

Chapter One

Badleigh Vicarage, Wednesday, 8th October 1806

My dear Eliza,

I promised yesterday that just as soon as I had leisure for writing I should send you a full and satisfactory account of Penelope Lamb's accident at Madderstone Abbey; and so I shall begin upon it. Though I fear I may have to leave off at any moment, for there is a great deal of needlework to be done for the little boys at school and Margaret has already opened her workbox and begun to look at me with displeasure.

In yesterday's note I was kind enough to hint at some very peculiar circumstances surrounding Penelope's fall and I do not doubt that since receiving it you have enjoyed all the apprehensions and heightened imaginings which such hints can supply. And I trust my account will not disappoint you, for it was a very strange business indeed – one which I cannot, yet, understand at all.

The first thing you must know is that it all came about because of the ghost – I mean, of course, the Grey Nun of Madderstone.

And, by the by, it occurs to me . . .

‘Well, Dido,’ said Mrs Margaret Kent heavily, ‘I daresay that when I was unmarried I had leisure for writing long letters.’ She regarded her sister-in-law with the tragic aspect

of a saint bound for the pagan arena in Rome. 'I declare it is more than a fortnight since I touched my writing desk.'

'Yes,' said the unrepentant Dido without ceasing to move her pen. 'It is quite one of the evils of matrimony, is it not?'

. . . it occurs to me, Eliza, that the Grey Nun is a remarkably important lady. The possession of a family ghost confers such dignity! I believe that every family which has any claim at all to grandeur should have a ghost. I consider it a kind of necessary which should be attended to as soon as the fortune is made and the country estate purchased.

Everyone's consequence is increased by the presence of a ghost.

For here are the two Crockford sisters, who are no more than some kind of third cousins to the Harman-Footes of Madderstone, but they must walk their visitor, Penelope, two miles across the fields to see the Grey Nun. Well, not perhaps quite her, for she cannot of course be relied upon to be always at home to morning callers – but at least the ruins in which she is reputed to appear.

I said to Penelope, when I was invited to accompany them, 'It is not enough, you know, that we should entertain you with parties and visits while you are here in Badleigh. We cannot send you back to your school in Bath without first chilling your blood and supplying you with nightmares to last a twelvemonth.'

And she, I discovered, was very grateful for the attention. For she had 'never set foot in a real abbey before' and she did 'most sincerely hope that it was very dreadful and just exactly like what one read about in books . . .'

Well, she is a sweet-tempered, good-natured girl and so

very pretty that I always find great pleasure in looking at her – but I do not believe that she has more than common sense. However, since she is now lying abed with an injured head, I ought not to speak ill of her, and I confess that her eager naivety suits my taste a great deal better than Lucy Crockford’s studied sensibility.

All the while that we were walking to Madderstone . . .

‘It is a great pity,’ said Margaret loudly, ‘that Eliza is not here. *She* is a very fine needlewoman.’

‘It is extremely kind of you to say so, Margaret. I shall be sure to pass on the compliment.’

‘And so very obliging. Why, last spring, she sewed three shirts for little Frank in as many days.’

‘Did she indeed? How remarkable!’ Dido resolutely continued with her letter, but a glance across the green baize of the parlour table had shown colour mounting in Margaret’s broad cheeks, her narrow mouth tightening. If there was not to be a state of warfare in the house, she must soon lay her pen aside. As she bent her head further over her page she rather fancied that she felt, prickling through her cap, not only the heat of autumn sunshine magnified by the window, but also a disapproving gaze.

And yet she could not help but try for a few lines more:

All the while that we were walking to Madderstone, Lucy was talking in her slowest, most languishing tones of the ‘extraordinary atmosphere of melancholy which haunts the ruins.’ An atmosphere to which she is herself ‘most extraordinarily sensitive.’ For ‘no one – no one in the world – feels these things more acutely’ than she does. And there have been times when she has been ‘almost overwhelmed by

the extraordinary atmosphere of the ruins . . . ?

So those two continued to talk of ghosts, with only an occasional digression in praise of Captain Laurence – who, I suppose, must be considered a secondary motive for our visit to Madderstone Abbey.

And, by the by, I cannot help but wonder that Lucy and Penelope should contrive to be both in love with the captain without any cooling of affection between themselves. Nor can I quite determine whether it argues most for the sweetness of their natures, the weakness of their understanding – or only the insignificance of their attachment to the gentleman.

The sunny silence of the room was broken by Margaret's searching noisily in the workbasket for a spool of thread. Dido began to write faster:

Harriet Crockford, I noticed, scowled darkly whenever her sister talked of the captain; I do not think she has a very high opinion of him. But I could not prevail upon her to discuss this interesting topic. And, while nuns and the navy were canvassed by the other two, Harriet and I were much less pleasantly engaged. It was roof leads and damp in the kitchen passage all the way with us.

Harriet informs me that there is a hole in the roof at Ashfield which is a yard and three-quarters long and twenty-seven inches broad. It would, I am further informed, 'break Dear Papa's heart' if he could see the hole in Ashfield's roof. And, if my memory were only a little better, I could relate to you the exact cost of the tiles and lead which will be required to repair it.

Poor Harriet: there are times when she goes beyond being sensible and is downright dull. And it is very disconcerting

that a woman who is more than two years my junior can seem so very old. I find myself wishing that she would not wear such a dowdy bonnet, nor such a large and unbecoming cap beneath it; and I begin to despair of her ever having an original thought – I believe she only lives to reflect the ideas of dear dead Papa . . .

But now I am getting quite off the point. It is such a very great pleasure and relief to ‘talk’ to you, Eliza, that I cannot stop my pen from running away with me.

I must return to that woman of consequence: the Grey Nun. For it would seem that yesterday she was indeed at home to callers! Or so Lucy believes.

There was another, louder, sigh from the other side of the table.

‘Well, well, I suppose you have nothing else to occupy your time,’ said Margaret, ‘but I confess that it makes me quite *envious* to see you writing away all day.’ There followed some vigorous stabbing at a shirtsleeve. ‘The truth is,’ she continued, ‘that when your cottage was given up and it was proposed that you should come to live with us, I told your brother: “Francis, my dear,” I said, “I am sure I shall do all that I can for your poor sisters, but I do not know how I shall manage – with all the business I have to attend to – I do not know *how* I shall manage with having a *visitor* constantly in my house.”’

It was too much. Reminded of her dependence, Dido bit her lip, set aside her pen – and reached for the workbasket.

Chapter Two

The room which Dido had been given possession of on the attic floor of her brother's vicarage had not much to recommend it. It was small and cold and airless; it had no hearth, and its ceiling sloped so steeply that anyone lying in the narrow bed might, with ease, place a hand on the plaster. There was but one small window and it could be reached only by kneeling upon the bed. However, the apartment had, in Dido's opinion, two material advantages: one was the very pleasant scent which crept into it from the apples stored in a neighbouring attic, and the other was the twisting narrowness of the stairs which led to it.

Margaret was not fond of climbing twisting, narrow stairs and only visited the attics when her constant dread of the housemaids stealing food became so great that she must make a search of their bedroom.

Tucked under the sloping roof, her icy feet wrapped in a counterpane, Dido felt herself beyond the reach of interference and was able to continue with her letter as well as her cold fingers would allow:

. . . Well, Eliza, I am sure that I have now sewn more linen than can possibly be required by two young gentlemen of twelve and ten, and I think that I may now go on with my story.

We had a fine sunny day for our walk to Madderstone yesterday – though with a sharp breeze blowing. And very glad I was to be able to go, for, besides the sewing, there is the bramble jelly to be made – and Rebecca began to pick the damsons yesterday. However, Margaret is as anxious as ever to show attention to Mrs Harman-Foote and, since she does not like to walk so far herself, I am her envoy.

We had a very pleasant walk through the fields and the park, but once we came into Madderstone's pleasure grounds there was an end to all pleasure in walking! For Mr Harman-Foote is very busy at his 'improving' again and there was nothing but dirt and puddles and confusion all along the path which leads from the park gate to the abbey ruins. There are new terraces laid out and half a dozen great oaks and Spanish chestnuts taken down to 'open up the vista' and I fancy that the stream is to be turned into a cascade or have its consequence increased in some such way, because the lower pool – the one we have always thought to be the abbey's fishpond – is drained. The old stone dam is breached below the overflow – and there was a great to-do, when we were there, over catching the carp in nets and putting them into pails.

And, by the by, I should be quite angry about the despoliation of such a fine old estate if I thought Mr Harman-Foote improved only for pride and show – but, knowing his character, I suspect it is rather to provide honest employment for his men after our bad harvest.

Well, it being still quite early in the day, we resolved upon paying our respects first to the Grey Nun and then walking on to the great house to call upon Mrs Harman-Foote. We made our way through the cloisters and came into the ruined nave. Penelope was delighted – for it seems

that Madderstone is 'so very much like a place in a book,' and 'one can imagine very horrid things happening in it.'

Dido was compelled to stop, for she was shivering too much to carry on. She unwound her feet from the counterpane, went to the room's one small closet and took out the shawl which her sailor brother John had brought from the East Indies. Pulling it about her shoulders, she knelt upon the bed and looked out of the window.

The moon – almost full – rode high and very beautiful amid a flying wrack of cloud; its light silvered the meadows and reflected palely on the little stream dividing the glebe from the dark outline of woods.

'Look to nature when you are troubled, my dear.' That is what Dido's governess, Miss Steerforth, had told her many years ago. 'The beauty, the majesty, of God's creation, will be sure to set your little worries at nought.'

Dido looked . . . But, tonight, all the serenity of nature could not soothe her. The moon, lovely and indifferent, had no power to make her forget that she was trapped here for an indefinite period as Margaret's 'visitor', the dear home which she had shared with her sister, Eliza, given up in the cause of family economy. It was so very hard not to feel injured, or to suspect that an injustice had been done.

But she must not allow such thoughts to intrude. The failure of Charles's bank had involved all her brothers in heavy losses. They had all been compelled to retrench: Edward's hunters were sold and poor Francis, if Margaret prevailed, might be reduced to taking in pupils again – a practice he had given up with great pleasure when he was presented to the rectory of Badleigh five years ago. In the light of these

sacrifices, it was only natural that her brothers should attempt to reduce the cost of their sisters' maintenance. They had not wished it. They had been very kind and regretted the necessity very much.

Indeed they had regretted it so much that, for a while, everything had hung in the balance and the rent of Badleigh Cottage might have been paid for another quarter, had not Margaret just chanced to remark that, of course she knew nothing about the matter – and she did not regard the cost at all, for she was sure she would divide her last farthing with her dear sisters, but she could not help but say – since the matter was now under discussion – that she had never been quite easy about Dido and Eliza living alone in that house. It had such an *odd* look, when their brothers had all homes they might be invited to share, which, she must observe, would be a much more *respectable* arrangement. Though, of course, she did not care at all about the *considerable* expense of maintaining a separate establishment.

The balance had tipped; the lease had been surrendered at Michaelmas. And now Margaret . . .

But this would not do at all! Blame and resentment would only make her unhappy – as Eliza reminded her every time she wrote.

The surest escape from misery was mental exertion – that was a maxim of which Miss Steerforth herself would have approved. And Dido had discovered that the very best kind of mental exertion was the solving of a puzzle or mystery.

She tucked her feet under the counterpane again, took up her letter and resolutely turned her mind once more to the strange, inexplicable events in the abbey ruins.

* * *

... We rested a while upon the fallen stones in the shelter of the nave, but the girls were quite determined to climb the narrow old night stair into the haunted gallery.

So up we all went and, as we climbed, the wind whipped about us horribly and we were forced to hold hard to our bonnets. However, we gained the gallery in safety and Lucy began explaining how the Grey Nun appears there to 'wail and wring her hands whenever there is trouble about to befall the people of Madderstone', and how, 'at this very moment' she herself could scarcely stand for 'the extraordinary emotions' which the place aroused in her . . . And a great deal more of that kind.

And Penelope's blue eyes grew wider and wider and she exclaimed that it was 'All quite dreadful! And so delightful.' And she wondered that anyone should ever have wanted to become a nun. For it must have been so very uncomfortable – and dull too, she did not wonder – for nuns never did anything but walk about with their hands folded in very nasty gowns, and tell their beads. And she did not know what it was that they told their beads – though she had always supposed that it must be their sins.

Meanwhile, Harriet and I stood beside the pillar at the top of the stairs and looked out through the great arch of the east window, across the ruined lawns, the workmen and the wheelbarrows, to the drained pool. After a time, Harriet observed that some gentlemen from the house were come down to see how the work went on; and then I was foolish enough to remark that Captain Laurence was among them. The girls caught at the name, and resolved immediately upon walking to meet him. I should perhaps have judged better, Eliza, and held my tongue, for, I suppose, the combination of narrow,

crumbling stairs and eager passion is a rather dangerous one.

However, Lucy got down the steps safely and I was next to follow her. When I reached the bottom I looked up and saw that Penelope was just moving towards the stairway. She bent to lift her skirt a little, for the wind was blowing it about her ankles. She went down the first two steps and then she stopped – holding on to the ivy that grows upon the wall with one hand, she turned back as if she would speak to Harriet.

And, in the instant that she did so – when she was turned back and looking full into the gallery – there came such a look of shock over her face. Her mouth opened – she put a hand to her lips – she stepped backward – and lost her footing.

She fell down onto the broken pavement of the nave below – and lay without moving.

There seemed, Eliza, to be a moment in which the world and everything in it stood quite still. Then movement came back suddenly; but not so smoothly as it ought. Everything, including myself, was moving in an awkward, jerking fashion. I was the first to reach Penelope and it seemed as if everything was to be left for me to do. Lucy was entirely occupied in screaming (which at least served the purpose of bringing Captain Laurence and one or two of the men running to our aid). And Harriet was still at the top of the steps, weak and shocked and struggling hard to hold on to her bonnet and cap which were almost blowing away in the wind. I think she was perhaps afraid of falling herself.

I raised Penelope up as best I could and began to rub her temples. But she was heavy and did not seem to breathe.

I called her name.

The eyes flickered and opened for a moment. The lips moved. ‘I saw her,’ she said. ‘It was her . . .’

Chapter Three

Dido did not believe in ghosts. No, she quite definitely did not believe in them . . . But what had Penelope meant when she said, ‘I saw her . . .?’

There was such an air of mystery about the whole affair as could not help but inspire the dullest of imaginations – and Dido’s imagination was certainly not one of the dullest.

She had written so long her candle was burning low and the eerie light of the moon was throwing long shadows from the bedposts and the washstand across the bare floorboards. The wind was whining softly under the eaves and the clock upon the landing was striking the half-hour after midnight . . . At such a time, in such a place, it was only natural that the fancy should wander . . .

She could not prevent it, though she did not like to confess it in her letter – and she could not help but wonder what a certain Mr William Lomax might say if he knew about it.

‘A *ghost*, Miss Kent?’ She could imagine the look of wonder, the lifting of the eyebrows, the half-smile. ‘You cannot truly believe that your friend saw a ghost upon the gallery?’

‘No, no,’ she said aloud, ‘I do not say that there

certainly was a ghost – only that there was *something* – something which shocked her and made her fall.’

She smiled at herself and shook her head. Disputing with the absent Mr Lomax was become quite a habit with her. It was, perhaps, because there was so little rational conversation to be had in the vicarage; but she did not like it; it spoke of too great a dependence upon his opinions. And besides, he was too much inclined to win their disagreements, even when he was not present and she had all the trouble of devising his share of the conversation as well as her own – which did not seem quite fair.

But she would certainly not wish him – or anyone else – to think that she believed in such things as moaning, hand-wringing grey nuns. In point of fact, she had no patience at all with ghosts. They were so very *useless*.

There might for example be some purpose in this dead nun appearing, as she was reputed to do whenever disaster threatened the folk of Madderstone, if only she could be prevailed upon to disclose the nature of that disaster or advise how it might be averted. But, from all that Dido could gather, she had never performed such a service.

And, while they continued to be so very unobliging, she was determined not to put herself to the trouble of believing in ghosts.

It was an opinion which she might have expressed yesterday at Madderstone – if there had been an opportunity. For, no sooner had Captain Laurence carried the insensible Penelope into the hall of the great house, than Lucy had broken out with: ‘She saw the Grey Nun

on the gallery! And the fright made her fall. It is true. She *said* that she had seen the ghost.’

Dido had tried to intervene at this point with a suggestion that it was not certain that it was the nun she had seen. That she had not exactly named her . . .

But reasoned argument was quite out of the question just then, for all the while Lucy was talking, Mr Harman-Foote was booming out orders for a man to ride to the village for the surgeon, and his wife was giving very exact directions as to how Penelope must be carried up the stairs. And all the little Harman-Footes, who had, unluckily, been in the drawing room when news of the accident burst upon the household, were loitering about in the hall and adding their own noise to the uproar, despite their mama’s pleas to the nursery-maid to remove them from the distressing scene. Two imperious little girls were clinging to the lady’s gown and screaming to be noticed, while young Georgie – a stout-looking boy of eight or nine – was regarding Penelope levelly and demanding to know, ‘Is she dead?’ with very little sign of distress, but with a great deal of interest.

It was not until some hours later that Dido was at liberty to give her own account of the accident. By then the house was more at peace. Mr Paynter, the surgeon, had come and shaken his head and drawn in his breath, and finally declared that Penelope had a contusion to the head. However, he did not despair. Rest and careful nursing would probably set her to right – though they must not hope for a very rapid recovery.

The invalid was made comfortable in one of the abbey’s best bedchambers and Harriet appointed herself her only

nurse, sending away all the others. 'I know what I am about,' she said, flapping her hands at Dido. 'Too many cooks spoil the broth, you know.'

'But you cannot take all the trouble upon yourself,' Dido protested, still holding her place beside the bed, and gazing down at the pale face, sunk deep into the pillow, and the closed eyes which had not opened again since that strange moment in the cloisters. 'You must allow me to help.'

Harriet stepped back from the bed for a moment, and drew in a long, weary breath. Turning into the light which was coming through the half-closed curtains, she pushed up her large, ugly cap – and, without it shadowing her face, she looked positively young. Harriet was certainly the prettier of the two Crockford sisters – there could not be two opinions upon that point. She had a smooth white brow from which the hair grew in a delicate peak, small regular features, and an elegant figure; but her dress and air were those of an aging woman. Harriet Crockford had given up youth many years ago – or perhaps she had never embraced it.

'My trouble is of no consequence,' she said, now frowning seriously, 'and I cannot allow you to stay, for if you do, Lucy will demand it as a right that she stay too.'

'And why should she not? It is only fair that she should join with you in nursing.'

'Oh no, it will not do. She cannot look at Penelope without weeping. The greatest kindness you can do me is to take care of *her* and see her safely home. It would not do at all to have Lucy fixed here at Madderstone.'

Dido raised an eyebrow. 'You would not have her

living in the same house as Captain Laurence?’ she asked curiously.

Harriet avoided her gaze. ‘I think,’ she said, ‘that young girls should not fix themselves too soon. They should make hay while the sun shines.’

When Harriet could not express the thoughts of ‘Dear Papa’ it was her habit to fall back on maxims and received wisdom. It gave all her conversation a threadbare, made-over feeling – and rendered her real opinions difficult to comprehend.

‘Lucy is three and twenty,’ Dido observed. ‘Time enough, I would have thought, to become *fixed*.’

‘Oh Dido! Why must you always argue?’ cried Harriet impatiently, her face reddening. ‘When all’s said and done, nursing must always belong to women like you and me – women who are too old for love.’

Fortunately Harriet turned away just then to gather up Penelope’s clothes with efficient, angry little movements. She did not see her friend’s blush and involuntary start. There was a short silence before Dido returned to the attack.

‘But on this occasion I *must* argue. You cannot be the only one attending on Penelope,’ she insisted. ‘You need an assistant. And if I am indeed another aging crone who, by your account, is suited only to serve in the sickroom then I had better stay – my life is otherwise a dull blank!’

‘Now,’ said Harriet, folding her arms and frowning, ‘you are being satirical – and you know that I particularly dislike your being satirical. Can you wonder at my not wanting such an argumentative companion?’

‘But . . .’

Just then the patient began to stir and both women turned to look at her. Harriet went to her side immediately. ‘Please, Dido, just do as I ask and take Lucy home. And . . . as for an assistant . . .’ She paused and watched the face upon the pillow thoughtfully for a moment. ‘If they can do without old Nanny at home, then tell them to send her. She is used to nursing . . . Yes, Nanny will do very well indeed.’ She gave a weary smile. ‘Now go please,’ she urged. ‘Our talking is making her restless.’

Dido left the sickroom and walked slowly down the elegant sweep of Madderstone Abbey’s great staircase, pausing for a moment to gaze over the curve of the banister to the pattern of coloured marble on the hall floor below. She could not help but wonder why Harriet should be so very determined to keep Lucy away from the captain . . .

It was an odd little mystery and one which, she decided, she must get to the bottom of soon – but, meanwhile, there was something else troubling her: Harriet’s theory that an unmarried woman of more than thirty should devote herself to being useful and give up all thoughts of love. It was – like most of Harriet’s utterances – common cant. An unmarried woman over thirty was considered of no importance to anyone. She must make herself as useful as she might.

And, of course, Harriet knew nothing of Dido’s true situation. No one but Eliza knew that, within the last half-year, she had been solicited – and solicited by a very agreeable, handsome man – to change her name.

The affair between herself and Mr Lomax was a cause of very real anxiety to Dido; she suffered all the

anguish which strong affection, combined with profound doubts as to the wisdom of a marriage, can produce in a sensitive, intelligent mind. But, nevertheless, she found it rather provoking that she should have to suffer all the pain of indecision over his offer, while enjoying none of that consequence which a proposal of marriage usually bestows upon a woman!

Smiling at her own vanity, she continued down the stairs, but stopped again upon seeing below her in the hall the sleek black head of Harris Paynter, the young surgeon. There was something furtive in his movement: a looking-about to see whether or not he was observed. Dido could not help herself; she immediately stood very still – and observed him.

He was now standing irresolute, holding a folded paper in his hand. He appeared to be upon the point of delivering a note. In half a minute his mind was made up: he stepped to a small table where lay several letters – just brought from the post office. He slipped his note in among them, turned and hurried away towards the back of the house.

Dido waited until the sound of his steps died away and then slowly continued down into the hall. Propriety demanded that she walk directly to the drawing room door – curiosity argued for a detour towards the table . . . She stopped. The folded note could be clearly seen among the sealed letters. She took one step closer. There was a name written upon the note: *Mrs Harman-Foote* . . .

Now why, she wondered, was a humble surgeon writing messages to the lady of the house – and delivering them with such evident caution?