



Hartly House – I

LETTER I

Bay of Bengal.

The grave of thousands!—Doubtless, my good girl, in the successive years of European visitation, the eastern world *is*, as you pronounce it, the grave of thousands; but is it not also a mine of exhaustless wealth! the centre of unimaginable magnificence! an ever blooming, an ever brilliant scene? And moreover, I have to inform you, that all the prejudices you have so long cherished against it must be done away; and for this plain reason, that they are totally groundless. Yes, Arabella, the mother I have lost, and your so much lamented friend, fell not, as we have conceived, a victim to this ardent climate; her pulse was not suspended by exotic disease; the arrow of death was lodged in her gentle bosom *before* she left her native country, and she alone debarked,[†] to expire on this coast.—But take the melancholy fact, as my father was drawn out to relate it, during our voyage.

That the marriage of those to whom I am indebted for my existence was a marriage of affection, sanctified nevertheless by the approving voice of their parental relatives, is a circumstance you are well acquainted with; but, perhaps, it may be as new intelligence to you as it was to me, that, from the tender distress mutually experienced on their first separation, in consequence of my father's profession, they resolved, on their reunion, never to separate more.

My birth gave them, however, a different turn of sentiment, though it in no degree lessened their conjugal attachment; my

infant period being an insurmountable impediment to my mother's making an East India voyage, and my education a claim upon their feelings not to be dispensed with, until their confidence in the good understanding and excellent principles of your aunt at length persuaded them their personal superintendence might, for a time at least, be safely intermitted; then the firmness with which my mother bade me adieu, astonished all who knew her.

The India fleet was detained in the channel by adverse winds; and, in an excursion to Portsmouth, my mother caught a cold, which terminated in a cough.—Yet did the extreme delicacy of her complexion, and uncomplaining turn of temper, prevent the discovery of a consumptive tendency, until it was too late to try the efficacy of softer climates than are to be met with in an East India voyage. She laboured, suffering angel as she was, to give her husband hope, even when she herself despaired; talked, in the most touching terms, of the treasure they had left in England; and when the pious fraud could no longer be kept up, died, conjuring him to live for my sake.—But I will not dwell upon so heart-wounding a subject; I indeed cannot, Arabella, for it has unhinged me, and I must quit my pen for a few moments.

If the packet I sent you from St. Helena (which was the first opportunity that offered) was put safely into your hands, or rather, if I could be assured that was the case, I might spare myself the trouble of accounting to you for what you call my wonderful departure from my native country; an epithet that surprises me not, when I recollect the incoherence and agitation with which I told the story of my approaching embarkation; but as I must remain for months uncertain whether it reached you or not, I will, on this occasion, give you the particulars of my motives and consequential conduct; for I love you too well to suffer you to suppose caprice, or the wild curiosity of seeing foreign sights had any share in my instantaneous resolution to visit the eastern continent.

Having attended my father, as you well know, to Deal, in order that we might enjoy each other's company to the last possible

moment, I found, Arabella, on every renewed good-night we exchanged, irrepressible sighs escaped him.

The wind began to waver, and was expected to come round to the favourable point before the next morning's dawn.—I was retiring, and the final farewell appeared to tremble on my father's lips; again I approached, and again, to embrace him.—My manner unspeakably affected him.—It was nature's work; and when did nature ever work in vain?

He held me for a short space, with silent anguish, in his arms, and I could alone articulate, 'My father!—my dearest father!' 'Alas! Sophia,' said he at length, 'are my feelings prophetic; shall I never more behold thee?' 'Oh, Sir!' cried I, 'revoke, I conjure you, your own decree; nor be so cruel to yourself, when it is my anxious wish to accompany you, as to leave me behind.'

He lifted up his eyes and hands; but made no reply.

I dropped instinctively on one knee before him. 'My dearest sir,' resumed I, 'if you persist in refusing my request, and I live not to welcome your return to England, can you charge the calamity on aught but your own fiat; for it is you, not Heaven, that forbids my sharing your destiny; or, should I survive you, do not flatter yourself the tidings of your dissolution could be supported by me; for who could convince me my presence might not have been soothing, or enable me to believe that somewhat of my suggesting might not have been salutary, and prolonged your most valued life?—Your heart relents (perceiving I had subdued his resolves); I read it in your countenance; and I take upon me, short soever as the time may prove, to be prepared to go with you.' He laid his pocket-book open on the table, bade me use the contents without reserve, and, to hide his emotion, hastily retired.

With what alacrity and expedition I provided the necessaries for my voyage I need not mention; for who has not heard of the all-creative power of gold, and the rapid movement of the wings of inclination?

We embarked together, and have without one alarming (that is unusual) incident, made the Bay of Bengal.—This letter shall

therefore be constituted the repository of a private vow I have entered into with myself, never to marry in Indostan, lest it should become difficult, at some future period, to ascertain, my genuine impulse for quitting the country of my birth; a vow, take notice, Arabella, I will not violate to be a nabobess.

And thus concludes my last epistle, unanimated by oriental suns, and unperfumed by oriental breezes. An indescribable degree of vivacity already diffuses itself through my heart, inso-much that I hasten to tell you, in the cold language of European friendship (before I blush to have known its frigid influence) that I am your's affectionately,

SOPHIA GOLDBORNE



LETTER II

Hartly House, Calcutta.

The splendor of this house, as it is modestly styled, is of itself, my Arabella, sufficient to turn the soundest European head; but I am well aware, was I to plunge at once into a description of it, I should have my veracity, if not my intellects, impeached : lowering myself, therefore, to your narrow conceptions, I will begin with the circumstances of my first arrival, and so contrive to temper, though I cannot, like Mr Apollo, lay aside my rays, that your optics shall be enabled to contemplate, however brilliant, the dazzling objects I gradually open on your view.

The island of Sawyer,[†] at the mouth of the Ganges, is the first land you encounter; but as it is alone inhabited by tygers, alligators, &c. &c. you will believe me when I tell you I had not the smallest *penchant* for visiting it. Pilots, however, come down to this distance (some hundred miles) from Calcutta, for the safe convoy of ships; the tide of this eastern river being subject to no less sudden than impetuous changes, insomuch that the ablest seamen are often drifted by it.

We proceeded on our voyage up the river to one of the stations for Indiamen,[†] called Culpee,[†] 150 miles from Calcutta, where my father received the most affectionate greetings from his old acquaintance; and we were told, that three *bugeros*[†] were on their way to welcome and accommodate us.

This sound having no semblance whatever of the eastern dignity, I begged my father to inform me what a *bugero* was:—He smiled, and bid me wait their arrival, nor seek to anticipate my own discoveries in a single instance.

We next passed the second station, called Cudgeree;[†] when lo, the *bugeros* appeared in view; and judge, if you can, of the pleasure it gave me, after having been so long confined to one set of company, to perceive I was on the point of tasting the boundless joys of eastern magnificence.

You have seen, as you suppose, some very handsome barges on the river Thames; but how poor a figure the handsomest would make, in comparison with the *bugeros*, or barges of Calcutta, I will endeavour to convince you.

As they approached, my ears drank in the most delightful sounds; a band of music, as is the custom, occupied each of them, playing the softest airs; and from the *tout ensemble*, brought Dryden's Cydnus[†] and Cleopatra to my recollection.

The company in the first that came along-side of us were seated upon deck, with kittesan[†] boys, in the act of suspending their kittesans,* which were finely ornamented, over their heads; which boys were dressed in white muslin jackets, tied round the waist with green sashes, and gartered at the knees in like manner with the puckered sleeves in England, with white turbans bound by the same coloured ribband; the rowers, resting on their oars in a similar uniform, made a most picturesque appearance.

My foolish heart was in the *bugero*, before my father, at the earnest solicitations of his friends, and a look of desire from me, assisted me to descend from the ship; but, when descended,

* Umbrellas. [Author's note.]

my astonishment and delight so abundantly increased at each advanced step, that the European world faded before my eyes, and I became *orientalised*[†] at all points.

Eight gentlemen, three of whom were my father's particular friends, and four ladies, were the party; and it appears to me, Arabella, that I shall find every poetical description realised in this enchanting quarter of the globe; for be it known to you, in the language of Southern's *Oroonoko*,[†] that when presented to the gentlemen as my father's daughter, I *bowed*, and *blushed*; and, if I have any skill in physiognomy, they *wondered* and *adored*; and such, I already understand, is the court paid to ladies at Calcutta, that it would be well worth any vain woman's while, who has a tolerable person, to make the voyage I have done, in order to enjoy unbounded homage.

The chief article of refreshment was claret, which was drank with great freedom, under the name of *Loll Shrub*.[†] Coffee, tea, sweetmeats, &c. &c. were offered, but in general refused, except by my father, who is fond of coffee to a degree that I think will not accord with his health in this relaxing climate.

A kitesan boy instantly took his stand behind my chair, and an attendant, called a Bearer, flew backwards and forwards in my service; and in this state we reached Diamond Point,[†] a place of debarkation,[†] where we found a suitable number of Palanquins in waiting to accommodate us all.

I was startled, Arabella, however prepared, on finding myself hoisted on the men's shoulders; for I need not observe to you, the only difference between a palanquin[†] and a London sedan-chair, (except the travelling ones) is their having short poles fastened to the central part of the sides, the front pair of which have a curve for the bearers better hold—Venetian blinds instead of glass windows—and in the mode of carrying.

It was evening; I therefore, as well as my father, and the rest of the company, had two harcarriers,[†] or flambeaux-bearers, running before me; and I felt all the dignity of my transition; though I will confess to you, the *Tok, Tok*,[†] their almost perpetual cry, to clear the way, did not fall so agreeable on my ear as I

could have wished; nor was I able to suppress the invocation of *aura veni*[†] at every foot step.

From the point where we landed, to the Esplanade, (a place I shall describe to you on my own acquaintance with it) is almost four miles; and swiftly did we pass along; for it seems these palanquin-bearers (with proper relays, as is the case with those that perform journies) are so expert, that in defiance of the heat, &c. &c. they go at the rate of from nine to twelve miles an hour.

I could only observe by the light of the flambeaux (though a host of servants poured forth to receive us) that the entrance to Hartly House was by means of a double flight of stone steps, at the top of which we found a spacious balcony, called a veranda, covered in by Venetian blinds, and lighted up with wax candles, placed under glass shades, to prevent their extinction from the free admission of the evening breeze; together with a couple of card-tables, furnished at all points, for those disposed to occupy them, with very many other polite *et caetera*'s.

Here I met with new homage, in the form of congratulations on my safe arrival; but recollecting, it would not be to forfeit it in future, if I declined it at the then moment, I complained of fatigue, and was conducted to an apartment that would have satisfied a princess, though neither more nor less than a common genteel sleeping-room.

The furniture was all Chinese,[†] of the elegant materials and manufacture of which, even you people in England have a very tolerable idea; but the vases and the perfumes were superior to every thing of the kind within my knowledge, and as such had a fine effect on my feelings.

My musketto[†] curtains are made of beautiful muslin, extremely full, and capable of considerable expansion; and it is the custom for the servants to beat them immediately before going to bed, to clear them of those insects; when they are just sufficiently opened to admit the party, and suddenly closed to exclude those troublesome nocturnal companions; then, being spread out wide, they admit the air in the most refreshing degree. Apropos of musketto; I must tell you, though I shudder at the bare recollection

of so vulgar a nuisance, that, in like manner with the bugs in London,[†] they mercilessly annoy all new-comers, blistering them, and teasing, if not torturing them continually; and in a great measure spare those who are seasoned to the climate.

And now let me ask you your opinion of my attachment to you, when I can thus forego the highest earthly pleasures, flattery and luxurious accommodation, for your amusement.—But perhaps, instead of thinking yourself obliged to me, you will, with the true European *sang-froid*, suspect me of self-gratification in my descriptions;—beware, however, of such erroneous conclusions, as you value the future favours of your own

SOPHIA GOLDBORNE

P.S. We are, they tell me, (yet such is the present warmth, that, without the information, I should not have supposed it) arrived at the commencement of the temperate season,[†] and I am taught to expect a very fine climate for five successive months, the monsoons not coming on until February, when agues and fevers are epidemic; and my constitution, no doubt, Arabella, must undergo its naturalization; for few indeed are the exceptions to these severe attacks, which often lead down to final dissolution.—The idea shakes my constancy! Oh! pray devoutly with me, that my dearest father may be spared in his own health, and unwounded in mine; for well do I know he could depart in peace, if his child was not to be left behind.—And to survive her!—Can any thought be more killing? Good night!—I will try to lose it, and all my cares, in that sweet balm of our existence, sleep. Once more, therefore, good night!