

Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Ten

The Letters of 1867

By Maeve O'Lynn

February.

Lady Alice:

My dearest Beth,

Thank you for your letter, which quite lifted me from the torpor of a wet Hillsborough afternoon. I so craved all your thoughts on the party last week; one gets so dreadfully waylaid at these events. I am sure that with the house lit up we made a gay scene but I will confess that often throughout the evening I had to stifle my yawns.

A much primmer affair than we are used to in these parts, as befitting my father's recent health troubles, and a particularly demure occasion for the happy couple at the centre of it all. And of course, I am happy – gloriously so – to be betrothed to my beloved Thom but having to conduct oneself as befits a lady about to be married is somewhat less glorious.

Thank goodness you were amidst the discreet whirls of activity on the periphery, which is always the best location at any gathering, and your letter told me all that I missed at my own engagement celebrations!



The music at the party was beautiful though, was it not? The soprano from Dublin hit such thrilling notes – my Aunt Chentwynd told me later that she will soon be off to perform in Milan at La Scala for a season. I fell asleep dreaming of her crystal voice soaring through that gilded theatre, filled with flickering light from the gas lamps on the walls and when I awoke my heart quite ached.

I wonder if I shall ever have occasion to visit Italy again – as you know, my only visit was curtailed under the most trying of circumstances and as for the scandal that followed...well, I can only wonder if I am destined to be in its shadow forever.

You of all people know that the truth had little relation to what was published: Papa was less than pleased to find me conversing with one of the sailors on board the yacht and, naturally, he made his displeasure keenly felt, but as for catching us in an illicit embrace or pitching the poor unfortunate overboard? My goodness, people have such imaginations!

I would never have believed how long the gossip would have continued, however – in some circles, my name remains quite scarlet. Don't you think this is why our soiree last week was so subdued an affair? I am certain my brother made sure of it – Arthur would rather see me safely married than becoming instead a wild haired spinster with a fondness for sailors, bent on disgracing him entirely!

He has never been slow to remind me how many seasons have passed since my debut without a marriage proposal, and I know he is determined I shall not lose this one.



And I do not doubt that my father had a hand in it too - people know (or believe they know) Papa as both strong and hot tempered, they see his white whiskers and handsome frock coats and think him quite a bon vivant but lately the truth is altogether different.

At present, the best word to describe my father's character is austere - gone is the man who opened his house to entertainments and enjoyed music and claret. His later years, his health troubles and constant thoughts of his legacy have changed him greatly and I think he is relieved to see me engaged for he no longer feels himself quite up to the task of constraining my altogether too lively spirits. It troubles me that he and my brother both seem of one mind that this responsibility now falls to Thom.

March.

Have I ever mentioned you are my dearest friend, and I often aspire to your sweet temper and loveliest and most patient of dispositions?

You may have guessed I have a favour to ask! Though while I should like to frame this as a request, I am afraid it is something more urgent than that - I shall absolutely require you to be a bridesmaid at the wedding.

We have set a date for October - I say "we" but I have been little consulted on the matter. Once Mama was able to ascertain how long it would take for lace to arrive from Belgium and a fittingly elegant dress designed and made, the wheels were in motion and yesterday at breakfast I was told that preparations would be made for the autumn - I suppose she has decided at



my advanced age there is no point in proceeding at a measured pace!

It is not the case that I particularly wished for a long engagement myself, but I believed we would have longer to become better acquainted and enjoy our courtship before plunging headlong into the state of marriage and its many attendant obligations. Then, in addition to the timing of the wedding being set by my parents, Thom arrived at luncheon and told me his sisters will naturally have to be bridesmaids – all four of them! Florence, Madeleine, Isabel and Beatrice are all sweet girls but terribly excitable and I am quite ready for a nervous collapse at the thought of being surrounded by them and only them for the day itself.

So, Beth, my dearest and oldest friend, I must beseech you to overcome your natural reticence and agree to be dressed by my mother and keep me in a state of steady calm on my way to the altar. What do you say?

April.

I wonder if you might be free to visit again soon? We shall have the dressmaker in situ, which I know shall not delight you entirely but I pray you remember how grateful I am for your friendship – particularly when you see the rather bold colours Mama and I have chosen for the dresses and wedding décor. An October wedding does lend itself to vibrant autumnal hues!

But I must also tell you of a less daunting and more lovely piece of news – my brother and I took a turn around the gardens last week on one of those April afternoons that is just purest colours and sublime variations in weather from golden sunlight



to blustering wind and racing clouds across a changing sky. And, Beth, I could hardly believe my eyes – he has engaged a team of builders and stonemasons to erect a pretty folly for me right where the Yew Tree, Lime Tree and Moss Walks meet. The early bluebells and anemones have just begun to flower in patches and the whole scene is beyond enchanting. Arthur means this as a wedding gift to Thom and I, though quite clearly it is I that have the affinity with these gardens so it is a most warm token of affection.

As children, as you know, I was so very close to my brothers but I have felt often in recent years that much has changed now Arthur has been tasked by my father with the running of the estates in Ireland and my younger brother has taken to spending so much of his time in London. For my part, I had rather resigned myself to being a spinster and I had, in fact, come to very much like the idea of tending the garden, perhaps my brother would have given me charge of the roses, and I would have devoted myself to my lifelong passion for music and reviving Mama's traditions of theatrical evenings at home and the Theatre Royal in Belfast.

I cannot lie – even now there is something about this life that strikes me as appealing, no household to run, no real responsibilities to attend to but those I choose to take upon myself. We are very often told that marriage is to be equated with bliss and though I fervently hope this is so, I admit that I can see the advantages of a life tending flowers and playing music of my own pleasing.

I must confess that while I have sorrowed to see my father decline, I also have envied my brothers' freedoms and their security when my debutante season passed without a proposal, and then another, and another. It is most strange that men's



lives are shaped by grander forces of money, politics and education while women must wait for the whim of a man to decide ours – a suitor to ask, a father to grant permission.

I suppose with a wedding on the horizon, what my future holds is no longer a question I need ask – but it is still an undeniable comfort when I will soon be leaving for my husband’s house to see this connexion with my childhood home quite literally cemented into the gardens.

June.

I hope this letter finds you well and you enjoy the pressed rose petals from my garden enclosed herein. *O my Luve's like a red, red rose, That's newly sprung in June*, I played this morning on the piano. Mama has arrived and intends now to stay in Hillsborough Castle until after the wedding while Papa remains in Kent for the time being; he finds the climate kinder there.

To complement the vivid red shade chosen for the bridesmaid dresses, it will come as no surprise to you, I think, that we have decided on roses for the bridal party bouquets and to hold veils in place, to bedeck the church and for the tables at the wedding déjeuner too, of course. They are intended to call to mind the wreath of wild roses I wore at my presentation to the Queen Victoria seven years ago. Where we shall source such decadent red blooms in an Ulster October I cannot say, but Mama, as you well know, never allows such trivial affairs as the seasons interfere with her party planning.



It is certain the wedding will be spectacular – I know it is unutterably wicked to think such thoughts but thank goodness the dashing if inconstant Lord Lieutenant is this three years departed from our mortal plane – my parents never quite forgave me for failing to win his heart and Papa was certain that between that and the scandal in Naples after my debut he would never succeed in making a good match for me.

Between you and I, I am persuaded that since no one managed the feat of winning the affections of the gentleman in question in the fifty-nine years before we met or in the years that followed, we can perhaps deduce that he rather preferred the poetry of our pairing as dance partners than mundane thoughts of marriage and the domestic.

I certainly hope to hold Thom's attention somewhat longer – though I suspect that my betrothed is rather more enamoured with my feminine wiles than my aesthetic potential as the subject of one of Lord Lieutenant Howard's Latin verses. However, I did make for a beguiling Roman vision in my white gown that night at Brownlow House, so I suppose we can hardly blame the poor man for being struck by poetic inspiration – there is little else to be inspired by in Lurgan.

Do you recall the firework display at the close of that ball? Though now I recall that you missed the fireworks that evening – there were pyrotechnics of a different variety taking place indoors!

Everyone was talking about your cousin's flirtation with the thrillingly unsuitable Captain Walter. In the garden alone together...and not watching the fireworks but emerging from behind that handsome laurel bush near the drawing room windows. Well, who can say what went on there, but I am certain it was not a horticultural discussion, for her cheeks were



quite flushed when she returned indoors! Regardless, I have my heart set on a similar firework display for the wedding – the perfect spectacle to conclude a joyous day and an auspicious start to my new life.

I have lately been rather diverted by a ladies' manual on wedding superstitions. For instance – If in October you do marry, love will come but riches tarry. This one I am not sure of – Thom certainly has no shortage of riches but it would be horribly disappointing if riches came but love was slower. I can only pray it is not so.

Another homespun piece of wisdom offered by the book is that marrying in the inclement months of the year is favourable since rain symbolizes tears, so if it rains on my wedding day, the lore is that it will be the last time the bride ever sheds tears. My spirits are curiously depressed this afternoon – I have been crying so often these days, at the slightest thing. Mama is growing impatient with me and I am not surprised. I suppose it is simply the excitement of the wedding preparations.

September.

I have spent this past weekend sorting and packing – trunks are being sent to Cumbria, my trousseau for our honeymoon must be prepared and it is now time to put away childish things. I came across some sketches we made together the summer long ago we fancied ourselves great botanists, and I am enclosing one here for you to remember.

Meanwhile, trunks are also arriving, and you can guess what this means – Madam Momel's dresses for the wedding have arrived from London, like a flock of richly plumaged tropical birds descending. I thought my mother's insistence on the Brussels



lace was perhaps a touch excessive but now I see it against the white satin, the effect is nothing short of luminous. I am enchanted by the sweeping veil and Thom has presented me with the most lavish tiara of pearls and diamonds and necklace and ornaments to match – they are simply magnificent and yet I cannot help but feel like a child bedecked in a costume for play.

Perhaps his family jewels will feel more natural to me once I am a part of that family? I hope you will adore the simple lines of the white tulle we selected for the bridesmaid dress and veils, and I think when you see the cherry-coloured tunic you will be quite persuaded.

Mama is also preparing the guestbook for the wedding and we have enjoyed poring over invitations and programmes from other events our family has hosted in Hillsborough Castle through the years.

Did you know, for example, I opened a ball for two hundred and fifty people here with my father when I was only seven? My mother never disposes of anything – the very dress I wore that night has been preserved for posterity. And the rumours surrounding Mama and Papa’s wedding celebrations are, in fact, completely true – now that I am to be married, it seems she now considers me a real adult at last and she confessed yesterday at supper that twelve people indeed died from alcohol poisoning following their wedding celebrations at Hillsborough Fort. And she looks askance at me if I accept so much as a thimbleful of Madeira!

Mama claims it was simply an unfortunate incident of poorly brewed spirits, but I suspect high spirits and over indulgence were the more likely culprits. I find it difficult to picture my parents so young and carefree that they could preside over



such a party and I quake to consider whether marriage is responsible for making them so redoubtable. I wonder will I, too, be changed in such a fashion? I expect I will, and I am sure this is perfectly natural, but yet I rail against the idea.

Perhaps this is why I have been so strongly encouraged, nay prevailed upon, to depart promptly for our honeymoon before the entertainments at our own wedding begins. The party being planned is so large in scale and ambition that I am heartbroken to miss it...but it appears my husband now speaks for us both and he is of one mind with my parents. Dearest Beth – is there nothing I can do to change their minds? Is this just the first step towards becoming a silent, dutiful wife?

October.

My Dear Miss Traherne,

Is that not a most proper way for us to address each other as befitting my new marital status? I jest of course, and I am delighted to receive your note here on our honeymoon at Glenarm Castle. Our situation is quite beautiful, surrounded by well-appointed grounds and an elegant walled garden. It is not the best time of year for flowers, but the trees are ablaze with colour and on a clear afternoon we fancy we can see right across the sea to Scotland.

Would I still prefer a sojourn on the Italian Riviera? Well perhaps that will be a trip for Thom and I to make in the future – for now, my husband is much consumed with his plans to enter political life when we take up residence in England and his attention is occupied with letters back and forth on these matters.

Oh, my closest friend, we are hardly parted and I am missing you already. One benefit of Thom's political ambitions is that



he plans to launch his election campaign with a season of dinners, card parties and a great ball at Underley Hall. These will provide the perfect reason for you to visit, if you are agreeable.

You were diplomatic in your last letter describing the festivities at the wedding after we departed but now I beseech you to be less so - tell me, did the athletic contest proceed despite the wet weather? Did not the arches and rosettes of flora and evergreens make a pretty sight? Mama was more than a little proud of the castle gates' Irish greeting Cead mille failthe worked in flowers. Were the bonfires lit and was the countryside aglow with flames? And was everyone talking of the firework display Papa spent a fortune on? He mentioned the cost often, as you know!

Please write and tell me what you thought of the wedding fireworks, the flight of the sparkling rockets from the Court House roof, the roman candles, comets, saxon wheels - I heard Messrs Joseph Bradell and Son met every expectation and the words Mama chose - 'God Bless the Happy Pair' - were illuminated in most brilliant fire.

Soon we shall depart for our new home in Cumbria, though I hope often to visit Hillsborough Castle, my temple in the gardens and you, my dear Beth. However, as for your questions about the wedding night - as an old married matron I can no longer be responsible for corrupting the young, you will have to ask your sister.

Yours, always - Alice

