

Perdita

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Chapter 1

The Sublime and the Beautiful

On 25 August 1781, in the tawdry, sultry days at the tag-end of a London summer, the papers reported briefly that the famous Mary Robinson was sitting for her portrait to Thomas Gainsborough. He made two images of her in the second half of that year. The smaller is the softer and more likeable: a charming oval head, originally part of Mary's own collection, it hangs in Waddesdon Manor today.

But it is the larger and more dramatic of the two pictures that is discussed among students of art history: a colossal full-length portrait, now in the Wallace Collection. From her Mayfair home, Mary had travelled the brief distance to Schlomberg House in Pall Mall where, in the darkened painting room at the back of the west wing (only yards away from where the notorious Dr Graham had his Temple of Health and Hymen), the sombre, rusty trees of the picture's background sprang to lowering life under the sweeping strokes of Gainsborough's long brush.

In the foreground, Mary sits on a rustic bank, exquisitely if inappropriately dressed, a Pomeranian dog - a symbol of fidelity, and Gainsborough's favourite breed - perched panting by her side. A miniature picture is held in one hand, a crumpled handkerchief in the other. The pose owes a debt to Watteau's *La Réveuse*, but Mary's expression is hardly that of the wistful, yearning dreamer. The dog looks more tranquilly pensive than she. Her position, indeed, is static and graceful; her arms are relaxed; her face is the polite oval of non-expression that was the hallmark of gentility. But, staring challengingly from behind the beautiful mask, her dark eyes tell a different story. The Mary who looks out of them seems both angry and wary. As she had reason to be.

As August dragged to a close, she was coming to the end of a long summer month of the most agonizing negotiations. The miniature Mary holds in her hand is almost certainly a picture of the young Prince of Wales, who had commissioned this Gainsborough portrait. But by now the prince had abandoned Mary for another woman, leaving her to arrange for the rest of her life as best she might. She had, at the prince's request, thrown away both her marriage and a promising career on stage - and with them her only sources of security. She had expected the prince to provide for her, splendidly. But he showed no sign of wishing to do so, and the only tools still left to Mary's hand were the letters he had written her - rash, impetuous letters promising her the world, and pouring out his bitter feelings about the rest of the royal family. Now the overriding concern of the prince and his advisers was to get these damning documents back into their hands. Mary professed herself very willing to give them, the inducement being her 'earnest wish' to restore the prince's peace of

mind. But she reminded the prince of everything he owed her ... If she were to hand the letters back, would he show a similar generosity?

Throughout all of the past month, an angry correspondence had crackled back and forth between the prince's representative, Colonel Hotham, and the young Viscount Malden, representing Mary. Hotham offered five thousand pounds for all copies of the letters. Not only did the amount seem woefully inadequate, but Mary was shocked Hotham should state the deal so bluntly. Nothing could be more 'injurious to her feelings' than the idea of a simple trade, wrote Malden sympathetically, 'nor will she bear the idea of having it supposed that she has sold papers so dear to her'. It did not suit her pride, or her picture of herself as a creature of romance and delicacy. She excused her adultery to the world on the grounds that she truly loved the prince - and perhaps she had come to convince herself that she did. To Hotham, of course, this was nothing more nor less than a blackmailer's quibbling - and in this nerve-wracking game of poker, the cards went all the palace's way. As Mary assumed her pose for Gainsborough, the date for which the handover was fixed was only three days away.

So Mary did indeed have reason to be angry; so tense, perhaps, that it is no wonder Gainsborough, widely praised for his ability to seize a likeness, failed, this time, to capture his subject's face precisely. The tilt of the head Gainsborough gave her is hers; in other portraits, too, she carries herself in that enquiring way. But enchanting though the painting is, it was not felt properly to represent Mary. Contemporaries called this work one of Gainsborough's few failures, and he withdrew it from exhibition at the next Royal Academy.

Writer after writer praised Mary's loveliness. She had, wrote the parliamentary diarist Nathaniel Wraxall, 'surprising beauty, such as I have rarely seen equalled in any woman'.* 'She was unquestionably very beautiful,' agreed one grudging, but honest lady - 'but more so in face than figure.' Her figure, if anything, was not quite luscious enough for the taste of the day, too boyish - for, just as she had energies and ambitions deemed more acceptable in a man, so, when she played breeches parts on stage, one critic wrote that she made a better male than any other actress. But though her face was her fortune, it is harder to be sure of its exact shades and lineaments. The fine dark brows are a fashion of the period, which also dictated that, though she was still in her early twenties, her hair should be powdered into grey. And the observant would notice how Mary could change the impression she projected, from the sportswoman to the painted belle, and again to the simple country girl.

Perhaps, this time, Gainsborough's likeness withered and died under the force of Mary's very wariness. She tried always to control her image carefully. And what Gainsborough did paint here was above all else the portrait of a lady. For the same Royal Academy exhibition, he painted the dancer mistress of a royal duke in costume; but that would never have done for Mary. Instead, the delicate swirls of her silk dress melt away into the darkling landscape. She is to be seen as at one with nature, sensitive and introspective: a creature of sensibility.

The cult of sensibility - the great eighteenth-century foregrounding of imagination and individuality - informs much of the writing of these later decades. It certainly

informs that of Mary. Later in life, Mary was to become a poet - perhaps the poet - of sensibility. And when, towards the end of her life, she began to write her Memoirs, sensibility - the emotive, feeling tones of a heart too sensitive for its own good - was the language she would use to tell her own story.

She began her Memoirs with her birth, conventionally enough. But she made a good story of it. Mary was born, she wrote, in Bristol's 'antient' city; in a tall old house huddled on one side against the cathedral itself, and on the other against the ruined cloisters of St Augustine's monastery. Once, perhaps, the Minster House (or the 'Prior's Lodging', as it was sometimes called) had sheltered visitors to the abbey. Long since destroyed, it was falling into ruin even in Mary's day. 'A spot more calculated to inspire the soul with mournful meditation can scarcely be found amidst the monuments of antiquity.'

Mrs Darby came to childbirth, as Mary later wrote, on a November night, and never remembered a more stormy hour. 'The wind whistled round the dark pinnacles of the chamber tower, and the rain beat in torrents against the casements of her chamber.' Dark and dismal, ancient and atmospheric, that room is one of even 'mid-day gloom', reached only by a winding staircase, a cloistered path. Recalling it, the grown-up Mary aptly called the setting 'Gothic', and that, indeed, is what she was describing: a scene fit for a Gothic novel of the day. She evoked for the reader an apt starting point for a life of pain and woe. 'Through life the tempest has followed my footsteps; and I have in vain looked for a short interval of repose from the perseverance of sorrow,' she continued, dramatically.

The 'tempestuous' night Mary was born was, so her published Memoirs read, 27 November 1758.* However, recent research into the cathedral's baptismal register shows that 'Polle', daughter of Nicholas and Hester Darby, was baptized, not born, on that November day. Polly - a common pet name for a girl called Mary - had been born over two years earlier, in July 1756. If Mary did deliberately omit the date in her manuscript to mislead the reader, it is not hard to see why. Her Memoirs were a piece of special pleading, written to convince a sceptical world that in all the adventures of her early adult life, she acted innocently. For every bad decision she made, youth was to be her best excuse; so, obviously, the younger the better.

She was born into a time and place of contradiction. The traditional view of England's eighteenth century is of a world at peace, dignified and practical, elegant and successful; of a century that began with the expectation of Hanoverian succession and ended, true, with the Napoleonic wars, but with Nelson's battle of the Nile holding out a promise of victory to come. This was an England of successful commercial men and ladies in panniered skirts, of hair powder and tea, ruled by a rubicund, roast-beef-eating squirearchy. It was a stereotype the Georgians themselves, with their popular caricatures of a beef-bolting John Bull triumphing over a half-starved Frenchman, valued enormously. Lord David Cecil, writing a quarter of a century ago, saw a world 'social and practical', envisaged a 'clear breezy climate of good sense and good humour'. More recently, other historians have done much to undermine this cosily static picture, taking on board the period's cruelties and its opportunities; its sheer contradictory energy; the number of subsequently influential ideas, social and scientific, that were actually born in the eighteenth

century. But the old image has never quite gone away. Roy Porter, introducing his book *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, wrote of 'hierarchical inequalities and frictions ... the pursuit of wealth and the production of a new consumer culture ... more individualistic lifestyles ... [and] rapid industrialization' before concluding that 'what the challenge of these new forces ... chiefly reveals is the elasticity and tenacity of the status quo'.

Mary was born into an England where George II still sat on the English throne. The coronation of his grandson as George III was still some years away. The lions of literary London were Dr Johnson and Horace Walpole, and it would be another decade before Wordsworth and Coleridge were even a twinkle in a parent's eye. It was less than a decade since England had finally brought its calendar into line with that of Europe; people still grumbled that ten days had been taken away. Though the rapidly increasing pace of enclosure was only just beginning to change the face of agricultural England, America was still a colony, and France seemed unshakable as a monarchy. But it was an age, none the less, of increased wealth and trade, as well as of inflation and monopoly; an age of a rapidly burgeoning press to broaden horizons and spread thoughts of political change; and an age of rapidly increasing literacy. A lady of this time might display her fashionable concern by visiting the Foundling Hospital or one of the even newer charitable institutions - even if she did go to gawp at the lunatics in Bedlam on the same day. (On the one hand, the last suicide to be buried at the crossroads died well after Mary. On the other, he could - having woken to an alarm clock that also lit his candle, washed with Pears' soap and taken a swig of Mr Schweppes' soda water - have attempted to cash in his life assurance policy.) Though London, at the time of Mary's birth, had only just got its second bridge across the river, the recently founded British Museum would shortly open its doors. And London itself was being challenged by newly prosperous provincial cities.

Bristol in the 1760s was a thriving, thrusting port; the country's second city and entrepôt for the transatlantic trade in rum, slaves, tobacco and sugar on which its prosperity was founded. Cabot had sailed from Bristol to Newfoundland, and the city boasted its worldwide connections. Outside the new Corn Exchange stood huge carved figures of the three explored foreign continents: Asia, Africa, and America with a wreath of tobacco leaves in her hair. It was a natural wintering place for Mary's father - a man, Mary wrote, of 'strong mind, high spirit, and great personal intrepidity'. Descended from 'a respectable family' in Ireland, he had been born in America, and although he had returned eastwards in pursuit of a family estate, his imagination never ceased to look westwards across the Atlantic, to the new country. The summer sailing weather sent him to St John's, on the Newfoundland coast, where he long cherished hopes of making his fortune from a fishery; indeed, in 1758, on behalf of the Merchant Venturers of Bristol, he addressed the Board of Trade on the defence of the Newfoundland colony.

Mary's mother Hetty (or Hatty) came from the Seys family of Boverton Castle, Glamorganshire, and though it was four generations back to the Richard Seys who had owned those stately walls, Mary dwelt at length on the virtue and piety, the beauty and bounty of that long line of ladies. She boasted in her *Memoirs* of how a great-great-aunt had married Peter King, a Lord Chancellor of the first part of the century and himself nephew to the great John Locke, philosopher-hero of the

Enlightenment; of the grandmother, a lady of piety and charity, whose botanical and medical studies made her the 'village doctress'. She wrote also of her own mother's birth in Somerset, and connection with a gentleman called Jonathan Chubb, whose name is now less well known and respected than Mary's own, but who was artistically and politically influential in his day.

That same mother's 'neat figure' and vivacity of manner (a youthful gift that hard life seems to have robbed from her - unless she simply handed it over to Mary) won her the addresses of 'a young gentleman of good family'. She turned him down in favour of the more dashing Darby, and lived to lament it. She often dwelt 'with regret and sorrow', Mary recalled, on the young gentleman's memory. Mary herself experienced that same conflict: the father she resembled might have been raffishly glamorous - but here, in her mother's line, was the gentility she needed, a family not only respectable, and even vaguely aristocratic, but intellectual to boot.

It is surely significant, too, that it is on the women behind her that Mary dwells so lovingly. Men in her life - from her father onwards - are untrustworthy figures who appear and disappear. Perhaps she chose them that way. She would later disclaim any interest in the warm, even passionate female friendships that featured so largely in the emotional life of many women of sensibility. But it would be female relations - mother and daughter - who remained with her as companions, not only in her triumphs, but in adversity.

This was a time when the position of women underwent enormous change - albeit in an odd, 'one step forwards, two steps back' sort of way. The law was clear: 'By marriage the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended,' explained the legal textbook *The Laws Respecting Women* in 1777. Social opinions were not necessarily kinder: women, Lord Chesterfield told his son, were only 'children of a larger growth'. But against those broad assumptions - in some circles - a measure of dissent was possible. The questioning climate of the Enlightenment was itself, as Roy Porter put it, unusually 'woman-friendly'. The radical movement that by the end of Mary's life had bred a backlash against women's public and political activity had none the less by then given a few women a chance to function outside their traditional sphere. Mary would be both a prominent voice in the movement and a prominent victim of the backlash. In her early adulthood, she broke the rules that dictated sexual chastity to women. In her later years, the pressure to make public repentance for those sins was at war with her sense of justice, her urge to challenge those unequal rules. One can trace in her childhood that impulse to anger, to resistance; and trace too, perhaps, the urges that led her to transgress in the first place.

The first eight years of Mary's life were comparatively privileged ones. Nicholas Darby's commercial ventures were 'crowned with prosperity ... every day augmented his successes; every hour seemed to increase his domestic felicity'. For this prosperity, at least, their home city must take some credit.

Bristol was a place, wrote Mary later, 'more famed for opulence than philanthropy'. Horace Walpole agreed: 'the greatest shop I ever saw', he wrote, where 'even the very clergy talk of nothing but trade'. And Bristol had proved a hard nursery for the

precocious young fantasist Thomas Chatterton, Wordsworth's 'marvellous Boy', who bloomed early, published, was acclaimed, then reviled, and in 1770 died of arsenic and poverty - all before he was twenty. Chatterton complained of the city's 'Damn'd narrow notions', critical of a place where there was 'no credit' for the Muses - and Mary would write poetry to Chatterton, the native son who sprang from the same 'uncultivated soil'.

But the city was also, slowly, becoming a place of notoriously independent spirit and religious nonconformity - and, thus, of education. Coleridge, in the years ahead, would find it a fertile breeding ground for his visionary ideals of Pantisocracy. His friend and associate Southey, a born Bristolian, wrote defensively that 'I know of no mercantile place so literary'. The politician and thinker Edmund Burke - whose son later became a friend of Mary's - would be Bristol's MP. And, in terms of her early education, both formal and domestic, Bristol was not unkind to Mary.

Her earliest years were spent in the shadow of Bristol Cathedral, between the port where the ocean-going ships came in and the newest Georgian houses beginning to straggle up the hill. The cathedral she knew was a truncated building, its planned nave having been abandoned with the dissolution of the monasteries - hardly bigger than a large parish church, perhaps, but with monuments and memories to fire the imagination of a sensitive child, and one who visited it daily.

The nursery where she had been reared leaned so hard against the cathedral walls that the swell of the famous organ seemed almost to make another voice in the chorus of her fractured family. Sitting there, listening to the surge of the music pass through her, 'I can at this moment recall to memory the sensations I then experienced; the tones that seemed to thrill through my heart, the longing which I felt to unite my feeble voice to the full anthem, and the awful though sublime impression which the church service never failed to make upon my feelings.' As soon as she could read, she had picked out the names of long-dead clerics as she wandered the stone corridors. She had seen the sun shine through the fractured glory of a medieval window; gazed at epitaphs in inscrutable Latin; run her fingers over the row of kneeling figures on the side of an Elizabethan tomb. Flipping up the seats in the choir stalls had, no doubt, sent her imagination spinning at the lewd, lively carvings - the monkey playing the drum; the cat biting the priest's genitals; the man baring his behind in astonishing mockery. Even in the coldest season 'nothing', she wrote, 'could keep me away'. Her brothers would run ahead, to play on the green before the Minster, but she always begged their old servant to let her stay. She would make her way to sit on the night stairs, each tread hollowed by time, down which generations of monks, by their order's harsh rule, had been sent stumbling every three hours to pray.

Mary was still small when the Darbys moved out of the atmospheric but uncomfortable Minster House into one more suitable for their growing family; a place of silver, 'silk furniture, foreign wines'. The city at this time was a place where merchants spent money as freely as they made it. Mary's clothes were ordered down from London; she slept in a bed of the richest crimson damask - extraordinary luxury for a Georgian child. 'The tenderness of my mother's affection made her lavish of every elegance; and the darlings of her bosom were dressed, waited on, watched,

and indulged with a degree of fondness bordering on folly.' (This tenderness, of course, may not have precluded their being sent away in babyhood to the home of a wet nurse. Though awareness was growing of the physical - and, increasingly, of the psychological - risks, this was still the norm in middle-class families.)

The second Darby child, born some seven years after her elder brother John, Mary was always set apart from her four siblings. They were big and blond, she wrote, with a countenance 'particularly animated and lovely'; she was 'swarthy; my eyes were singularly large in proportion to my face, which was small and round, exhibiting features peculiarly marked with the most pensive and melancholy cast'. Mary grew up with a good deal of encouragement to stake her claim on the attention of those around her. As her biographer Janet Todd wrote of Mary Wollstonecraft, born just a year later into a family which also hovered on the edge of gentility, 'Much has been made of the effects on character of being the second-born, the child who must earn his or her place and is much more outgoing, opinionated and unconventional than the eldest; Mary [Wollstonecraft] was a classic case. More can be made of the fact that she was a girl in a patriarchal world.' The same can be said of our other Mary - with the reservation that she was not technically the second born, since a first daughter had died of smallpox as a toddler, two years before Mary's birth; an event which 'most deeply afflicted the most affectionate of parents', and must surely also have made Mary's own birth a matter of more than usual emotion.

'If there could be a fault found in the conduct of my mother towards her children, it was that of a too unlimited indulgence, a too tender care.' In this, Mrs Darby was unusual: control and correction were still considered the first duties of an average parent, though the breeze of new ideas had already blown open the nursery doors of more advanced families. But Mrs Darby's indulgence may have been due more to weakness than to modernity. The upbringing she gave her children left them, as even Mary complained, too little armed against 'the perpetual arrows of moral vicissitude' - vulnerable in some way.

The importance of early influences was something of which the adult Mary was well aware. Her forebear John Locke had made the idea popular currency. How strongly, she wrote in her novel *Walsingham*, years later, 'the earliest impressions take hold on the senses; and how powerfully they influence the mind, during our weary journey of existence'. Those who later blamed Mary for being mercenary, on the make, might remember that none seek the red carpet (or the red damask bed) so keenly as those who have had it, and then - like her - have had it yanked away.

Mary's first formal education took place in the school of the Misses More in Park Street, just a puffing five minutes' uphill walk from the cathedral. This was another name that would soon become famous in intellectual circles, for notable among the five sisters was Hannah More, once herself a pupil in the same school. Though Hannah had been reared in the strict Evangelical religious tradition, in the 1760s she was not the formidable matron of later pictures, but a young girl with 'something of the china shepherdess in her appearance', another pupil wrote; 'an innocent naughtiness lit up her countenance, quiet fun twinkled in her large dark eyes and a slight quirk twisted the corners of her mouth'.

As an educationalist and leader of the bluestockings, Hannah More would be an ardent supporter of women writers - but only within the limits prescribed by a strict religious teaching and a respect for conventional authority. 'Rights of Women! We will be hearing of the Rights of Children next!' she would later protest, indignantly. In the years ahead, Hannah More may have been embarrassed by her connection with the notorious Mary. Dr Johnson's friend Hester Thrale Piozzi wrote delightedly, years later, that of all 'biographical anecdotes' she had ever heard, the most exquisitely ironic was that 'Hannah More la Devote was the Person who educated Perdita la Pecheresse'. And it is noticeable that the published Memoirs touch on Mary's memories of the Misses More only very briefly. "'In my mind's eye," I see them now before me; while every circumstance of those early days is minutely and indelibly impressed upon my memory.'

It was through the Misses More that Mary had her first taste of the theatre, for the young Hannah was every bit as stage-struck as Mary. 'I have heard Him!' she raved after first seeing Garrick in 1774, aghast that the London audience even 'took the Liberty to breathe' while her idol was on stage. 'In short I am quite ridiculous about Him.' Despite becoming a friend and house guest of the Garricks, Hannah More later turned against the theatre on moral grounds. But that was still some time away. The first time Mary saw a dramatic performance was at a benefit for the actor William Powell, whose two daughters were at the More school. So too were Priscilla Hopkins, daughter to David Garrick's prompter at Drury Lane (and later wife to the actors William Brereton and, after him, John Philip Kemble) and Alicia Palmer, the child of two actors and herself later an author. Through the Misses More, Mary was connected to a veritable Who's Who of theatrical talent. She mentions the fact, she says, 'merely to prove that memory does not deceive me'. Was this an implicit rebuke to Hannah More's rejection of Mary's later way of life? A reminder that actors cannot - even by a bluestocking of conscious rectitude - be dismissed as louche outsiders quite so easily? The play Powell and his wife performed was *King Lear*; strong meat for a young child, one might think, but well suited to Mary's propensities (and, like so many tragedies, habitually given a happy ending in the eighteenth century).

Mary's early tastes were stamped with 'romantic and singular characteristics ... a too acute sensibility'. Even as a child, so Mary later wrote, 'the only melody which pleased me was that of the mournful and touching kind', while a story of melancholy import 'never failed to excite my attention'. Before she was seven years old, she boasted, she could correctly repeat Pope's 'Lines to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady' and Mason's 'Elegy on the Death of the Beautiful Countess of Coventry'. Of course, the sentimental and the tragic were in vogue, and by the time she chose to emphasize this early delicacy, Mary had ample reason to recast her life in the only model that made sense: that of the woman too sensitive, too feeling for this world. At seven, Mary seemed in fact to have comparatively little to make her melancholy; but she harps on the theme with enough detail and plausibility to suggest, once again, a pattern - the echo of her mother's influence, maybe? For a time was coming, as Mary turned nine, when the temperamental gulf between her parents - the aspiring, irresponsible father and the clinging mother - would break the household in two.

In Mary's words, a change then took place 'as sudden as it was unfortunate ... From this epocha I date the sorrows of my family.' Her father being born an American, as

she put it, 'his restless spirit was ever busied in plans for the increase of wealth and honour to his native country'. A few years previously he had had a new business plan, 'as wild and romantic as it was perilous to hazard ... no less than that of establishing a whale fishery on the coast of Labrador; and of civilizing the Esquimaux Indians, in order to employ them in the extensive undertaking'. Mary was perhaps five when this scheme began to occupy his thoughts by day and his dreams by night. Nor was it entirely an absurd venture: 'eccentric', perhaps, and 'rash', as Mary, with hindsight, called it; but these were years when fortunes and empires were being built on schemes no less far-flung and adventurous. In his first foray, Darby took upwards of 150 men to his chosen site near the Straits of Belle Isle - territory wide open for exploitation, since the British had held it only since 1763, ejecting settlers from all other nations. The expedition ran into problems: his men refused to winter in the harsh climate, and Inuit destroyed his salt supplies, as well as boats and lodgings. But Darby was not easily daunted, and continued to plan an enterprise to rival the established whale fishery in Greenland.

It must have seemed a gamble worth taking. Money could turn a man into a gentleman merchant, or a nabob of India. According to Dr Johnson, 'An English tradesman is a new species of gentleman' - if he prospered sufficiently. If Darby's hopes had come to fruition, Mary's story might have been very different. His list of supporters was impressive, all of them drawn by the irresistible dual lure of the chance to win wealth, and to evince a 'laudable and public spirit': twin goals of the eighteenth century. Mary mentions the Earls of Bristol, Chatham (the former prime minister, Pitt the Elder) and Northington among those who subscribed their names, along with the governor of Newfoundland. (Robert Henley, Earl of Northington, the Lord Chancellor of the time, had stood Mary's godfather and she liked to hint that there was no 'god' about it - that she was his natural daughter. She might 'adore' her mother, might boast that the 'warm hospitality' of 'the British merchant' characterized Nicholas Darby, but when once she was moving in circles where the taint of trade was called the smell of the shop, she would hanker for antecedents more glamorous and more aristocratic.)

It was not just the financial risk of the project that caused domestic disharmony. 'In order to facilitate this plan, my father deemed it absolutely necessary to reside at last two years in America. My mother, who felt an invincible antipathy to the sea, heard this determination with grief and horror ... [but] My father was determined on departing, and my mother's unconquerable timidity prevented her being the companion of his voyage.' Mrs Darby's resolve was no doubt reinforced by her husband's determination that the younger children should remain behind to continue their education.

In 1766, then, Darby once again set sail - accompanied by 180 men, some of whom had agreed, this time, to stay the winter - having first placed his eldest son John with a merchant house at Leghorn (Livorno) in Italy. On his return, he might have tales of the long sea voyage; of a land so harsh that the best British settlers were men who came from the lonely Orkneys. He might have sealskins to make a cape, or scrimshaw carvings on a narwhal's tooth. But Darby was sailing into a world of experience his family could hardly grasp, let alone share. This departure indeed

proved to be the end of an epoch: the Darbys would never again make a household together.

Later in her life, a recurrent theme of Mary's novels would be that of the father who is missing in some way. Fathers, in Mary's novels, as in her life, were either adored but absent (their absence bound up with a daughter's guilt), or present, but hostile and angry. One heroine, if she could but find her father again, 'will clasp his knees in the agony of conscious misery; I will awaken his heart to pity; I will recall to his memory, all the hours of infant innocence, when I used to hang about his neck, and share his kisses; - I will not be forgotten; he shall know me for his own.' Mary, when the time came, would write a poem just as exaggerated to the memory of Nicholas Darby. One by one, throughout her life, the men for whom she cared moved away from her - often across the sea. The pain of loss was something she felt early. Her relationship with the mother she 'adored' remained close. But through all the tribulations ahead, Mary showed little sign that she felt the support of any wider family network, any blood community.

The repercussions of Mr Darby's absence took a while to make themselves felt in the household. In Bristol, despite the mother's anguish, the family continued - at first - to live in the state to which they had become accustomed. Dresses were made of the finest cambric. Winters were spent in the city, hot weather in the fresher air of rural Clifton heights, where the wealthy were beginning to build summer mansions to enjoy views of foliage-clad, deep-toned cliffs almost as beautiful (wrote Humphry Davy) as the spectacle of a Penzance or a Mount's Bay. Mary was never allowed to board at school or to spend a night away from her doting mother, who appeared to care little if her education consisted only of making 'doggrel verse', or singing and playing (on the expensive Kirkman harpsichord her father had bought her), so long as her 'person' improved apace. And if this closeness had its penalties, at least it gave Mary a sense of importance, of being necessary. But when disaster came, it came twofold. Threefold, really.

For the first months of Darby's absence, his wife was cheered by the 'kindest' letters. But they became more constrained in tone, less frequent. Mrs Darby's affliction was extreme, nor did she hesitate to make Mary party to it. Eventually, a silence of several months was broken by news of a 'dreadful secret': Darby had a mistress, 'whose resisting nerves could brave the stormy ocean', to keep him company where his wife would not. This was the news that 'nearly annihilated' Mrs Darby, whose mind, Mary wrote, 'though not strongly organised, was tenderly susceptible. She resigned herself to grief.' Her sorrows were shortly compounded by news of a different order of calamity. Darby's fishing station had failed.

His men's lack of experience - and of discipline - had several times proved a problem. So had his failure to establish successful relations with the Inuit community. In November 1767 they attacked, killing three of Darby's men and destroying more than four thousand pounds' worth of equipment. As Mary heard the story, 'the Indians rose in a body, burst his settlement, murdered many of his people, and turned the produce of their toil adrift on the wide and merciless ocean. The noble patrons of his plan deceived him in their assurance of marine protection, and the islands of promise presented a scene of barbarous desolation.' In the teeth of his

business losses Darby offered up a bill of sale on his entire property. His family, already on a personal level betrayed by him, were now homeless - and he was still away. Old friends, or so-called friends, fell off, their former protestations of affection proved worthless by 'that unerring touchstone adversity'. Former guests tut-tutted over the 'prodigal luxuriance' they had once enjoyed so eagerly - and Mary learned that money could easily come, and easily go.

To this devastation was added personal tragedy. William, the elder of Mary's two younger brothers, fell ill of the measles and died at six years old. (Mary's robustness was proof against the infection, just as she would survive the London germs that killed so many adolescents newly arrived in the city.) Mrs Darby, in her grief, was nearly deprived of her senses - and yet, Mary adds, extraordinarily, her distress at the loss of her child 'was less painful than that which she felt in the alienation of my father's affections'. True, infant mortality was high, and half of London's children died before they reached the age of five. But still it seems a strange kind of sensitivity. 'A religious resignation' was Mrs Darby's only consolation - but at the end of another year's span, when Mary was almost ten, even that quietus was broken. Returning to England, Mary's father summoned his family to a meeting in London. In the hopes, perhaps, of reconciliation, Mrs Darby packed up her surviving children and prepared to move to the capital.