

The Air at Knightsteed

Darren Everett



AS THE STORY GOES, THERE WERE THREE WAYS IN WHICH A child might come to live in the Copper City.

The first was in the way that is most natural – that is, as the product of a gentleman and his lady, in love; the second was on the not-so-uncommon occasion that one became lost on the roads outside the city and the Hall of the Chapels deemed it necessary to offer succour within its walls; and the third was when Lady Emma of the Knightsteed estate wrote a letter to the First Lord of the Treasury at Piccadilly, London, to request a son.

At that time relations between Britannia and the free city-state of Copper were civil – indeed, before madness befell him, His Majesty signed an agreement with the city’s Marquis to

allow the city to extend its northern borders into a forest belonging to the crown. Therefore, the Duke of Portland, First Lord of the Treasury, responded immediately to Lady Emma in order to ascertain the age, social class and lineage of the son she desired. It is said that Emma replied simply: 'Oh, you know the sort, William¹; one that will grow into a fine gentleman should do.'

So, while it remains unknown how Portland acquired the boy, it was on the second Thursday of October 1808 that Lady Emma's heir was dispatched to Knightstead.

It would be fair to say that Lady Emma was not particularly fond of Thursdays. Her husband had been hanged for crimes against the state on a Thursday, and while she may not have found this disagreeable in itself, the entire affair had surely been something of an embarrassment. In a letter to a friend, Mrs Crockoll, Emma had this to say:

It has been more than forty years, Enid – and truth to tell, nothing has occurred on a Thursday since to alter my opinion. I find it the dullest of the weekdays, surpassed only by Sunday afternoons. Trust William, then, to despatch my boy on this of all days. And in October, of all the months!

In fact, she found Thursdays so objectionable that she would refuse to leave the house or entertain guests, and if pressed to

¹ William Henry Cavendish-Bentinck, 3rd Duke of Portland. A reference in *Copper & Verdigris* to a dalliance between Lady Emma and His Grace in their youth is almost certainly untrue.

reply to correspondence she would keep it concise to the extent of leaving sentences unfinished and closings unsigned.

It is probable, therefore, that Lady Emma was not in the best of moods on that day and she was clearly underwhelmed with her boy. Nine years old, he was “lanky and pale of complexion [...] quite obviously the runt of the litter” with “a weak chin, ginger hair, and a shortness of breath that makes him wheeze like an old mongrel dog”.

The boy’s breathing problems were in fact more severe than Emma made out in her writings. Before his arrival at Knightsted, he had been caught in a fire at St Bartholomew’s Hospital in London which claimed seventeen lives; while the boy survived, it is possible that the smoke he inhaled caused him long-term respiratory difficulties.²

Their first exchange was transcribed by Lady Emma:

EMMA: What is your name, boy?

BOY: I don’t have one, miss. I was told you’d be naming me.

EMMA: I was never pleased with the name my father gave me. You shall choose your own, when you have come of age and have proven yourself to be a gentleman.

BOY: So what will you call me till then?

EMMA: Until then, I shall call you “boy”.

² This theory does not explain why the boy was at the hospital to begin with; it has been suggested elsewhere that the boy had health problems before the fire started, and it was only because of his shortness of breath that he did not inhale as much smoke as the seventeen unfortunate children who shared the ward with him.

For several days, she was undecided as whether to keep the boy or return him to London – perhaps another reason for her disinclination to name him. Mrs Crockoll attended a function at Knightsteed at the end of October and may have persuaded Lady Emma to accept the boy as her heir. Their conversation is not recorded in detail, but Mrs Crockoll appears to have drawn attention to certain pale, nervous, and possibly inbred male members of high society who were present at the party, and suggested that the child was well-qualified, therefore, to become a gentleman.

“All the same, I imagine it will be no mean feat; frankly I do not think you are up to it” is the phrase attributed to Mrs Crockoll in Lady Emma’s journal – the deciding factor, we can assume, in her acceptance of the boy, history having shown time and again that Lady Emma could never turn down a challenge.

*This is an extract of ‘The Air at Knightsteed’ from the short story collection
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