangerous game. Too much indebted to the event for his acquittal.—No judge of his own manners by you.—Always deceived in fact by his own wishes, and regardless of little besides his own convenience.—Fancying you to have fathomed his secret. Natural enough!—his own mind full of intrigue, that he should suspect it in others.—Mystery; Finesse—how they pervert the understanding! My Emma, does not every thing serve to

'Such a dreadful broiling morning!'

'No, no, that's to-morrow; and I particularly wanted to see Knightley to-day on that very account.—Such a dreadful broiling morning!—I went over the fields too—(speaking in a tone of great ill-usage,) which made it so much the worse. And then not to find him at home! I assure you I am not at all pleased. And no apology left, no message for me. The housekeeper declared she knew nothing of my being expected.—Very extraordinary!—And nobody knew at all which way he was gone. Perhaps to Hartfield, perhaps to the Abbey Mill, perhaps into his woods.—Miss Woodhouse, this is not like our friend Knightley!—Can you explain it?'

Emma amused herself by protesting that it was very extraordinary, indeed, and that she had not a syllable to say for him.

'I cannot imagine,' said Mrs Elton, (feeling the indignity as a wife ought to do,) 'I cannot imagine how he could do such a thing by you, of all people in the world! The very last person whom one should expect to be forgotten!—My dear Mr E., he must have left a message for you, I am sure he must.—Not even Knightley could be so very eccentric;—and his servants forgot it. Depend upon it, that was the case: and very likely to happen with the Donwell servants, who are all, I have often observed, extremely awkward and remiss.—I am sure I would not have such a creature as his Harry stand at our sideboard for any consideration. And as for Mrs Hodges, Wright holds her very cheap indeed.—She promised Wright a receipt, and never sent it.'

'I met William Larkins,' continued Mr Elton, 'as I got near the house, and he told me I should not find his master at home, but I did not believe him.—William seemed rather out of humour. He did not know what was come to his master lately, he said, but he could hardly ever get the speech of him. I have nothing to do with William's wants, but it really is of very great importance that I should see Knightley to-day; and it becomes a matter, therefore, of very serious inconvenience that I should have had this hot walk to no purpose.'

Emma felt that she could not do better than go home directly. In all probability she was at this very time waited for there; and Mr Knightley might be preserved from sinking deeper in aggression towards Mr Elton, if not towards William Larkins.

Chapter LI

This letter must make its way to Emma's feelings. She was obliged, in spite of her previous determination to the contrary, to do it all the justice that Mrs Weston foretold. As soon as she came to her own name, it was irresistible; every line relating to herself was interesting, and almost every line agreeable; and when this charm ceased, the subject could still maintain itself, by the natural return of her former regard for the writer, and the very strong attraction which any picture of love must have for her at that moment. She never stopt till she had gone through the whole; and though it was impossible not to feel that he had been wrong, yet he had been less wrong than she had supposed—and he had suffered, and was very sorry—and he was so grateful to Mrs Weston, and so much in love with Miss Fairfax, and she was so happy herself, that there was no being severe; and could he have entered the room, she must have shaken hands with him as heartily as ever.

She thought so well of the letter, that when Mr Knightley came again, she desired him to read it. She was sure of Mrs Weston's wishing it to be communicated; especially to one, who, like Mr Knightley, had seen so much to blame in his conduct.

'I shall be very glad to look it over,' said he; 'but it seems long. I will take it home with me at night.'

But that would not do. Mr Weston was to call in the evening, and she must return it by him.

'I would rather be talking to you,' he replied; 'but as it seems a matter of justice, it shall be done.'