

# Grace Dispersed

## *Indian Runners*



### **BIOGRAPHIES**

Falling From Grace: The Dukes of Mallard  
Empires of Grace: Ladies and Gentlemen  
The Blandy Papers: Maid for Murder  
Manly Grace: The Myth of the Mallards  
Faith in Grace: The Bishops of Mallard

### **MUSINGS**

Manners of Grace: Axioms  
States of Grace: The Mallard origin  
Proof of Grace: Mallard Evidence

### **STORIES**

The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

### Collected Mallard Papers, Series I: States of Grace

Copyright remains with the editors, who may at any time elect to reproduce, revise or abandon it. Readers are at liberty to imagine value. For those who require certainty, the notional price is three guineas.

© 1990 Viscountess Viola Violet Vorpel (attributed)

© 1990 Arthur Frederick Blandy, PhD. (editor, attributed)

© 1990 Ima Duckson & Sons, Printers & Ornamental Bookwrights (design, typesetting)

© 2025 Apond Editions, an imprint of Ducksina House (first critical edition; inconsistencies preserved by intention)

Produced in Sydney, Australia by [grace@mayflet.com](mailto:grace@mayflet.com) [web: [mayflet.com](http://mayflet.com)]

No part of this publication may be corrected without the express permission of the Mallard family. All typographical peculiarities are the responsibility of the original designers, whose aesthetic cannot at this late date, be altered without disturbing the historical record.

All rights reserved, or none at all, depending on whom you believe. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without prior permission—though history suggests that parts will be copied, misquoted and misattributed regardless. Copies may be requested, passed hand-to-hand, gifted or left to languish on a shelf where they might be mistaken for a family history.

## Preface

*Viscountess Viola Vorpel*

Smugness is an odd little word with a disproportionately large shadow. In the older dictionaries—those that smell agreeably of dust and calfskin—it appears as something almost virtuous: smooth, trim, neat, properly turned out. It belongs to the realm of polished boots and brushed cuffs, of surfaces made correct. Yet listen carefully and one hears, faintly behind it, the whisper of another word: smuggler. The one who moves stolen goods under cover of respectability, laundering theft into commerce with a steady hand and an innocent face. That, too, has been the business of empire.

For those of us who came of age in the 1920s, in drawing rooms and dormitories where the maps still showed the world pink at the edges, smugness was the ambient temperature of British life. It warmed the tea and cooled the conscience. The Empire, we were told, had brought order, law, railways, railings, respectable hats, and English verbs to the furthest ends of the earth; in return, the world had obligingly supplied rubber, tea, tin, labour, and the occasional rebellion to keep the newspapers brisk. It was, by the time of our youth, not so much an argument as a habit. Empire was simply the weather—alternately bracing and oppressive, but always presumed.

This book is written from within that weather, but at an angle to its barometer. It takes as its subject the British Empire as seen not from the desks of proconsuls or the benches of Parliament, but from the particular vantage points of those who were expected to decorate its surfaces rather than direct its course: women and men who loved contrary to regulation. Between them, they furnished the imperial story with its colour, its conversation, its domestic labour, its gossip, its silences, and its inward dissent. They are often present in the archive as bystanders and footnotes—wives on verandas, sisters sending parcels, clerks who never married, friends who shared houses for decades—but rarely as narrators in their own right.

To attend to their vantage is to see empire as a system of smuggling. Not only of goods—though cotton, sugar, opium and gold were indeed moved across oceans in ways that would have troubled any plain-speaking moralist—but of meanings. The grand phrases of the age—civilisation, protection, improvement—served as the velvet wrapping around more brutal transactions. Land was taken and named “secured”; labour was coerced and called “recruited.” Violence was reissued as necessity, and necessity as benevolence. Words themselves functioned as customs officers, stamping stolen property with the seal of legitimacy.

Nowhere was this more glaring, and more carefully polished, than in the story of opium. In the polite version, taught in the clubs and the better schools, Britain fought for the principle of free trade and the opening of China to commerce and light. In the less polished record, the East India Company cultivated opium in Bengal, forced its sale into Chinese markets in defiance of Chinese law, and when Chinese officials attempted to stem the tide, dispatched gunboats in the name of treaty rights. The dealer condemned the addict; Parliament congratulated itself on its principles. The moral contortions involved would have been comic had they not been soaked so thoroughly in human suffering.

These contortions required a supporting theatre of character. Asia, and the wider “East,” were cast as lands of weakness and excess—of “Oriental vice”—against which Britain’s own indulgences appeared, by contrast, sober and corrective. The word “civilised” did more work in those years than any battalion. It allowed gunfire to appear as education, taxation as tutelage, and the imposition of alien codes as the simple spreading of light. The smugness lay not only in the acts themselves but in the composure with which they were described: theft, narrated in the grammar of stewardship; domination, recited as service.

Women and queer men moved inside this theatre as both participants and witnesses. Women organised the social life of stations, read to the children of officials, arranged the flowers before imperial portraits, edited the letters home. They saw, at close range, the disjunction between the rhetoric of mission and the reality of boredom, bad temper, and bureaucratic blundering on which the imperial day so often turned. Many of them learned early that if one wished to endure, one listened more to the servants’ accounts of weather and wages than to the Governor’s speech on destiny.

Gay men, for their part, lived at a double remove. They were beneficiaries of hierarchy—white, male, educated—yet also suspects under the same legal and moral codes that claimed to be civilising the world. Their friendships and attachments developed in the interstices: in the mess, the office, the shared bungalow, the voyage out and home again. To read their letters, when one can find them, is to see imperial smugness from a strange vantage: both inside the club and perpetually on its threshold. It is perhaps no coincidence that some of the sharpest, quietest observers of Empire’s manners and absurdities were men whose own desires had to be smuggled beneath a surface of correctness.

This book is not an indictment in the oratorical manner, nor a defence in the nostalgic vein, but an anatomy of tone. It is concerned with the gloss that allowed so much to pass unquestioned: the way a quartet on the verandah could coexist, perfectly naturally, with famine in the same province; the way a missionary’s earnestness could share

the page with a shipping report tallying human cargo as “coolie labour”; the way a law criminalising love between men could be exported abroad under the heading of “improvement.” It asks, in effect, how a society came to feel right while doing so much wrong—how it achieved that peculiar state in which conscience is not silenced so much as gently muffled, like the ticking of a clock under heavy curtains.

To write from the 1920s is to stand at a hinge. The War has shaken the certainties of our parents; new movements stir in India, in Egypt, in Ireland; women have stepped, unevenly and controversially, into the realm of the vote. The Empire is still officially a source of pride. It is also increasingly a source of unease, a subject for jokes in some circles and for anger in others. The polished surface has begun to show scratches. What this book proposes is that we attend not only to the grand cracks—the mutinies, the wars, the legislative acts—but also to the hairline fractures visible in private rooms: the diary that does not quite agree with the Times, the letter that undercuts the official report, the drawing-room conversation that goes suddenly, tellingly silent.

Smugness, as the etymologists remind us, is not the opposite of guilt. It is guilt in its evening clothes, smoothed and brushed and reassured by its own reflection. To read the Empire through the eyes of its women and its queer sons is to watch that toilette in progress. It is to see how theft learns to call itself tidiness, how exclusion dresses as propriety, how an entire world-system acquires, and then believes in, its own good manners.

This is not, perhaps, a comforting vantage. But it is, the writer hopes, a clarifying one. For if there is any lesson to be drawn—not as moral, but as observation—it is that what we most need to understand about empire is not only what it did, but how it learned to do it with such excellent poise.

## Preface

*Viola Vorpel, 1938*

In the years after Her Grace Alice Elizabeth Fitzartur, 38th Duchess of Mallard left England in 1850, a new network of correspondence arose between all those women scandalised by her departure—the ones who had attended the centennial and collected a few small tokens—and those who had not yet done so but soon would—eager to discuss, dissect and divert themselves with the details, until it passed into family myth as Alice, the mad hatter.

With few outlets to express themselves—and admittedly much of what they wanted to say is unpalatable to more modern ears—these women had unexpectedly found a way to extend their inner, sanctified social family circle into a vast bubble that encapsulated all the earth.

The gentler result of Alice's departure was it showed women they could choose freedom from the tyranny of fashion and society. Never a stream but a trickle from each generation of the Fitzartur-Mallard flock flew away. Some were dismayed—shocked back into being English—others embraced the lands they chose to be adopted into. Alice was one of the latter, as Octavia would later become in Australia.

This collection of letters, found by the deMallards in the 1920s when they rifled the ducal estate and Mallard House before it was auctioned, came to me in a box when a distant cousin left India in 1937. How she came to have so many is beyond me to fathom. Perhaps they employed vast armies of scribes to copy such valuable documentary evidence. They were certainly wealthy enough.

As it transpires, these letters that passed between Shimla, Bombay, Calcutta and Sussex have proved immensely valuable though not for the reasons cited by my cousins. Most published work—written, of course, by men—on British India centres on men or on domestic service; women appear mainly as wives, sketches or footnotes. This surviving correspondence is the archive English women in India have been denied.

Some letters show women who were oblivious to their surroundings and tried to impose England on a foreign land. Some mirror the frustrations of living in England or mark comparisons about alien cultures. Some show women who embraced and discussed— even if they never truly understood—a world that was not and did not need to be, England.

In her letter to the Duchess, Alice speaks of running away with a male milliner. It was apparently one matter to run away from one's husband. Quite another to openly admitting to tipping the velvet.

## 1850: Mallard House to the Dowager of North Lodge

You will hear soon enough from the gossips, so let it be from my own hand first. I am leaving His Grace. Not for another man but for another life.

I cannot breathe beneath forty pounds of fabric, steel and lace; I cannot walk three steps without a hoop catching on some wretched chair; I cannot think when my head is clamped in diamonds heavier than reason itself. What is all this contrivance but a prison disguised as

finery? A corset is not support, it is restraint. A crown is not elevation, it is a collar.

They call me mad for liking hats. Fetish, they whisper, as if it were a shameful passion. Yet every day they put crowns and tiaras on their own heads and call it majesty. Hypocrisy sits heavier than any bonnet I have ever worn.

So I shall go eastward, with my milliner—yes, the man who makes my hats, though not my fool. No servants, no trunks, nothing to trail me back to this estate. Once I pass the last lodge gate, let no one follow: that ought to do it.

If they say I am the Mad Hatter, then let me wear the title proudly. Better a fool in wonderland than a duchess in chains.

Your errant cousin, Alice

### 1850: Dowager of North Lodge to Mallard House

At last! I had begun to think you would go to your grave in satin shackles. They will call you madder than March but I call it sense. What is a Duchess but a prisoner of fabric and form? You were never made to suffocate under brocade or to rustle about like a tent in the wind.

Let them bluster. The truth is this: the lodges have always been our queendom. Here, without Dukes hovering and heirs measuring our worth in sons, we are at liberty to rule in quieter, subtler ways. We keep our own courts, we command loyalty with purse and wit and we have no need to ape men's battles to prove our strength.

So go, girl—go eastward with your hats and your milliner. Let them chase their own tails in the big house, bound by primogeniture's chains. Every sister who slips free loosens the whole lattice. In time, perhaps the title itself will crack and fall away, like an old hoop-skirt left to rust.

From one so-called madwoman to another: may you never be brought back.

Your cousin in freedom, North Lodge

### 1850: Simla to North Lodge

If this letter finds you surprised, I hope it finds you glad as well; for never in my life have I felt so light, so entirely myself, as I do now in this extraordinary place at the very edge of the world we were taught to fear. I must confess the truth from the beginning: I have left the Duke. I have left the draughty halls, the endless obligations of the estate, the hollow dinner parties with their parade of titles and—most liberating of all—the suffocating tyranny of a husband whose affection was reserved only for his hounds and his grooms. You will now understand why my

letters grew brief and muted these last months and why I have written to you at last only once the hush of my new happiness has settled into something almost real.

Ah but let me tell you about India—the very air seems to awaken one’s spirit from a long torpor. I had heard it described as feverish and strange, yet have found it fresher by far than any English spring. The sky here is impossibly blue and, at dawn, the whole town wears a veil of mist that glows as though lit from within. How stifling England seems in my memory: the choked parlours, the rain-spattered windows, the endless round of obligations. Here, even the ordinary is vivid; colours burn, scents mingle and every moment on the hillside is alive with a kind of expectancy.

I must tell you, too, of my companion—dearest Louisa, whom you will surely remember as the milliner who once worked small wonders on my battered straw hats. Her spirit, so nimble and so full of laughter, has made everything possible. It is no exaggeration to say she has taught my heart new syllables. In our house above the Mall, with its scrambled garden and view onto the wooded slopes, we live with that easy, contented confidence my marriage never afforded. I have learned, at last, the luxury of sincerity.

The journey was a tapestry richer than any woven for an English salon. On the ship from Southampton, there were weeks of brine and sunlight, the sky smudged with gulls and the air as sharp as new linens. We dined each evening with a mix of travellers: earnest missionaries with ideas as fixed as their corsets, clever young clerks destined for Calcutta and one Indian merchant whose English was Oxford-perfect and whose laughter shimmered with irony. We spoke of poetry and profit and, for the first time, I felt myself spoken to as a mind rather than an ornament.

The train journey from Bombay inland was a revelation. We rattled through jungles shimmering and green, the windows thrown open to let the rush of air carry away every vestige of London fog. Along the way we met local families—one noblewoman in a sari and gold bangles who greeted us with hospitality so graceful it made my own curtsies seem leaden by comparison. At every stop, children sold cut fruit and sang songs, their faces gleaming with mischief and hope.

On the last stretch to Simla, we rode with baggage perched atop a pony cart, laughter echoing around the hairpin bends. I watched porters weaving up impossible slopes and at dusk women gathered firewood, stopping to offer us water with shy, smiling glances. There is a poise here that puts our self-importance to shame.

How changed I am! I do not claim it has all been without fear. There have been moments—the first night on the boat, a sudden storm over

the Deccan plain—when I doubted what I was doing. But each day here introduces me to myself as I might have been had I never lived behind stone walls or under the gaze of a family portrait. My only sorrow is that you cannot see it for yourself.

Do not worry for my safety or my soul; I have found grace in kindness, laughter in companionship and a world larger than the one we were born to serve. If you ever grow weary, remember that somewhere beneath this burning sky, your sister is—as she always wished to be—herself at last and truly, dazzlingly happy.

### 1851: Calcutta to Sussex

I scarcely know how to begin recounting this journey and arrival in Calcutta, for the reality here has been an onslaught upon every sense and I write with a heart heavy with both dismay and disbelief. The voyage itself was a torment beyond endurance—weeks bottled beneath a relentless sun, the air thick and fouled with the ship's odours, the ceaseless lurch of the sea sapping every ounce of my resolve. I scarce escaped seasickness to step ashore into a city that is altogether unlike anything I had imagined.

Calcutta assaults one at every turn. The sights are bewildering: streets thronged with crowds so vast and disorderly that every attempt at order seems laughable; colours so vivid and strange, the saris and turbans like a painter's palette spilled without care; yet amidst this vibrancy rise slums so squalid that no decent English home could countenance them. The endless din—bells, calls, raucous voices and animal sounds—invade what little peace I had hoped for. And the smells, oh, the smells! A mixture of spices, refuse and an unending mingling of elements both sweet and repugnant that cling to one's skin and garments no matter how often one bathes.

As for touch and taste, the very air suffocates with humidity; my skin is often clammy and uncomfortable beneath the glaring sun. The food is a bewildering array of spices and unfamiliar textures and though the cooks have tried to serve me some semblance of English dishes, my palate rebels. The constant perspiration and the ever-pervading dust make wearing my usual velvet gowns impossible; the fabric wilts and traps heat mercilessly. I am forced instead to wear lighter silks or cottons, fabrics foreign to my tastes and far less luxurious to the touch.

The house I now occupy scarcely feels like a home at all. It is cramped, sun-drenched to the point of glare and far beneath the comforts and elegance of our family estates in England. The servants here are strange to my expectations and the English society I have entered is but a pale shadow of the refinement to which I was

accustomed. Here, one finds a low level of social grace, a mix of vacuous chatter and petty ambition among those who, like myself, are expatriates but seem eager to assert whatever small importance their titles or connections afford in this distant outpost.

I confess, Jeanne, that my spirit has been sorely tested. I had envisioned a grand adventure, an opportunity to claim some corner of the world as my own. Instead, I find a world at once chaotic and alien, at odds with every ingrained notion of dignity and taste I hold dear. Yet I write you with hope; hope that time will acclimate me, that I shall find beauty and grace amid this turmoil and perhaps even carve out a place where I can thrive.

Do write soon, my dear cousin. I long to hear the familiar comforts of home and to know that, despite the distance, we remain united in spirit.

### 1851: Sussex to Calcutta

How your letter filled me with such vivid and overwhelming imagery—I read it twice, each time feeling as if I were beside you, yet repulsed and disoriented by the very world you describe. Your candour in sharing the hardships and discomforts of Calcutta moves me deeply and I can only imagine how ill-fitted you feel against such a riot of sights, sounds and smells so unlike our orderly English countryside. I am grateful, above all, for your safety, though I grieve at the squalor and disappointment that greet you far from the comforts you deserve.

Your description of that horrid voyage, the perilous journey inland and the strange customs and people you have encountered leaves me full of questions I beg you to answer in your next letter. How do you endure the climate so different from ours? Does your home, wretched though you find it, offer you moments of peace untainted by the foreign tumult?

I wonder also about the English community you have entered in Calcutta. You mention its low level of social grace; do these expatriates cling tightly to one another despite their coarseness? Are there any semblances of the gentility that we prize so highly or is the empire's outpost a reflection of the distance from home and the challenge to civility they face? How do you endure their company and what hopes have you for making India your true home?

Write soon, Cordelia and do not forget that even across oceans my thoughts remain with you. I pray that with time you may find your new world less alien and that happiness may fill the spaces between the strangeness.

## 1852: Bombay to Sussex

What a thrilling moment it is, at last, to write you from the very shore of India, a land whose name scarcely hinted at the abundance which now greets my every sense! I cannot exaggerate my delight and astonishment; I find myself renewed, as if shed of English cobwebs by the warmth and colours of this extraordinary city. The very air sparkles with life: it is thick with unfamiliar spice, tangy sea breeze, the smoke of chapattis baking and, wafting through it all, a sweetness from the mango trees which dangles over our verandah, putting English orchards utterly to shame.

The city bursts with sounds so unlike home—every street is a tapestry: criers hawking their wares in a dozen lilting tongues, the sharp clatter of bullock carts, children laughing and somewhere always, the swelling cadence of a temple bell. My fingers ache to describe to you how the fabrics here feel—the silks are as cool as water and impossibly light, their patterns painted in hues I've never seen adopted in Grosvenor Square. My beloved velvet, I'm mournfully convinced, must be put away for the foreseeable future; one moment beneath the Indian sun and I have learnt what true impracticality means! It will be silk and softest cotton for me, fluttering in the scented evening breezes. Even the taste of water here—sometimes faintly perfumed with rose—reminds me at every turn how very far I am from Wiltshire's meadows.

I find my palate perpetually intrigued: sweet, cardamom tea, melon so ripe I fear it will dissolve on my tongue and the exhilarating heat of a single chilli tucked mischievously into rice.

You may wonder how I have fared among our own countrywomen here. I must tell you, the English society in Bombay is most satisfactory—quite as lively and all the more enterprising for their foreign surroundings! Dinners are elegant affairs, yet marked by a certain freedom, as if this place has peeled away the stiffness that sometimes weighs down English gatherings. The ladies, attired in muslins and vibrant sashes purchased at market, are quick to welcome newcomers and conversations dart from news of the latest ship to the peculiarities of the monsoon. There is gossip aplenty and a happy inventiveness in adapting to every novelty, from punkahs to palanquins.

It is, in every sense, an awakening. My senses are deliciously overwhelmed, my mind full of plans and impressions and my pen is already itching for a reply. How I wish you could see it, dear Jeanne! Until you do, imagine your cousin utterly enchanted, already sun-bronzed and quite transformed.

## 1852: Sussex to Simla

Your letter was an absolute delight and I confess it left me quite envious of your adventures among mangoes, mandarins and exotic silks! I am so pleased you write in such happy spirits—though you must, for my peace of mind, promise to take care. The world beyond England's hedgerows is strange and splendid but, as Maman would remind us, not without its hazards. Remember, cousin, beneath the enchantment, to be prudent.

How I long for more details! You write so enchantingly of colour and taste—but tell me, what of the people themselves? Are the customs truly as intricate as the books would have us believe? Have you begun to learn their language or do you converse only in English among your circle? Describe for me, if you please, the conversations at table: are they animated or do they hew to the stately awkwardness of home? And what of the city beyond your pretty verandah? Are the markets noisy, the temples overwhelming, are the festivals as lively as rumour suggests?

You spoke of Louisa but have not yet mentioned dear Rose and her prospects—is she seeking a husband in Bombay? I have heard that some go out precisely for that purpose—the “Fishing Fleet”, they call it! It is said the Season in India is thronged with balls and matches; how curious that distance multiplies romance rather than diminishes it. I wonder whether Rose feels as giddy as the others in pursuit—or is she, like you, more entranced by sensation than by suitable matches?

Please do send every particular you can, Alice. Describe the culture, the people and all the small marvels of your new world—but above all, look after your heart and your reputation. We are all longing to hear more.

## 1852: Sussex to Bombay

Your letter reached me just yesterday and I declare I read it twice over, such was the vivid pleasure it gave me. Bombay sounds more marvellous than ever I had imagined and your descriptions of scent and colour quite set my own dull drawing room abuzz with longing. Still, I beg you, do be careful; English sensibility is no defence against all wonders and dangers that India may hold and I hope you shall not lose your good sense in the midst of so much excitement.

You must write to me soon and tell me more about the fashions, for I am most intrigued by these Indian silks and the fate you have consigned your velvet. What patterns are worn by English ladies there and do you find the local styles infectious? Does one wear much

jewellery or do our pearls and jet look out of place? Are your gowns more often white or bright with colour? Do describe your wardrobe and, if you dare, what the gentlemen make of it!

And, dear Rose, you must settle my curiosity about the eligible society in Bombay. Your hints about the lively gatherings and the freedom of colonial life make me quite wonder whether you are seeking a husband or merely enjoying the novelty. Are there many young men about and are their manners equal to those back home? I hope you are not so enchanted by mangoes and sunlight as to forget the practical business of your station—or, at least, let me know if you intend any bold adventure!

### 1852: Bombay to London

Bombay is a bewildering place and I find myself thrust into a world so rich with colour, custom and intrigue that each day is a new performance. The English society here is a curious mixture of impatience and striving; titles mean far less than the fortunes one can claim or the alliances one can forge.

Speaking of alliances, I have learned that among the Indian princes, manners are a game of silk and steel—graceful smiles masking razor-sharp ambition. Just last evening, I attended a *darbar* where I observed a princeling silently dismiss a rival with a mere glance. The courtesies of their court far exceed in subtlety our own civilities.

Do tell me, Harriette, what new fashions spark the imagination in London? Are the narrow waists still reigning supreme or does the crowd there adopt the looser lines of what I might call ‘exiled elegance’? And the scandals—do let me know who has fallen from grace or risen like a phoenix. Here, gossip flows as freely as the monsoon rains.

### 1852: London to Bombay

The fashions are shifting—whalebones yield to softer bodices, though the corset remains queen. The *gioco delle dame* continues as ever, with a new duchess causing whispers by her late-night visits. Scandal keeps the salons alive, my dear. Keep your eyes sharp and your tales sharper.

## 1853: Bombay to Surrey

You must forgive the long silence—our days here seem to expand and dissolve like the heat mirage on the Maidan, so that the hours lose all distinction. Bombay bewilders me still. The air itself feels different—heavier, scented with strange blossoms and spices and charged with something I can only call intimacy. I do not know whether the country seduces its inhabitants or they simply yield to its insistence but everywhere I look there is a disquieting vitality, an almost indecent life.

We are especially struck by what one might call the sensual side of India. To our amazed eyes, the country appears to writhe with feeling, with form and gesture so unlike our own. Even in temples—the very houses of their gods—symbols of man and woman, of union itself, are not veiled but exalted. Imagine, Mabel, the very emblems we shun from polite conversation set up as sacred objects! It is at once revolting and fascinating; one feels one ought to look away, yet cannot.

The English here pretend to be unmoved but I detect unease beneath their mirth. Never have I seen so many fans stirred at so little heat. Perhaps I misjudge them—but I confess a curiosity that I had not known before. We have been trained all our lives to think sense and soul sufficient and that modesty is our ornament. Yet one cannot help but wonder whether the women of our land have, by this enforced decorum, missed some secret pulse of existence that these people so openly revere.

Do not think me corrupted, dear cousin! I cling still to every English scruple, though the climate conspires to loosen them. But it seems to me that India does not allow one merely to observe; it insinuates itself into one's blood, whispering that there is more to life than propriety and tea at four.

## 1853: Calcutta to Sussex

I write to you with much to say about Rose, who has truly embraced this new world with a gusto that surprises us all. She has brought with her the rigid “English morals” we grew up with—but rather than shying from this foreign place, she has plunged headlong into its social whirl as naturally as a duck takes to water. She is on the lookout for any number of husbands, it seems, provided they are wealthy and belong to someone else—a fact which has drawn no small amount of gossip from the expatriate circles. The latest whispers suggest she has caught the attention of a certain nabob, whose fortune and influence

rival many back home. Whether this is a blessing or a scandal I leave to conjecture but Rose is quite unapologetic in her ambitions.

The life here in Calcutta is unlike anything we imagined. The mixture of peoples, customs and colours is a constant marvel, though it does have its more trying aspects. The Indian populace we encounter on our travels embody a grace and dignity that one must admire, despite the noise and confusion that accompany daily life. On the journey here, from the bustling docks to the crowded trains and the jostling carriages, I found myself endlessly fascinated by their effortless poise amid the chaos.

Yet, the English society here is a pale reflection of what we knew in England. There is a looseness to the manners and a desperation for status that can sometimes border on the farcical. The women, especially, seem to have shed many of the demure restraints our mothers prized, racing instead to secure their positions in this unequal, transient society. Indeed, Rose seems to thrive within it, as if her ambition has found fertile ground.

I confess, though I miss the familiar graces of home, there is something refreshingly immediate, almost raw, about life here. The climate, the colours, the very air—so unlike the damp and temperate England we left—and the small everyday marvels, from the rhythm of the bazaars to the slow, purposeful rituals of the locals, continually enchant me.

Do write soon and let me know of all the news from home—for it is the only anchor I have in this swirling new existence.

### 1853: Bombay to Calcutta

I give you leave to question my morals but not my virtues. I am ever a faithful member of our English Church and often, after a morning of dutiful obeisance in our local cathedral, spend a few hours—my stays as loosened as my mind—in conversation with the Bishop of Bombay. I thank God we are not Romans lest I should be forced to confess my many and varied sins, which might shock even the most worldly-wise priest of that faith and render you, my dear Cordelia, quite faint with perturbation.

I have escaped, as has cousin Alice, from the stuffy inevitability of a dull marriage to a singularly disinterested gentleman of title and fortune to a land where I may employ my talents for my own pleasure and success in conjugal conversations with men of rank if not of title. I have already set my sights on scaling the princely court here in Bombay, to which I am entitled through my prestigious family connexions and to which I shall apply myself as a furtherment to my own pleasures.

We share the benefits of having Harriette as a leader in London's most fashionable circles. I intend to rely on a frequent correspondence with her to stay abreast of the latest fashions in attire and behaviours and in her especial knowledge of male proclivities. In your eyes, we may be "fallen women" yet we have each fallen from such a great height as to be barely distinguishable from those whose society we now perforce enjoy or endure.

Climb the ladder of social success in Calcutta, dear Cordelia and I shall meet you halfway from the top—one step beneath Heaven and several above propriety.

### 1853: London to Calcutta

You speak so easily of virtue and morality, as though they were innate. Were it so, what need have we of a moralising church to sustain them?

We have but two occupations as women and each revolve around conjugation. We may raise children or we may not. For a woman of slender means or limited imagination, the former is her only option. For a woman like myself or Rose, we may choose the latter as it not only affords a more pleasurable and sensual existence but it permits us the only power to subvert a male-dominated world.

Had you but seen the look on the Minister for —'s face or heard his eagerness to answer all my playfully subtle questions, you might appreciate the significance of my influence on worldly affairs.

It is a constant source of wonder to me how the whisperings of one gentleman in power may as readily be whispered to another in the throes of passion for my embrace, when he forgets himself. To then perceive how readily men of such little wit or intelligence presume to have arrived at some little idea of mine and present it to the world as their own. And to see the impact such trifles have on the lives of men and of women, since that is my true aim.

You, dear Cordelia, have one man to persuade or influence in the smallest of domestic matters. I command an empire.

### 1853: Sussex to London

I hope you will admit to three worthwhile occupations for women, dear Harriette. I make no judgement of yours or Rose's methods of employing your wiles in the pursuit of those most sensual of pleasures to influence a society made by men in their own image. It is all some of us may do to rid this world of the scourge of English Christianity and

moral hypocrisy. Perhaps this is the third occupation of all women: mothers or not.

Indeed, it is the plight of many women to be captured into the phantasy of her role as the “mother of empire” and to produce children at an alarming rate, thence to have them expire here early or in foreign climes later.

Yet what of this other occupation open to all women of means and substance? What of the women who, like myself, have borne children who are flourishing yet who find themselves with nothing better to do than embroider reality onto an antimacassar or make social calls on ladies like herself with nothing better to fill their time? Do you suggest that the trivial domestic duties of a lady of leisure diminish her intellectual capacities to such an extent she is rendered a dullard?

What ought an idle woman of intelligence and curiosity with a library of notable works—and a list of additions given to one’s husband to furnish from London—do with those endless hours if she has no taste for society? Are such women truly an aberration, as has been so regularly noted—by men—in the press? We know, you and I and countless other women of wits that we are, if not superior, at least equal to a man’s intellectual capacities. Why ought we to deny ourselves the benefits of an education such as they enjoy and widen it to encompass an appreciation for all the lands and all the peoples in this empire?

I wonder at male stupidity in averring that the occasional woman of some intellectual standing is more an oddity than an acceptable continuance. To be sure some such women take delight in deflating a man’s opinion of himself and, though I may laugh, I cannot help but see it is as self-refuting. If we argue on their lines, we deserve to be castigated for putting ourselves forward. Yet there are ways to be subtly subterfugeous—as with my own small, irregular and anonymous pamphleteering—that cause more long lasting consternation than mere public debate.

And I wonder too that men believe the lies they tell themselves—and us too—that we are too fragile, too incapable of managing our own affairs, too genteel for a real knowledge of the world in which we live together. How, if women receive so little valuable knowledge, to account for women who do rise above the rest of us and demonstrate a perspicacity rarely seen among our own sons?

### 1853: Surrey to Bombay

Your most recent letter caused quite a stir at tea—though I confess I read its more *exotic* passages in the privacy of my bedroom. You do

write with a fervour that startles me, my dear and one cannot help thinking that the Indian sun has coloured not only your complexion but your very thoughts!

I must urge you, however, to remember who and what you are—a gentlewoman of England and a representative, however modest, of our nation’s virtue abroad. These people, though fascinating in their customs, are vastly inferior in moral understanding. We must therefore observe, not absorb. The British woman’s gift is steadiness, not susceptibility.

Still, we cannot deny a certain academic interest in what you describe, Jeanne especially. You must write to her about your observations. The temples—what an extraordinary notion, to mingle worship and what one might delicately call the *principle of generation!* I should like to know how these symbols are presented. Are they openly displayed or wrapped in some allegory which only the initiated comprehend? And are the women themselves truly unashamed or do they merely appear so under the eyes of their priests and husbands?

Do take care, my dear Rose, to *protect* your sensibilities. You have a fine and thoughtful nature, which must not be tampered with by all this tropical pageantry. Yet I depend upon you to enlighten us, within the bounds of decency, about these strange and alarming ways of the East.

### 1853: Sussex to Calcutta

While I confess that I do not altogether condone her pursuits, I also find myself understanding, if not excusing, her ambitions. As the granddaughter of a duke, Rose faces a world where few occupations lie open to her beyond marriage or pleasure—and all too often, these two pursuits do not comfortably align.

If Rose chooses not to marry—whether out of defiance, prudence or desire—she risks a life marked by uncertainty and limited independence, for few respectable roles await a gentlewoman without a husband. The constraints are many, the options quickly narrow.

I am struck by how swiftly Rose has adapted to this foreign society, conversing with ease in the complicated social dances of Bombay’s expatriate community. Her so-called “English morals” seem as much a badge of pragmatism as of restraint. In these less rigid circles, where status is both coveted and precarious, her readiness to seize what she can is natural, if not commendable.

Do you find, as I suspect, that the colonial world softens some of our more staid customs or merely masks new forms of haste and ambition beneath the guise of tropical gaiety? I long to know more about the

strange blend of old-world grace and new-world urgency that shapes your life. And as always, I remain eager for news from India's vibrant and confounding shores.

Write soon, dear Cordelia and may your days be filled with small comforts amid the grand uncertainties.

### 1854: Simla to Sussex

You must allow me to share a morsel of local wisdom whispered in the drawing rooms of Simla: "*Never shake hands with an Indian, my dear, for you may not care to know where that hand has been*". At first hearing, the counsel smacks of that vague caution with which many here regard native habits; yet upon closer inquiry, it proves entirely practical. By immemorial custom, the left hand is kept for certain ablutions, while the right is jealously preserved for eating, so that to exchange gestures with the latter offends no standard of cleanliness.

India itself is no single country but an endless patchwork of sovereign little worlds—self-contained, self-sufficient and insular to the point of indifference. The strict Hindu will neither eat at table with us nor permit our touch and will, with a bow, withdraw rather than share a closed room. In his eyes, we are as the *achhut*, the untouchable. This I find humbling, though in truth it is no novel fate: all foreigners who have come before us—Persian, Turk, Afghan—have been met in much the same manner.

The land is immense beyond imagining, older than our oldest stones at home and so bewilderingly intricate in custom and creed that I despair of ever mastering its logic. To understand India is like gazing into a kaleidoscope; for an instant there is order, a bright geometry and then, without warning, the pieces scatter—new colours, new arrangements but never the same one twice. The number of peoples, the throngs of gods, the burden of antiquity—it is too much for one mind to contain.

There is, too, a subtle peril here. To grow too enamoured of these shifting scenes is to loosen one's own moorings, as though the compass needle might forget north for some exotic direction. Many a sojourner has confessed to a sudden flutter of disquiet, a longing almost physical for the sight of Sussex hedgerows, the sound of the rain on a familiar roof or the scent of lilacs in an English spring. I cannot deny I feel it too, in the quiet hours when the mountains press close and the whisper of the pines is unlike any at home.

Simla itself remains a curious refuge—a little England precariously perched upon Himalayan ridges, where gossip and garden parties try to hold the raw vastness at bay. Yet when the mists roll in from the valleys

and the bells from some distant temple reach one's ear, it is impossible not to feel we stand in a place far older, stranger and more stubborn than anything our Empire has yet known.

### 1854: Sussex to Simla

Your account of Simla is a tonic in these unsettled months. I had imagined all India to be a flat expanse of dust and ruin, so your description of wooded ridges and cool air quite surprises me. How curious, too, that propriety should extend even to the hands! One observes so many rules here in England and yet calls them manners; perhaps in India manners have simply taken on a sacred hue.

London society is restless as ever. The news from the Crimea fills every breakfast table, though we in Sussex concern ourselves rather more with the shortages and the new talk of reform in the Army. Harriette pronounces that nothing good can come of Parliament meddling in military matters; George, contrariwise, applauds every speech that sounds a note of common sense. Thus the nation debates itself into fatigue, while the newspapers flourish.

Do take the air on those high walks you describe. England seems dull beside such scenes but dullness has its merits—it preserves one.

### 1854: Simla to Sussex

Life here dances between reality and a careful pretence. In the morning we ride out to look upon Himalayan ridges that recede into blue haze; by evening we are at table in candlelight, speaking English gossip within walls hung with English pictures. The mists creep up the slopes and from the depths of the valley temple bells toll, carrying their strange music into our little enclave.

In those moments I feel the truth most sharply: we perch upon the edge of something vast, ancient and utterly indifferent to us. Simla is but a season's refuge—the mountains, I am persuaded, belong to themselves.

### 1854: Sussex to Simla

You speak of the Hindus withdrawing rather than sharing a room. I cannot help but think how our own county gentry once shunned tradesmen and dissenters with a similar fastidiousness. The difference, I

suppose, lies only in the direction of the prejudice. We are so skilled at drawing lines, even when the names of the lines change.

Society here busies itself with the Exhibition's afterglow and the endless chatter of who is reading whom. Mrs. Gaskell's new tales are being discussed in every drawing room—the idea of giving servants and factory girls their own histories quite shocks the older generation. I think you would admire her courage. Change creeps upon us more quickly than we perceive; perhaps our quiet hedgerows conceal revolutions of their own.

### 1854: Bombay to Sussex

The monsoon has come with such drama that even the most seasoned residents speak of it in reverence. The hills disappear daily into vapour; torrents pour from tin roofs and the valleys fill with the sound of water rushing unseen. Simla becomes an island in cloud, every path an avenue of dripping leaves and sudden rivulets.

There is in all this damp enclosure a strange hush, as though Nature herself insists upon silence. My correspondence, too, has grown sparse; one spends long hours reading by a sputtering lamp while beyond the windows the forest breathes and sighs.

At such times I find my thoughts wandering far—to our Sussex fields gleaming after a summer shower and to the confident steadiness of life at home. I miss, most of all, the unembarrassed clarity of belonging. Here, one forever watches and is watched, part of a ruling caste that commands yet never truly knows the people among whom we live.

### 1854: Simla to Sussex

It is true. I did help myself to the vast hordes of jewellery my husband's family has always acquired from its extensive lands and titles throughout the Empire. I imagine on those rare occasions when I think about my earlier life, that His Grace must not have noticed their loss particularly, nor mine I remind myself. I have sold several fine pieces as I travelled, yet always wearing the larger emeralds, diamonds, rubies and pearls close to my person. Many of the more foolish English women here are delighted to own a fabulous necklace of mine. I wonder at their blindness in not seeing that India is a gem and does not need additional ornament.

It was, however, on an occasion that I sat speaking to our Maharajah. He had been introduced to me during a party somewhere and we had formed an intimate friendship based on our mutual interest in headwear: hats, as you know, being my especial favourite. And in jewellery. As any collector with a fine collection of rare and valuable gems, there is always the so-called “holy grail”: the stone that was missing—likely stolen by us. It was, he said, a sapphire the size of a Golden Oriole’s egg. A captured fragment of the midnight sky, the blue heart of a frozen ocean or the glassy glow of a deep-sea treasure, with its light holding a celestial, almost holy brilliance. His reverence was intoxicating and rewarded. For, as I later proved, that gemstone was in my own collection and I gave it to him with my blessing.

I wanted no thanks—it was enough to have relieved myself of its weight on my person—but he gave me a suite of apartments in his palace and servants aplenty for whenever I chose to leave Simla. And, as though I have need of such titles when I have escaped all I have had, he wanted to call me Rajkumari.

It is here now when I am able to study India, as I rest from my travels. Not this court nor the way we English relate to this unrelatable mass of separate peoples. Here I have a library of works in a language I have yet to grasp to discover a world of words that is beyond my understanding.

### 1855: Simla to Sussex

My studies continue apace and give me cause for all kinds of musings and wonderings. It strikes me as a peculiar English solipsism to describe India as primitive when this collection of principalities has existed in one form or another for thousands of years.

We call this civilisation *primitive*—the word itself meaning first-born, not backward. It is perhaps only our English vanity that made it an insult.

Yet the hierarchical nature of its fragmented society both reflects and deflects the reasons India has been so easily overtaken by the English.

A maharajah has no real power nor a claim to lived reality. He has lived a life of contained and constrained luxury—even before the arrival of the British. There are lesser nobles beneath him, suited to a princely court; he has wives aplenty, as he chooses them, mistresses at his command; he is the leader of his principality. All are arraigned about his person.

How does that differ from English society with its monarch at the head and all of us arranged in circles beneath?

Or more amusingly, once one sees the troupes of monkeys that gather in the sunset and smother buildings—ancient and modern—throughout this strange world: is he a great king, our maharajah or is he a great monkey, as the word originally suggests? The Sanskrit root, I am told, binds *raja* and *markata* in curious proximity—rule and mimicry, mastery and motion. One cannot tell whether we imitate them or they us.

If he is to lead his people to a common welfare—and is that not the role of any government, when all is said and done—is he not better suited as a mahatma: a wise teacher of his people?

To be sure, this is not the democracy we English enjoy—all women excepted—where some influence can be brought to bear through our men on a course for change. Here such change is monumentally glacial, as lethargically slow as the people who live in such intemperate climes.

One wonders at our arrogance in thinking to reform such a country, as if grammar could be imposed upon a language already ancient and alive. Perhaps we are but annotators in a text that was written long before we learned to read.

### 1855: Bombay to London

I write to you now from the heart of an Indian prince's court—a spectacle of opulence and ritual! The Maharaja is a magnificent creature, draped in jewels and commanding loyalty with effortless grandeur. Yet beneath the splendour lies a fraught web of alliances, jealousies and whispered threats. Women like me find their wits tested as much as their charm.

The English residents here mutter about 'the moral looseness' of colonial life but I have found that survival demands a flexible morality. In fact, Lady P—once a lady of impeccable rectitude—was recently discovered consorting with the wealthy merchant Bahadur Khan, bringing shockwaves down the Hill. Society shifts on a knife's edge.

Do tell me, how fare your salons? Are the conversations still laced with artifice or genuine delight? The latest Parisian coiffures sound ravishing, I confess a pang of envy.

### 1855: London to Bombay

The salons attempt gaiety but are darkened by politics and secret liaisons. The new coiffures you crave have tongues wagging—some say too audacious for 'respectable' ladies. Remember, darling, audacity is your best friend but discretion your ally.

### 1855: Sussex to Simla

Your description of the monsoon almost makes me wish to be drenched beside you. England grows damp enough without storms, yet our rains seem mannered compared to your tempests. I like to imagine you reading peacefully while the jungle murmurs about your eaves.

Here the railways continue to advance like steel vines through the countryside; even our quiet Sussex lanes echo faintly with the rumble of distant engines. It is claimed that soon one may travel from London to Edinburgh in less than a day! I wonder if the modern world will have any patience left for reflection when all horizons can be crossed before breakfast.

Society, too, is altering in small ways. The daughters of even respectable families speak now of teaching or writing as \*occupations\*—the word itself has changed tone. I suspect you, with your keen mind, would have led such reforms had you remained here.

### 1855: Sussex to Calcutta

As autumn draws in, I walk beneath beech trees that shed gold upon the path and think of the leaves that must fall about you in those Himalayan forests. Our worlds differ utterly and yet seem bound by some quiet symmetry.

Your reflections on Empire reached me deeply. Perhaps we all live within our own enclosures—whether the English drawing room or the Indian hill station—and only rarely sense how small they are. You say that to gaze too long upon India is to risk losing one's foothold in one's own culture; I think our danger here lies in never loosening the grip at all.

The Crimean peace negotiations may soon conclude and we pray for an end to the slaughter. There is, too, talk of some gentle change in the laws governing women's property. The world turns, even in the provinces.

### 1855: Sussex to Simla

Your vision of India as a kaleidoscope delighted me. How apt a comparison! England, by contrast, seems a well-worn pattern that no longer shifts. Yet even here, beneath the calm, there are tremors—

young men speaking of the rights of labour, women whispering that education might serve them as well as embroidery. Father calls it “unladylike ambition”, but I confess it pleases me to hear new voices.

The roses are magnificent this year; the air seems filled with their perfume. Still, I find myself envying you those fierce colours and sounds, even the discomforts of which you write so vividly. How strange that the mind, like the heart, yearns for what bewilders it.

### 1859: Simla to Sussex

As I journeyed upriver on the Ganges, bearing witness to the wild and wondrous landscape, I found the customs of the local women to be as varied and profound as the waters themselves.

The women here carry themselves with a grace born of both duty and devotion. Many are seen balancing the graceful burden of water pots atop their heads, a practice which, upon first glimpse, might appear precarious, yet is performed with a poise that speaks to years of tradition and skill. This daily chore is but one among countless acts that weave the fabric of their lives—an existence intertwined deeply with the river itself, which centuries of faith have sanctified as both mother and goddess.

At the sacred ghats, where the river embraces earth in stone terraces, women gather in the early hours to perform the ritual bath, believing the waters wash away not only the literal dust of life but the sins that burden the soul. I was struck by the delicacy of their movements amid the chants and offerings, a solemn reverence that fills the air thick with incense and flowers. Here, devotion is displayed with a delicacy and strength that contrasts powerfully with the wild cries of the jungle beasts I heard by night.

Yet their lives are not confined to ritual alone. Many women tend to their families and fields, some managing household affairs while others join bustling markets. Their dress is a tapestry of vibrant silks and careful embroidery, each sari and bangle a statement of identity and belonging. Among the village women, I saw young mothers cradling babes with tenderness and resolve, while the elders shared tales of gods and ancestors as naturally as they spun cotton or swept the courtyards.

Despite the hardships that come with this existence—scarce water during the dry season, the physical demands of daily labour and the ever-present expectations of duty—the women here manifest a quiet dignity. Their joys, fears and hopes are woven into the very fabric of the river’s flow, as timeless as the Ganga herself. I treasure them.

## 1860: Surrey to the Empire

I am surprised and disappointed not to have received more regular letters from you, cousin. We may now live a greater distance apart than ever before but we must not forget our deference and manners.

I have enclosed with this letter a few assortments and samplers to furnish your Christmas with an English tone. You will no doubt be delighted to see I have included one or two papers from our Women's Worldly Ways publication. It is all the rage in England this year. I cannot but feel my small contribution to its finances has not made some difference to its success as the arbiter of taste and fashion in corsetry in this country. You would do well to take note of this and my other suggestions for a woman's true role in society.

Must I remind you that we are all Mallard women, related to an ancient Ducal line? While some of us may not hold titles and lands, we do hold a grace and a decorum that others do well to emulate. This requires us to remind ourselves of the maxims we were taught as children and here I have copied out a few of my favourites.

Make yourself interesting by not being the subject. A teapot, a playbill, a passing dog—these are safer topics than your digestion.

Manners are not self-erasure but self-measure. Offer enough of yourself to warm the room, never enough to smother it.

Good breeding is invisible. If you notice your own manners, they have already failed.

(From *The Mallard Principles of Conversation*)

Onto more domestic matters. I have read complaints in several of your infrequent letters about the difficulties you face in managing your houses. Your error lies, I believe, in your misperception.

The object of managing your own house is not merely personal comfort but the formation of a home—that unit of civilisation where father and children, master and servant, employer and employed, can learn their several duties.

What difference does your location truly make when herein lies the natural outlet for most of the talent peculiar to women?

We must all remember the role we Mallards play in shaping this Empire. We must all endeavour to make wherever we are as English as only England can be.

## 1860: Bombay to London

The years have transformed me here from a curious outsider to a fixture in Bombay's social tapestry. I have learned the language of eyes

and pauses, the intricate code that governs the interactions of this hybrid society. Our gatherings now include not just the English but the princely elites and wealthy merchants—a complex dance indeed.

Scandals flourish and the latest involves the son of a noble family accused of gambling debts and illicit liaisons with a courtesan from the red-light district—disgraced, yet somehow indispensable. The hypocrisy of these courts is breathtaking.

Has London changed? Does your world still sparkle beneath the gaslights or do shadows lengthen? Write soon, with all the delicious details I crave.

### 1860: London to Bombay

London remains a jewel with cracks that gleam faintly in candlelight. The theatres buzz with new plays and older scandals; our circles circle ever tighter. Curious about your tales—your world sounds more vivid with every letter.

### 1860: Simla to Sussex

Your recent letter arrived with thoughts both profound and stirring and I find myself compelled to reply at length, especially on the matter you so eloquently expressed: the great diversity of human nature and the challenges it poses to rigid systems of belief and law. Indeed, I agree wholeheartedly with your insight that it is folly to expect uniformity of conscience where our very dispositions are so utterly unlike.

Here in India, this truth reveals itself daily in a manner unmatched by anything I encountered in England. We live surrounded by a hundred gods, if not more, each worshipped with fervour and ritual. Upholding our Christian faith, as many of us here strive to do, is a task compounded by this vast spiritual landscape, where the sacred manifests in myriad forms and where religion intertwines deeply with culture, governance and daily life. And I begin to suspect that each creed is but a dialect of the same yearning.

Christianity here is interpreted through lenses quite different from our own. Missionaries labor with zeal, seeking to bring enlightenment as they conceive it, yet their efforts are met with complex resistance—not merely from those clinging to ancient creeds but also from the very structures of Empire that advocate neutrality and protection of all faiths. It is a delicate balance, for to impose one law or belief universally

risks alienating entire peoples, whose conscience and devotion are deeply rooted in their own traditions.

You wrote that “one law laid down by the majority... is only binding legally, not morally” on the minority. How true this rings here! We are daily reminded that conscience cannot be dictated by external convention and that moral authority resides within the individual’s divine instinct. To suppose otherwise is to blind oneself to the vibrant multiplicity of faiths and experiences that fill this land. It is precisely because conscience is so personal that our Christian faith demands of us humility, patience and constant reflection.

Yet, I confess that even as I cherish my faith, I observe here the world’s temptation to reduce conscience to “cowardice” constrained by social fear rather than divine guidance. Many in our expatriate society hide fears under piety’s mantle—fearing not God’s judgment but the scorn of their fellows. I take heart in your declaration that on the sole account of our soul’s clarity before God, we may remain blameless. It is perhaps this certainty alone that sustains us amidst such a conflicting spiritual milieu.

Judge not, that ye be not judged. In this land of myriad gods, my faith is not weakened but refined: it demands a gentler firmness, a deeper respect for difference, a resolve to seek truth without arrogance.

### 1861: Calcutta to Surrey

Your letter arrived in the midst of many sundries and duties and I have read it with the respect and care you so rightly deserve. I write in reply to your counsel concerning the household—the cherished ideal of home as a unit where all may learn their duties under one roof and a natural outlet for a woman’s unique talents. Your words, as ever, reflect the wisdom and values I hold dear. Yet here, in the tangled realities of India, I must confess that the path from house to home is a far more complex and arduous undertaking than one might imagine.

Our lives are never static. My husband’s posts dictate the rhythm of our existence and with each new posting comes the challenge of uprooting and settling anew—in places that differ as vastly as one corner of this country is from another. Each move requires not just the physical relocation of furniture and belongings but the painstaking establishment of a household within unfamiliar surroundings—where language barriers alone might render command and cooperation difficult. Our servants often come from different regions entirely, their dialects and customs baffling at first to one accustomed only to English ease of speech and manners.

Financially, the task of maintaining a house that approximates even a modest English standard is frequently frustrating. The best goods and furnishings must be shipped across continents, subject to delays and damage; local provisions and labour vary greatly in quality and availability; and the climate itself undermines the tidy order to which English households aspire. The heat, the monsoons, the dust—all gather to erode both comfort and seeming permanence. To create a true home, then, demands both resilience and ingenuity, as well as a patience that is tested daily.

Your belief that the household is where a woman's talents find expression resonates deeply. Indeed, I apply myself to this endeavour with care and resolve but there are difficulties. The gulf between 'master and servant' is widened here by language and custom; servants may not share our ideas of duty or respect and we must often negotiate customs foreign to our upbringing. Teaching these lessons is an exercise in diplomacy, as much as authority. Sometimes I wonder whether the ideal is one of harmonious education or fragile compromise.

Yet amidst these trials, I find moments of joy—when the household hums softly with order, when servants take pride in their duties, when my children flourish under supervision despite the difficulties. It is in these moments that the lofty ideal of the household becomes tangible—a small citadel of civilisation amid a vast and often bewildering empire.

Please forgive my frankness, dear Aunt but I wished you to understand the fuller picture here in this foreign land, so distant both in miles and in custom.

### 1861: Simla to Sussex

I have in recent days met a new recruit to our small social circle here. Her name is Felicity yet she is anything but happy at present, though newly wed. I am doing my best to help her settle before she considers the vexing questions of matrimony.

For now, she needs to consider practicalities that must be as alien to her as possible, arriving as she and her husband have from Dorset. Before meeting me, she has had to muddle through on her best: learning the unfamiliar procedures, finding out what sort of supplies are needed to keep on hand, working out, often through painful trial and error, how much money she ought to spend.

Enormous bills for supplies have appeared, run up by servants who assured her that all was in order. Awkward scenes took place when she ordered a servant to perform a task which he could not possibly do because of his caste.

“I desired my table servant to bring me the drawing-room lamp to clean, as I take charge of them. He refused, saying that he would lose caste to touch it. Fool! I got so angry and after a hard battle got my way but really they are enough to drive one mad”, she told me. Her desperation is remarkable and I long to advise her to relax but such women never learn how.

Instead I gave her enough vernacular to issue simple orders. She learned not to ask a Muslim cook to handle pork or a Hindu one beef. That certain tasks could be done only by the sweeper and they had their limits: they would not touch dead animals. For that, a still lower grade of Untouchable had to be employed. And so forth.

Should I meet with her again next year, I shall be interested to find out how she has fared: whether she has become a slave to English routine and its endless battle with dust; or if she has adopted this old, bright land as her own second home.

### 1861: Calcutta to Surrey

How little my letters to you can convey the true nature of existence in this strange and vexing country! Though the East may glimmer with splendour in tales told at home, in reality, it is an unending struggle between discomfort and decorum, chaos and the faint hope of civility. I must unburden myself, for Bombay has tried my temper to its limits and stretched the very bounds of my endurance.

We were invited to the city for several weeks and I assure you, nothing on earth could have prepared me for it. The weather was infernal—air so thick it could be cut with a knife, the sun like molten brass above one’s head and the very walls perspiring with heat. The locals fare much better, though apparently unaware of how they reek! Their odours—part spice, part sweat, part smoke—rise from the streets in visible shimmers, as though the city itself exhaled an indecency.

Transportation here is a comedy of discomforts. They call them carriages but they are nothing more than boxes of wood dragged by men who gleam with exertion, their bare limbs slick and shining. To heighten my mortification, I am obliged to hold my handkerchief to my nose to ward off the dreadful stench and though I am thoroughly aware how absurd it makes me look, I refuse to asphyxiate for the sake of false modesty. The locals, bless them, interpret this not as insult but as eccentricity—one small mercy in a sea of coarseness.

Oh but the manners! Politeness here is measured only by the size of one’s gratuity. Should a coin glimmer in one’s fingers, every soul within earshot becomes the image of servility; otherwise, requests are met with

either stares of incomprehension or bursts of chatter in their abominable tongue. Why, after more than a century of English rule, can they not master the language of their betters? It is as though comprehension itself shrinks away from reason in this land.

Everywhere, too, are noises—the cry of hawkers, the wailing of beasts, bells, drums and chanting. One cannot find a moment's peace. My sleep is invaded by jackals yammering beyond the compound walls or the melancholy sound of some native festival that always seems to begin precisely at midnight. The streets are crowded with beggars who multiply by the hour, goats that think themselves pedestrians and holy men daubed in ashes who proclaim enlightenment while wearing scarcely a thread.

Our lodgings are scarcely better. Sheets damp before they can be pressed, insects omnipresent and servants of every rank who mistake confusion for diligence. One must bark out commands thrice in rising tones before anyone stirs. I begin to think the Empire would crumble if left to these people's idea of order.

Yet—oh blessed yet!—all trials fell away the moment we reached the governor's palace. The gates opened and I stepped at once into England again. Lawns cut evenly, drawing rooms adorned with silver and lilies, voices speaking clearly—properly!—the language of civilisation. At dinner, there was music, real music, not the twanging of sitars or the pounding of those dreadful drums. Gentle laughter filled the room, porcelain clinked softly and for the first time in weeks, I felt clean.

So here, dear Aunt, you find me restored—if only for a while—by the sweet balm of English manners in this land of heat and barbarity. It is the smallest island of grace in a vast, uncomprehending sea.

## 1862: Simla to Sussex

You once asked what distinguishes English administration here from the ancient order it replaced. I find myself compelled to answer: it is not conquest in the sword and cannon sense but conquest by classification. The British have taken an Indian tradition of infinite subtlety—the system called *jāti* (that is, one's birth group or community)—and pressed it like a living flower between the pages of a bureaucrat's ledger until all colour and fragrance are gone.

Before our arrival, this *jāti*—or what we now so grandly call caste—was a local, shifting and human arrangement. A man's position flowed from his *kul* (family), his *peshā* (occupation) and the esteem accorded him by neighbours. A goldsmith's son might turn farmer, a weaver's daughter might marry into trade; the *panchāyat* (village council) settled such matters with a good sense most English courts would envy. The

people called it dharma—the right conduct suited to one’s place and talent—not a birthright but a duty of temperament.

Now, however, our government clerks—with their spectacles, measuring rods and moral certainties—have resolved to remake this delicate conception into a map of frozen hierarchies. They claim to read the ancient books—the Manusmṛiti and others—as if scripture were a census report! They have seized upon the word varna (colour or order) and fixed it like a brand across a vast empire that never shared one language, one custom, nor one god. Where once there were hundreds of small jātis, living fluidly among each other, we now have printed registers and numbered ranks. Each man must declare his caste, as he does his landholding or face bureaucratic invisibility.

And see what follows. In the first great census—whisperedly called the ginti sarkār kā (government of counting)—the people are compelled to name themselves within an alien scale. The English interpreter, equating jāti with “race”, believes himself impartial but he brings to the task the assumptions of his own class system. He believes, as many of our countrymen do, that an English gentleman and a low-born labourer are separate species—so it pleases him to think the Brahmin and the darzī (tailor) are fixed from birth as well.

It is a grievous irony, cousin, that in accusing India of stagnation, England has made her static. The British who deride “Oriental fatalism” have trapped the land in parchment and decree. Our census-makers, with their passion for ordering, have turned a social philosophy into a legal cage. The proud Brahmin finds his dignity diminished to an official title; the chamār (leather-worker) finds his hope for betterment sealed behind a clerk’s iron grille. Even whole tribes—hunters, nomads, wandering musicians—are now branded under edicts such as the Criminal Tribes Act, marked as born offenders for daring to live outside this new scheme of respectability.

And worse still, the Government’s own policies follow these classifications as though ordained from Heaven. Jobs, land and education are distributed according to this artificial scale. Men now compete, not to improve themselves but to have their jāti placed higher in the next enumeration. Villages whisper of advancement by petition rather than by deed—this is what passes for progress under the Raj.

They call it knowledge but it is power dressed as enlightenment. By favouring certain varna—particularly the Brahmin, whose Sanskrit and flattery so suit the clerks—they have found willing allies to uphold their rule. It is the old trick of divide and raj (divide and rule), wrapped in moralised parchment. The British call it governance but it is little more than hierarchy perfected.

I confess that it pains me to see this land, once a living mosaic of faith and custom, recast into the likeness of our cold English order—precisely ranked, rectangular and lifeless. India's old system may have been intricate and unjust but it was human; ours is mechanical, pretending to reason, yet blind to life.

I write this not as an enemy of our country's rule but as one who has seen its unintended cruelties. The English have, by their own tidy hands, turned what was once a thousand shades of belonging into a ledger of division. And so they call it civilisation.

### 1861: Calcutta to Surrey

It is with a heavy heart and trembling hand that I write to you today, having just seen my two beloved sons and darling daughter off on the long voyage to England for their education. My mind is a flurry of pride in their futures and sorrow at the cost—for I fear they may never truly return, that their Indian childhoods have been prematurely surrendered and that all the innocent days we might have shared have been lost to the wide gulf between continents.

You know, dear Aunt, how keenly we, here in India, feel the want of proper opportunity for our children, especially as they grow. The heat and air here sap not just the body but, I am convinced, the discipline that learning demands; local instruction, while earnest enough, cannot hope to rival that offered at home. And so, for all families of standing and ambition, there comes that dreadful decision: to send the children back across the sea, sometimes for a decade or more. They must, for their prospects, adopt English manners, absorb the refinement and rigour that only those reputable schools can offer.

To see them go—so small still, so trusting of the world—is agony. Their trunks, more than half of them bearing mementos of their brief Indian years, seemed out of all proportion to their persons. Yet I packed them with care: books, a small painted box, a ribbon, a scrap of muslin as fine as web, that they might remember my love in moments of loneliness.

The journey is no small test. Who could fail to worry at the prospect of months spent at the mercy of ships—storms, strange ports, fevers, the company of strangers? Even now, my heart catches each time the wind rises or dark clouds gather across the Hooghly, as though I could will the weather of distant seas to gentleness. I try to comfort myself that they will be welcomed by trusted family on arrival and that, God willing, kindness and good sense will see them through.

Most bitter, perhaps, is the knowledge that they shall grow—change completely—without me close at hand. I pray they do not forget the

sound of my voice, the feeling of my arms, the stories of their earliest days. Childhood is all too brief and here it passes even faster beneath the press of necessity and distance.

### 1861: Sussex to Calcutta

England grows ever more uneasy with the question of what, precisely, we are doing in India—what we build there, whom we educate and, dare I ask, for whose benefit. I have heard from several friends with sons in service that there is a new insistence upon sending English children home from the colonies for schooling. They speak as though it were a sacred duty—a contribution to the Empire’s future armies and its governing elite—but I find myself wondering at the cost, both human and moral.

Tell me, my dear, is this truly how you see it? Are your sweet boys being sent home not merely for their own good but as the making of future soldiers—part of this endless cycle of producing and supplying men to keep the great machine of Empire running? It chills me to think that our households have become, quietly and respectably, the nurseries for the next generation of governors and officers, destined to rule lands they only half remember and people they never truly know. Do you find, as so many here do, that a “home education” has become less about learning and more about socialisation—a preparation for command rather than knowledge?

And what of your little girl? It seems to me that, where the sons are sent to learn to rule, the daughters are sent to marry those rulers in turn—a perpetual exchange of power and obedience dressed neatly in lace and Latin primers. The Empire, it would seem, grows as much from its drawing rooms as its barracks.

### 1862: Simla to Calcutta

Books have long been esteemed as the principal avenue to all learning, especially in our English tradition. Yet, as the years pass and my circle widens to include more Indian friends, I have come steadily to value another kind of education—one born of living itself, with books as companions rather than masters.

So much of what is fine in Indian understanding cannot be traced solely to what is written in books. The women I have met, whether of noble lineage or humble station, display, through the conduct of their daily lives and the circumstances they navigate, a wisdom, patience and

adaptability that cannot be distilled from any volume alone. Their knowledge arises from participation—ritual, custom, responsibility in the household and society—that the page merely supplements. I watch as they maintain households that seem always infused with meaning; they relate stories of family, faith, village and nature with a tenderness and clarity that surpass dry accounts.

Our Anglo-Indian children, raised so often betwixt two worlds, might learn as much from such encounters as from any formal lesson. How different they might become if taught through example as much as through rote or recitation; if given opportunity to observe and absorb the subtleties of local courtesy, philosophy and resourcefulness. I do not mean that books should be cast aside—they are invaluable. I simply wish that we might blend their wisdom with that gathered from living fully in one's place and time. Such an approach would nurture minds and temperaments prepared both for future unions and for the world's uncertainties.

It is striking how the grace and knowledge of the Indian women prepares them for marriage as surely as it does for life's challenges. Perhaps our own girls and boys, by learning from this model, would be less unrooted, more able to belong wherever life carries them and whomever they choose to wed. I hope that, as our children grow toward adulthood, they might be shaped by both modes of learning—book and experience. In that way, they may carry with them true understanding, not just information.

Have you not found your own children becoming wiser over dinner tables, in gardens and through conversation, as well as through study.

## 1862: Bombay to Sussex

You asked me to tell you more about the native princes, so I shall dedicate this letter to a description of our Maharajah, whose court I have been fortunate enough to visit.

His Highness, for all his fabulous wealth, exists in a gilded cage of our own making. While his palace is a marvel of intricate stonework and lavish silks, his power is, for all intents and purposes, a splendid fiction. The Resident, a rather stiff Major Thompson, is the true authority here. The Prince must consult with him on all matters of state and every expenditure is noted. Thompson assures me the arrangement is for the Prince's own good—a way to ensure proper, civilised administration. The Prince, for his part, plays his part with effortless grace, feigning great interest in Thompson's counsel, even as his eyes betray a profound boredom.

The day for the Maharajah begins early, with a series of elaborate rituals and prayers that take up the better part of the morning. Afterwards, he holds a public durbar or audience, in the palace courtyard. Here, he sits on a magnificent throne and his petitioners, mostly common folk, lay their concerns before him. A clerk records the requests and the Maharajah offers a verdict, often with surprising swiftness. It is a striking scene, a vibrant tableau of India in full traditional splendour and one can almost forget the layers of British authority that lie just beneath the surface.

Afternoons are for leisure and entertainment. The Prince is a great patron of the arts and the finest musicians and dancers of the region perform for him. He also indulges in hunting expeditions, for which he maintains a substantial menagerie of animals. I was invited to accompany him on a boar hunt recently, a truly exhilarating if rather dangerous affair. His Highness rides with a ferocious enthusiasm and it is in these moments of sport that one sees a glimpse of the absolute ruler he might have been in another time.

What is most striking, however, is the pervasive blend of East and West in the palace. While the Maharajah's dress remains traditional, his youngest son, an English-educated boy of fourteen, addresses me in perfectly fluent English and has an alarming grasp of our own parliamentary customs. The boy has shown a keen interest in cricket, a sport I was quite surprised to find had taken root here. We spent a delightful hour the other day with bat and ball, the Prince's son wearing a white tunic and the most earnest of expressions.

The evenings are given over to grand feasts, with a variety of dishes so numerous and so spiced that one's palate is quite overwhelmed. The Prince drinks only water but he offers his British guests the finest imported wines. We eat seated upon cushions and the servants, in their bright livery, move about with silent efficiency. It is a world of incredible excess, yet the air is thick with a certain, unstated tension. The Prince knows his kingdom is not truly his own and Thompson watches him like a hawk. The loyalty of the princes was so crucial to our victory in the great rebellion of '57 and now we must treat them as allies while simultaneously ensuring they never again become a threat.

I must confess, that observing the Prince's life gives me a rather complicated feeling. There is a sense of genuine admiration for the man's dignity and charm, yet there is also the disquieting knowledge that he is a puppet in his own home.

## 1862: Sussex to Simla

Your letters arrive like cool rain upon our summer torpor. The town is filled with visitors fleeing the plague of smoke and soot; every inn in Brighton stands thronged with invalids pretending to convalesce. How different from your mountains!

As for the Empire's attitude toward India, the \*Times\* prints long arguments that we are bestowing civilisation. Yet when I read your pages, I suspect India remains serenely indifferent to our claims—it neither welcomes nor resists us, merely endures. Perhaps that is the secret of old nations; they have survived too long to mistake new visitors for destiny.

The Queen and Prince have been much seen about Windsor this season, though some say Her Majesty still mourns too deeply to be companionable. There is talk that the young Prince of Wales shows promise at Eton—why is it that all our hopes rest upon the shoulders of boys?

## 1862: Bombay to London

I have acquired a reputation, not dissimilar to your own, my dear Harriette. I doubt I will ever have the time or the inclination to write my memoirs and perhaps it would be unwise to expose some of the men who have so flourished in my salon.

Men like to call me a courtesan and I admit I enjoy the way they like to roll that word on their tongues as though it holds a shimmer of respectability. I find it delicious. Why pretend otherwise? I wear it like silk—cool against the skin, whispering as I move.

I want for nothing and easily pay that inexplicable tithe the Dukes insist on collecting annually. In return my name remains untarnished in dowdy England and gloriously sparkling here, wherever I move.

It's absurd, really. These powerful men, quivering at my table like schoolboys, confessing as though I might grant absolution. Sometimes they want forgiveness; sometimes they just want to be heard. And all it costs them is a thousand pounds and a bauble or two.

A woman of my vocation learns quickly that obedience is the true luxury of power. The higher a man stands, the deeper he wishes to bow. The same head that wears a crown or signs a treaty will, in privacy, bend to a woman's command if she speaks with the calm authority of his upbringing. "Yes, Lady Fitzartur", they say, like schoolboys hoping for praise.

Men visit me for many things—pleasure, certainly but also permission. The English unfasten their collars and let out secrets as though I were some confessor in lace and stockings. Indian gentlemen hold a different respect for women and there is a grace and fluidity about them that truly leaves an impression of the Englishman as a cold fish.

“Don’t tell anyone”, they all murmur and I laugh. Who would I tell? Their wives? My intimate friend, the ViceRoy? Their Gods?

There is nothing degrading in it, for either of us. I am simply the mirror their education forgot: the reflection that reveals who taught them pleasure through denial. My own discipline lies in observation—knowing precisely when to tighten or to yield, when a silence will hum louder than a blow.

I keep their sins tucked away like love letters. Confidentiality is the one thing I never sell.

If there is any code worth keeping, it is to accept all, to treat all the same. Not out of charity, nor superiority but because the game of rank collapses in the face of need.

## 1862: Bombay to Sussex

Since last I wrote, I have had further occasion to observe the Maharajah and in particular, how he conducts himself in different company. The man, I am increasingly convinced, has a chameleon-like quality, for his demeanour with his own countrywomen is a stark contrast to that with our English ladies. It provides, I think, a most illuminating insight into the two worlds he is forced to inhabit.

In the palace, within the walls of the zenana, he is quite a different creature. The Resident, of course, is forbidden entry and so the Prince is, for those hours, truly at ease. I am told by my Indian contacts that here he is an altogether more traditional ruler—laughing freely in his own tongue and with an easy, unconstrained manner one never witnesses in public. He consults with his wives and female relations on family matters and his power is absolute, yet defined by ancient tradition rather than British hierarchy. This inner circle of women remains a world of mystery to us, veiled both in fabric and custom. The Prince is the bridge between this private world and our own and the burden of carrying two such disparate identities must be considerable.

When English ladies are present, however, a very different performance unfolds. I escorted Lady Harrington to a palace function last week, where the Maharajah was holding a reception for our community. He was a model of stiff, Victorian correctness, his English impeccable yet formal, his conversation restricted to matters of state

and trivialities. There was none of the jovial ease I observe in his own court. These other British women, in their bright silks and fussy bonnets, treated him with a polite but thinly veiled, curiosity. To them, he is a fascinating yet foreign specimen, a ruler of an exotic land but one whose manners must be judged against a Western standard.

One can sense the tension in the air. We are here as his allies, yet our women, with their Victorian sensibilities, bring a certain judgment that he must constantly appease. The unspoken rules of our society dictate a certain distance—English ladies do not engage in any familiar way with Indian men, no matter their rank. So the interaction is a highly formalised dance, a diplomatic necessity rather than the social pleasure he and I enjoy privately.

The contrast is quite striking. In one instance, the Prince is a man in his own home, the confident head of his family. In the next, he is a living curiosity, a fascinating mascot of the Raj, navigating a minefield of manners and expectations. He is a truly talented actor, for he performs both parts flawlessly. One wonders, however, which is the real man.

### 1864: Simla to Sussex

I well recall a silly game my sisters and I played together as children, undiscouraged by our governess, a rather prim and dour Miss Blandy.

We decided to imagine how we should live luxuriously were we each to have £100 per year to spend. We should need a house each with a garden, perhaps an orchard, a few servants, the ordinary necessities of life, a wardrobe of clothes, perhaps not a carriage. And, as one of my sisters added, fresh flowers delivered every morning.

It was at this point our Miss Blandy called the curtain down on our amusing game by pointing out she earned the amount we had chosen to imagine and could afford none of those items nor indeed the time to enjoy them.

Now, here I sit in palatial luxury with far more than £100 to my name and my own well-recompensed Blandy maid. Yet I see all about me people of a different nation subsisting—no profiting—without money as we count its worth. They seem largely to be happy with their lot: we are a people who might compare this with that and find this wanting and want more than our share.

My Indian friends are wiser and see this is already that. There are indeed the poor, one finds them everywhere in the world, I imagine, yet even here they secretly smile—not indulgent but entire—as though with a hidden knowledge I have yet to unearth on a path I hesitate to tread.

Do not misunderstand me, I have no desire to surrender my worldly wealth and join them in their happiness. I am too much a sybarite for that.

### 1865: Simla to Sussex

This week the valleys below Simla have flared into colour with the Hindu festival of lights. From our balcony we could see little points of flame winking along the slopes, as if the stars themselves had drifted earthward for a visit. Music drifted faintly upward; the air smelt of flowers and burning oil.

It is impossible not to feel the pulse of devotion, however foreign its forms. I find myself wondering whether the same divine impulse animates all worship that seeks to make the unseen tangible. Yet to speak thus is almost improper here—our company would rather maintain its robust indifference than allow a flicker of sympathy lest it be construed as weakness.

Simla remains splendid in its own brittle way, yet I sometimes think our Empire's greatest illusion is that mastery consists in understanding less rather than more.

### 1865: Bombay to Sussex

You asked in your last letter why, despite all the abundance of local help here, I have chosen to retain an English maid rather than an Indian one. The answer, though simple in practice, is rather tangled in circumstance—and a curious tale it makes of our times.

My maid, Blandy, was originally brought to India not as a servant but as part of what was called a “civilising mission”. She was employed under contract to instruct the ladies of a royal zenana in the refinements of European domestic management—an endeavour the sponsors described in terms of moral improvement, though I fear it was received as condescension by its subjects. Poor Blandy soon discovered that her role existed in a most uncomfortable limbo. To the English residents, she was a mere hireling, scarcely more than one of the working class and thus hardly to be received in polite company. To the Indian princesses and their attendants she was little better than out-caste, blemished by service and by the foreign presumption of teaching what they never wished to learn.

At times she was treated as a curiosity—a symbol of modernity for the Prince to display before his British visitors as proof of his

enlightened ties to our civilisation. At others, she was ignored altogether, kept to shadowed corners as one might hide an awkward ornament. Surrounded by splendour yet belonging nowhere, she soon tired of the contradictions of her position.

When the princely household, perhaps wishing to be rid of the embarrassment, suggested she might serve me instead, I gladly consented. Blandy was, after all, stranded: her small savings long exhausted and her passage home impossible. She entered my household with much relief—and though I daresay she is the sourest creature alive before breakfast, I could not wish for a hand more adept at arranging my hair or pressing my gowns. Her manner is stiff, her temper easily pricked but in her I find some remnant of home—an echo of English precision amidst the fragrant chaos of Bombay.

So you see, dearest, I have not defied society's decorum for mere sentiment. It is simply that Blandy, having been cast adrift between two worlds, has found a place in mine—and I, in return, have discovered that an English maid abroad, though cross and grumbling, is worth her weight in comfort.

### 1865: Bombay to Mallard House

You must forgive me if my pen sounds low-spirited, for I write to you in a mood of weary resignation. My position here has been anything but what was promised when I left England under contract as a sort of governess—though truthfully, the title was a fine one for a thankless post. I was to instruct the Indian ladies in English habits, manners and domestic refinements. It was meant to be uplifting work—at least that is what the organisers said—but I soon learned there is little virtue in educating people who neither want the lessons nor respect the teacher.

Among the English, I found myself dismissed as a mere hireling, quite below the dinner table. Among the Indian household, where custom holds women apart, I was neither servant nor gentlewoman—simply something strange. Some looked upon me as out-caste because I worked for wages; others tolerated me solely as an ornament to their Prince's fashion for "modernity". I walked upon eggs between two worlds, belonging to neither and with no comfort to call my own.

When the Prince's household tired of the experiment, I was quietly passed into the care of Lady Rose Fitzartur, whom you will have heard of, though not from any pulpit. She moves, oddly enough, among nobler circles than most of the ladies who would condemn her and though her company is unconventional, she treats me better than many respectable wives would. The princely family "gave" me to her, as if I

were one of their jewelled fans and she accepted with a ready smile. I, for one, was glad enough to be gone.

And here I remain—her English maid, her “Blandy”, keeper of her gowns and curl-papers. The work is no lighter but at least I am back in an English household, where the air smells faintly of our own soap and tea and one may speak freely without an interpreter. I cannot deny that my mistress’s world is a curious one, full of visitors, laughter and many late suppers but she pays promptly and lets me alone when I am out of humour, which is more than most will do.

Do not think me content, my dear sister. I have long since ceased to expect contentment. I endure, as one must and am thankful for a roof that keeps the monsoon at bay. As for returning to England—well, the fare home costs five times what I possess, so that dream must wait for some wealthier resurrection. Until then, I remain in service—this time, at least, to a lady of some consequence, even if the world chooses to frown upon her.

### 1865: North Lodge to Sussex

Education does not merely enlighten; it empowers, it unsettles, it transforms.

You rightly question the double standard imposed upon us by Christendom—the way monarchs bend creed to purse and priests tailor doctrine to appetite, while women alone are enjoined to “hold fast”, as if obedience were our sole virtue. Yet I have learned to value its discipline even as I dismantle its tyranny.

This obedience, purportedly holy, is but a chain that fetters women’s ambitions and mutes their voices. Yet I hold fast to the belief that education—true, rigorous, unshackled education—is the key that might one day release us.

When a woman is educated with the same freedom as a man—to reason, to question, to master sciences and letters—she becomes far more than a mere vessel of domestic duty. She becomes capable of discerning the hypocrisies veiled as commandments, of challenging the social orders that confine her and of shaping her own destiny. It is no accident that many of history’s finest women have stood at the forefront of reform precisely because they wielded knowledge as their sword.

Already we witness promising advances: young women entering schools hitherto closed to us, the slow but certain establishment of colleges where women can pursue higher learning; the growing chorus for suffrage and equality. Each lecture, each book, each learned discussion chips away at the walls that enclose us.

Yet we must recognise that this path is no mere revolt against rule. It is a profound transformation of the soul's capacities. Education begets a spirit that refuses meek submission but it also breeds empathy, wisdom and the capacity to guide—not just to rebel. Our obedience then need not be servitude but an informed choice, grounded in knowledge rather than ignorance.

I would counsel you to nourish every opportunity for learning within your charge, not merely for the sake of accomplishments or domestic efficiency but as a birthright and armour of the mind. The chains of convention tighten where ignorance flourishes; let us seek to loosen them with education's steady light.

Trust that the day must come when women will no longer be told what obedience means but will define virtue and power on their own terms. Until then, we must hold fast to knowledge as our weapon and shield and nurture it in those who follow.

### 1865: Bombay to London

I must confess a truth that would scandalise the proprieties of both our worlds: I have become adept at wielding my reputation as deftly as any weapon. The wealthy and titled seek my company openly now, each alliance a stepping stone, each whispered invitation a chance at greater influence.

The Indian customs continue to astonish me—princely weddings that last weeks, with rituals suffused with meaning beyond my understanding, yet attended with the latest European fashion mingling curiously with sacred tradition.

Pray, reveal to me the freshest salon indulgences and the most delicate scandals from your London haunts. Your letters are my breath of home.

### 1865: Simla to Sussex

I write to you amidst the warm breezes and bright skies of Simla, where I have arrived once again for the summer season, surrounded by the grandeur and bustle of the Raj. As ever, I find my days a mixture of splendid routine and lively adventure, interspersed with the whispers and tales of women who themselves wander this vast land in pursuit of curiosity and, at times, necessity.

I must tell you first of my enterprising friend, Mrs Roy, whose journeys in the northwest have been nothing short of remarkable. Most

recently, she undertook a grand circuit with her husband, setting out from the serene city of Srinagar in Kashmir. Their first leg was a languid glide by boat down the Jhelum River, where the gentle rocking and the reflections of wild iris along the banks invited moments of reflection as much as travel. From there, they proceeded westward to Islamabad and then took the arduous path south towards Jammu, a city bordering Kashmir to the south.

It was a journey of contrasts—their passage across vast plains rich with rice paddies, the air fragrant with the scent of blooming iris, to the more daunting challenge of the Banihal Pass, a climb up to nine thousand feet where the horses faltered and the pace slowed to a crawl. Though no snow impeded their ascent, the biting wind made each step arduous, necessitating frequent rests.

They spent nights in tents and once in a guest house belonging to a local maharajah, where an enormous octagonal pool lay beneath their windows with tame fish gliding calmly beneath its surface—a quiet, regal comfort amid the wilderness. Another native guest house with intricately carved wooden windows provided shelter under a cold roof. During their travels, the party paused at a glen so theatrically arranged by nature that it seemed almost contrived—a cul de sac of towering rocks veiled in maidenhair fern, into which cascaded a stream from a great height. They crossed the rushing Chenab River on a rickety suspension bridge that swayed above the tumbling waters below.

It is in these stories and encounters that one glimpses the grandeur and the harshness of this land, for every marvel is countered by trials worthy of endurance. I delight in collecting such stories, passing them among our circle, for they bring life and colour to the pages of my memory and through them, I travel more widely than my own footprints might allow.

### 1865: London to Bombay

Your ascendancy delights me, though I envy your daring more than your success. Our salons now dance on the edge of revolution—both political and social. A new duchess stirs controversy with her salon's unusually frank discourse. Keep me informed, for your adventures are my nightly entertainment.

### 1868: Simla to Sussex

I trust this letter finds you well in the more temperate climes of England, where the air is clear and the seasons gentle. Here in the

vastness of India, the summer sun lingers longer each day, bathing the land in a shimmering heat that dulls the edge of all other sensations. My thoughts turn often to you and I take great pleasure in sharing a taste of this world, so different in every imaginable way.

Recently, I accompanied my dear, enterprising friend Mrs Roy on a most extraordinary journey up the sacred Ganges. We set sail in a modest boat, towing behind us a cook's vessel stocked with all manner of provisions—fresh sheep and chickens included—for what was to be a month's passage through a land at once wild and majestic. From our travelling household emerged a veritable moving farmyard: two cows with calves, a dozen sheep, alongside a string of twenty-eight camels laden with fine chairs, tables, household linen, the silver and porcelain indispensable to our fragile comforts and a trove of books suitable for every musing hour. Our servants trailed faithfully, bearing beds upon their heads not unlike an elaborate procession of nomads.

The river was at times calm and kindly, at others capricious and demanding. I found myself utterly captivated by the scenes along the banks—the languid crocodiles sunning themselves on the shelves of earth, the graceful Indian women balancing water pots with regal poise and even the somber sight of half-burnt bodies being solemnly shovelled into the river at the funeral ghats, a most poignant reminder of life's transient nature in this sacred place.

Our voyage met adversity, too. The river's temperament shifted suddenly: adverse winds tested our patience; hidden rocks threatened our fragile vessel; the chill of early frosts crept in at night; and at last, the boat sprang a leak. Yet none of these inconveniences weighed upon me heavily. The river's grandeur, with its towering cliffs clad thickly in woods rising abruptly from the glittering water, its scattered Hindu temples, ruined native forts and clusters of humble huts, enchanted me beyond measure. Stone ghats extended outward gracefully, inviting quiet contemplation by their silent steps.

At night, the wildness revealed itself anew—primeval jungles, their edges touching the water's rim, echoed with the mysterious cries of creatures unknown. The howls of jackals punctuated the darkness, while the roar of a distant and angry tiger stirred an exhilarating mixture of fear and awe. Daylight brought gentler visions—deer grazing peacefully in natural glades, their young gambolling joyfully around them and an expansive sky meeting the mighty river, divided by a blinding line of golden mustard fields drifting silently by.

On the water passed great Sindhi boats, their sails idle, carrying grain beneath the sunny boughs. Small fishing craft traced circles with delicate nets and Mohana women, bending against long steering poles,

guided their craft with a grace that rivalled the river's own flowing poetry.

My dear Jeanne, it is impossible fully to capture in mere words the spell that this journey has cast upon me. Yet I share it with you in the hope it transports you for a moment to these distant waters and brings you nearer in heart.

### 1870: North Lodge to Sussex

You will no doubt have read of my own occlusion from the world of men, after Edward is succeeded by my son. I shall now take my residence in that same North Lodge my predecessor graced during her lifetime. But I have neither forgotten my responsibilities nor my promises to you, dear Jeanne.

I have written to our young cousin Victoria reminding her that, though she now presides over a vast dominion—an Alexander in petticoats—the wisdom of governance does not consist in maps and ministers alone. It is incumbent on her to pay heed to the words of women such as ourselves when we take the trouble to show her an aspect of one of her colonies those dry reports she reads must paint in different colours and textures.

As the Fitzartur family has long been in the custom of supplying much-needed intelligence to the royals—yet has too often been discounted, to their obvious cost—I do not expect an immediate nor a cogent reply.

### 1874: Simla to Sussex

Here in Simla, the air is crisp and the mountain views a constant marvel but one never quite escapes the particular tediousness of colonial life. I find my time occupied with the usual rounds of dinner parties and amateur theatricals, which do little to exercise the mind.

Lately, however, my thoughts have been piqued by a subject I am quite eager to share with you, concerning our contrasting artistic sensibilities. Lord Northbrook, our Viceroy, was a particular admirer of Mr. Edward Lear's work and commissioned several landscapes from him during his travels here. I recently had the dubious pleasure of viewing some of his Indian watercolours and they provoked a rather striking observation that I feel you, with your discerning eye, would appreciate.

Mr. Lear is, of course, a topographical painter and his work here is, as one might expect, a meticulous and atmospheric record of place. He captures the Himalayan peaks—Kangchenjunga being a particular

favourite of his—and the winding river valleys with a great deal of skill. He is, as he himself says, a “painter of poetical topography”. Yet, what struck me most was the peculiar emptiness of his scenes. Even when he includes a small Indian figure or two, they are incidental to the vastness of the landscape or the imposing architecture of some ruined temple. They are simply part of the local colour, no more important than a palm tree or a craggy rock. The message, though unstated, is quite clear: this is a landscape to be admired but the people in it are of no great consequence to the overall composition.

This stood in such stark contrast to the grand mythological paintings we so often see at home. Think of Sir Frederic Leighton’s Cimabue’s Celebrated Madonna is Carried in Procession or the more daring canvases of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema that have been so fashionable of late. Even with Alma-Tadema’s archaeological accuracy, the focus remains resolutely on the figure. His nymphs, his goddesses, are not mere window dressing. They are the entire point of the piece, their expressions and their interactions telling the tale, often with an unabashed celebration of the human form. In these paintings, the body—particularly the female body—is the vessel for narrative, for beauty and for an idealised version of life itself. The background, no matter how detailed or beautiful, exists only to serve the drama of the human figures.

And here, in India, we see quite the opposite. The Indian landscape is painted with an extraordinary sense of reverence for the grand and untouched scenery, while the figures themselves are rendered almost as an afterthought. It is a reversal of our own artistic tradition, where the divine and the noble are given pride of place and the setting serves merely as a stage. Here, the landscape is the protagonist and we—both the artist and the viewer—are the observers, documenting a spectacle that, by its very nature, is removed from the life we know. It is all quite telling, is it not? The art reflects the very nature of our enterprise here.

I cannot decide whether Mr Lear paints India as it appears to him or as he has been taught to see it. Perhaps, in the end, even his empty vistas are a kind of translation error—beauty misread as possession.

### 1874: Bombay to London

As I prepare to leave Bombay after nearly two decades, I find myself reflecting on the extraordinary journey we have both shared in letters. From the fresh bewilderment of my arrival to the mastery of my place among the Anglo-Indian elite, this land has shaped me in ways I never imagined.

The court intrigues, the marriages, the scandals—a constant whirl of life richer than any London season. And yet, I treasure equally your stories, the fashions and follies of the great city across the sea.

May our correspondence continue, bridging worlds and years. Know that in India I forged a new life but my heart remains ever bound to you and the sparkling nights of London.

### 1874: Sussex to Simla

...lest their great expectations be diminished forever. I often wonder at the insularity of we English. Here we raise our children to live in England yet so many live in the wider empire. It is, I think, most difficult for women in our class since we educate our daughters in domestic trivialities, music, inoffensive chatter and courtesy then send them unprepared to an alien land where not only are there diseases to ravage and animals that kill but they are required to know how to treat people without any kind of linguistic, cultural or religious connexion. As well, they must construct their homes about them from houses that do not, in any way, resemble the more comfortable surrounds they have been used to by mimicking the homes they have left in England.

All this and more, while dressed in London fashions in temperatures far exceeding our own. Add to this the all too common need to shine socially and climb the rungs. A recipe for failure? Or an opportunity to provide practical and appropriate education for our daughters?

Our women sent as emissaries to the East have great expectations of a life precisely like the one for which they are educated. We expect to marry well, to raise a family, be socially active and politely scheming for our husband's preferment, to reside at the most proper addresses, in town and country. These are our great expectations. We are expected to be complaisant, attentive, fragile and liable to swoon.

We may hope to impose our culture on another—to render anywhere we are, England—but surely the burden of that application ought not to be given to women—that fragile sex—and increased by sending them ignorant of their future homes.

Improvements to a foreign culture—if that is the empire's intention—cannot be readily achieved without any idea of what is to be improved.

Do you think we are too unsure of our Christian convictions to permit the learning of so foreign a language lest it undermine our faith and church?

## 1874: Bombay to Sussex

As you may have heard elsewhere, I am on the point of departing India, though not immediately for home. I have received a most flirtatious invitation and am heading now to Constantinople to discover its sensual delights for myself.

Can one bequeath a maid-servant? You may think India has changed my morals to ask such a question. Yet this dour maid—and hardly that any longer, for she has acquired both a husband and a daughter—has proven unsuited by temperament to the climates I explore. She is a Blandy by name and nature and has often intimated that she wishes to visit her family in England. It has never suited me before—she is an excellent maid, if sour—yet now as I too am leaving, I wonder if I may send her to you? Give her in service—it is all she is suited to or desires—to one of your daughters when they are of an age to need one.

I will write again once I am properly established in my new apartments at the Dolmabahçe Palace—whose excesses, I am told, make even the Raj look provincial.

## 1875: Sussex to Simla and North Lodge

If it is my duty to make a house into a home, am I not within my rights to exert my influence and talents for my husband's comfort and ease?

I have reminded Arthur there is more to my wifely duties than to be beautiful and vapid and that he is a wise husband who follows his wife's advice.

We have since spoken at length about the need for a more suitable education of women, not only here in England but in the wider world. We are here talking about the rights of women and he agrees—rather timorously, I thought—that I ought to have rights and that his house is also our home.

Once having smoothened out the complexities of this vital issue in his own mind, he is convinced of the right course of action to pursue: to push the matter more quickly forward in the House.

## 1875: Simla to Sussex

You may recall that the term “scapegoat” originates in a story from the Old Testament, in Leviticus, where Aaron must select a single, strong and robust goat to bear the collective sins of his people and be cast out into the wilderness. It was vital that this goat be no weakling, for its survival alone would fulfil its grim and sacrificial role; it had to

endure being cast out from its herd, left to fend for itself, bearing a burden too great for any but the strongest.

How often, my dear cousin, do I see this metaphor enacted in our own time and place? Middle-class women, whose upbringing in England may have sheltered them from hardship, are sent forth—outcasts in a sense—into a land for which they are neither prepared nor acknowledged. Like that scapegoat, they bear a burden nobody wishes to face: the loneliness, the alienation, the navigating of strange customs whilst preserving a semblance of Englishness in this foreign realm. They carry the unspoken sins and shortcomings of both their society and the Empire itself, expected both to serve as pillars of propriety and to survive the rigours that would break a lesser spirit.

These women are often stronger—far stronger—than the men who send them away. It is not merely physical endurance that defines them but a resilience born of necessity, a quiet, uncelebrated power to withstand and to adapt. Thus, in their strength, they become unwilling symbols and bearers of sacrifice, much like the sturdy goat that must survive alone, bearing a burden too heavy to share.

In this spectacle, there is tragedy but also remarkable fortitude. I see in these women a new kind of heroine—bearing weight that others flinch from, navigating roles that test body and soul, all while sustaining the fabric of Empire and family. The scapegoat does not perish; it must endure and so do they.

## 1880: Bombay to London

I have occasioned to reflect rather sharply on certain delicate matters—particularly the curious contradictions of prudery, nudity and the enjoyment of sex, subjects which I dare say you will find not uninteresting.

It strikes me that we, you and I, cannot possibly be the only women who derive pleasure from sex; yet society so obstinately insists on a *dénouement* quite opposed—that “proper” women not only do not indulge their desires but are assumed not even to experience them. The hypocrisy is as palpable as the very air we breathe. Consider the day dresses that hide more than they reveal, stiff and decorous, against the evening gowns that dare to show much skin—a curious performance, indeed, where the body is both shielded and displayed according to the hour, yet the enjoyment of such display is never frankly acknowledged.

Here in India, nudity is common to such a degree that it becomes almost invisible—the bare bodies of women or men, whether by the riverside or in market lanes, form part of the everyday scene. If ladies

do not fancy the sight of naked men, pray, why do they not simply keep away from it? The very notion is so absurd as to border on the comical, yet the unwritten rules of society demand otherwise. It is far easier to feign offence than to confront one's own desires openly.

What puzzles me further is the apparent rise of prostitution in both London and Bombay. It is plain that men wish to behold naked women and to have sex with them, yet polite society will not permit this truth to be spoken openly. So the vice thrives in shadows and back alleys, whispered about but never addressed, as if what is most natural must be cloaked in sin.

I dare say, then, that our professions are simply tokens of a secret honesty in a world that prefers illusion. If truth be told, prudery is but a cloak for unacknowledged appetite and the enjoyment of sex a truth known to all but spoken by few.

I look forward eagerly to your thoughts on this, not least because among women there must be solidarity and understanding where society offers none.

### 1880: London to Bombay

Your letter brought me much delight and merriment, especially your wit on the matters of prudery and nakedness. I must confess, I laughed heartily at the recent quote I chanced upon in *The Times*, which declared quite bluntly that “the laws of decency unrestrained either by principle, custom or authority are just what might be expected from savage nations”. One can hardly help but smirk at such paternalistic notions, all the while knowing that this sanctimonious prudery only thinly veils the appetites it condemns.

Indeed, it is a curious paradox that men of all ranks and station—from the highest lord to the humblest clerk—often seek solace and warmth in the company of women outside the sanctity of marriage. The truth, whispered but seldom spoken, is that many men find little comfort at home because their wives, bound by society's creed and ignorance, deny themselves the pleasures of intimacy. Men, unschooled in the art of passion, grow restless and seek satisfaction elsewhere—some by taking mistresses, others by preying upon women who lack any other means of sustenance or respectability.

Though I am branded as morally suspect in many polite circles, I barely mind. Oddly enough, I am embraced with open arms by quite a number of fashionable women who, I fancy, are relieved to have someone else bear the weight of their own unmet needs and unspoken desires. I like to think that in some unseen manner, my profession takes a small measure of pressure from these unsatisfactory marriages,

allowing such women to retain their social facades whilst the truth of human nature is attended with honesty by others.

We share more than birthright: we share the candour to speak plainly of what others whisper behind gloved hands.

### 1881: Bombay to Sussex

Your recent correspondence gave me much to ponder, especially your observations on the ever-present shadow of moral regulation that pervades our lives here in the Raj. I share your sentiments fully: moral regulation is indeed nothing less than a symptom of imperial and patriarchal control—the body itself becomes a colony, as it were, over which authorities exert dominance as surely as over the lands and peoples beneath their rule.

The Anglican Church, with its strict doctrines, has colonised the soul, setting itself as arbiter of what can be thought and felt; the government presides over the nation with an iron hand, extending its reach globally; and society itself colonises the body, prescribing how one must live and behave, barring natural expression lest it threaten the fragile order. One feels it even in conversation, where a thought too freely spoken draws glances sharper than any knife. No one may live naturally, for that might jeopardise not only the individual's soul but the nation and the entire empire.

This leads me to ask, can such moral attitudes, which infantilise people into strict conformity, be the true cause that holds us back from greater achievements? We chase progress, yet we shackle ourselves with norms so exacting that spontaneity and genuine expression dry up beneath their weight. What then is the Church, the government or society so afraid of? Is it the loss of control itself, the possibility that freedom would dissolve the hierarchical order? Or do they fear the unruly, unpredictable nature of humanity unbound by rules?

Living here, I witness the double colonisation of both land and self, the relentless drive to mould every aspect of our being into a predictable form. Yet, I hold hope that underneath all this imposed order, the currents of rebellion and naturalness quietly flow, waiting for the moment to renew life and spirit.

Whether those currents ever reach the surface, I cannot say.

### 1881: Simla to Sussex

You will perhaps smile to learn that your cousin has turned philologist, for I spend a good portion of each afternoon poring over my notebooks on the Indian tongues. What began as no more than an

amusement—an effort to decipher the strange music of Hindustani—has grown into a veritable passion for etymology. There is something endlessly fascinating in tracing how words travel, shedding one skin for another, until they settle, quite domesticated, in the English tongue.

Indeed, English society here in India has borrowed much from the languages of the land without even perceiving its debt. The very architecture of our daily existence rests on Indian words. We breakfast beneath the *veranda*, recline upon the *charpoy* (which in the Hindustani khat is nothing grander than a string bedstead) and summon the *ayah* to bring the *chota hazri*. These sounds now trip easily from English lips, though few remember that *veranda* came to us through the Portuguese and *charpoy* once meant nothing more formal than a peasant's woven cot.

At our tables, too, India has lent us half our lexicon of taste. There is *chutney* from chatni, meaning something licked or savoured; *curry*, that catch-all for any fragrant stew, has strayed far indeed from its Tamil parent kari, a simple sauce; and *pukka*, which in Hindustani signifies something truly “ripe” or “genuine”, is now bandied about by Englishmen to mean “first-rate”. What delightful irony, that refinement in the mouths of our countrymen should depend upon so foreign a seed!

Nor does our inheritance end at the dining table. The *bungalow*, from *bangla*, “in the style of Bengal”, has replaced the English cottage for comfort in this climate. Our wardrobes, too, betray India's influence: loose *pyjamas* from *payjama* (literally “leg garment”), airy *shawls* from *shal* and bright *bandanas* from *bandhna*, “to tie”. Even the draped elegance of Indian silks has softened the former stiffness of our English tailoring—an influence I suspect will linger long after Empire itself has waned.

And in politics or culture, the appropriation continues. The upright “*pundit*”, originally *pandita*, once meant a learned scholar but is now turned by our newspapers into a chatterer of opinions. The solemn “*nabob*”—from *nawab*—once a ruler or courtier of high rank, now denotes some newly rich merchant returned from India with ostentatious fortune. As for “*loot*”, from *lut* (to plunder), it has journeyed from the battlefields of the subcontinent to the ledgers of London, where bankers speak the word in tones of inadvertent honesty.

It often strikes me that in these linguistic borrowings lies a curious confession—an unspoken admission that English civilisation, for all its pretensions, could not sustain itself abroad without Indian invention. Though our countrymen may rule by sword and paper, it is through words that India conquers them in return.

At times, as I sit upon the veranda in the cool of evening, surrounded by palms and the mellow hum of the bazaar, I think how language, like Empire, has two faces—the master’s and the servant’s—and how often the latter outlives the former. The words that England carries home will one day outlast our stations, uniforms and titles, quietly whispering that we learned far more here than we ever confessed.

Do English lips at home still speak these borrowed sounds unaware of their Indian birth? I sometimes think even you cannot imagine how rich and mingled the world of words has become at the edge of the Empire.

### 1882: Simla to Sussex

India is replete with insects that invade our houses and infect our good humours, with wild beasts that threaten even our daily perambulations, with parasites of all manner and description that, combined with a climate that is either hot and humid or frighteningly frigid, render life here barely tolerable. Yet the worst parasite of all—one that sucks life, blood, sweat, tears and toil—is the English.

We do not invade but like some species of ant, we colonise and dismantle what has already persisted for millennia and reconstruct it in our own vision of a proper home. We are an empty people, always filling our lives with a pursuit of more—a higher social position, greater wealth, larger lands—to what end?

Subjugation of those we perceive to be our inferiors. In England, it is those without heredity title and land. Elsewhere, it is everyone who is not English. For my part, I prefer the biting, scratching, tickling of an insect I can easily crush between my fingers or sweep from my home to these people among us who swarm together and enforce their bloodsucking standards on us all.

### 1882: Bombay to Sussex

You can scarcely imagine how often, in this gilded yet absurd corner of the Empire, I have longed for the proper distinction and repose of English society. The social world here in Bombay fancies itself a reflection of that in London, yet, like an image seen through troubled glass, it is but a blurred and comic imitation. One must live above its foibles or else perish from either boredom or indignation.

The difficulty, you see, stems from the fact that, as in most colonial cities, the majority of our society is drawn from the respectable middle classes rather than from the nobility. They are good sort of people—earnest, ambitious and frightfully self-assured—but they have no true

template for behaviour. With the refinement of breeding absent, they compensate by adopting an elaborate concern for precedence and ceremonial that would amuse you endlessly. It is a society of improvisation masquerading as hierarchy and one cannot help observing, with a mixture of amusement and despair, the feverish exertions of people intent on placing themselves before others. It has become, quite literally, a game of who comes first.

Nothing absorbs them more than the question of precedence at table or a ball. One might think the Empire itself hung in delicate balance upon whether a colonel should precede a collector or if the wife of a customs inspector has the right to enter the drawing room before that of a district judge. The debates are as prolonged as they are impassioned. I am told that just last week a colonel, resplendent in medals and moustache, introduced himself at a dinner by declaring, in tones of great solemnity, that he was a “full colonel”. His hostess, who had no conception of military rank, beamed upon him and replied, “Then I do hope, Colonel, that you will be a very full one after dinner!” The poor man, I am told, has yet to recover from the mortification.

These small absurdities might be tragic if they were not so entertaining. To me, who has known true society—where wit softens pride and lineage needs no explanation—it is a sort of amateur theatre played with touching conviction. I attend their soirées and races dutifully and I daresay with more composure than most, for I have long since mastered the art of seeming amused rather than exhausted by it all.

In truth, my dear, it is rather fascinating to observe how power rearranges itself in these distant dominions. Without the steadying presence of those accustomed to command by tradition, society becomes a restless sea, where anyone who owns a title, however minor, clings to it as though it were salvation. Those of us of higher birth must play our parts gently, lending a little grace where we can and allowing the appearance of equality to soothe their tensions. I find myself both spectator and participant in a fragile comedy—its absurdities endless, its consequences oddly human. Sometimes I think the only true precedence left is fatigue; whoever tires last, rules longest.

Still, amidst all the theatre, Bombay contains its splendours—the gleam of the sea, the colour of sunsets over the bay, the faint perfume of gardens that recall the tropics more than the temperate civility of England. I confess there are moments when I forget the foolishness and simply breathe in the strange delirious beauty of the place.

Write soon, dearest Jeanne. Tell me what occupies your quieter, better-mannered world, that I may live it vicariously and renew my

strength for yet another evening of misplaced precedence and misquoted politeness.

### 1882: Sussex to Simla

It is all a sham, this need to uphold the pretence of appearances. One wonders then how people might better amuse themselves and live a more Christian life. For idle hands do the devil's work, are we not frequently reminded by our Church?

Yet our idle hands spin social tops in ever decreasing circles: consuming without producing. Society thus keeps itself afloat while offering an aspirational possibility to those not included. Pride—one of the seven deadly sins—is praised, even by that Church. Is this not the devil's work incarnate?

I have heard tell of a local family who live most meanly, foregoing nourishment and comfort so that they may afford an extra footman whose only task—as he has no other—is to render an image of a family more prosperous than they truly are and set them near the top of their small social circle. It is as though they have made a pact with the Devil that not only allows them to remain idle and claim higher precedence but to suffer domestic inconveniences as their reward for seeming better than they are.

### 1883: Simla to Sussex

Your letter provoked in me such a stirring of thought that I could not resist taking up my pen at once. You speak of England with that familiar affection of one who dwells within her soft, green embrace, yet I find myself, from this distant height above the Indian plains, regarding her with both tenderness and unease. Living among the relics and realities of empire, one sees her more clearly—not as she imagines herself but as the pale reflection of an older, grander power.

It seems to me that England's strength lies less in her originality than in her extraordinary faculty for imitation. She survives not through conquest or innovation but through what I might call institutional mimicry—the after-image of Rome endlessly repainted. Her civil service, her army, even her municipal order, echo Rome's administrative genius; but she has shed all trace of Rome's cosmopolitan heart. Where Rome yoked strangers into a civic whole, England divides them neatly into subject and ruler, servant and sahib. Where the Caesars ruled by spiritual and symbolic majesty, England rules by the steady hand of property and inheritance. The Church of

England, that proud national institution, is less a faith than a divine accounting system for land and legitimacy.

I sometimes think that England's supposed virtues—her stability, her self-restraint, her quiet dignity—are themselves disguises. Stability cloaks inertia; isolation masquerades as mastery. The English call it stoicism, yet it is often no more than the confidence of a nation mistaking silence for wisdom. “Borrowed grandeur”, indeed! For every notion England proclaims as uniquely her own—law, governance, decorum—has its forebear in some earlier foreign splendour. The Romans lent her law, the French lent her taste, the Germans lent her scholarship and the Empire here supplies her with purpose. She borrows from all and christens each adoption as invention.

Thus England stands, aloof yet derivative, a careful custodian of a borrowed mantle. By my reckoning, she is not the heart of empire but its last, most respectable province—still enacting the imperial pattern long after the centre itself has vanished into history. It is a whisper of Caesar through the voice of a clerk. There is grandeur in it, perhaps but also melancholy, for imitation, however stately, can never rekindle the fire of the original.

Do you find this too harsh a judgment, dear Jeanne? Here in Simla, where every terrace bears some classical name and every official fancies himself a Roman proconsul, the illusion is hard to ignore. And yet, watching the monsoon clouds roll over the cedared hills, I sometimes think that imitation may be England's truest genius—her ability to make borrowed forms endure.

### 1884: Sussex to Simla

Full of your usual grace and observation, your letter has set me thinking about the great question that preoccupies so many of our English philanthropists—namely, the work of the missionaries in India. The news I read and the accounts you send make the whole enterprise at once grand and unsettling. Are these efforts genuinely meant to spread the word of a single God or to transplant English civilisation into a land pronounced “inferior”? Or are the two, in the missionary mind, one and the same?

I often wonder whether all this fervour is not a form of moral conquest akin to the imperial kind—the conversion of souls as a mirror of the subjugation of peoples. Is this, as some of our learned men argue, the proof of Anglo-Saxon biological superiority, a doctrine which renders it somehow moral for the so-called strong nations to dominate the weaker? I confess the notion makes me shiver. Strength seems always to find its own justification.

And is the prosperity of the British Empire—its military and commercial triumphs—to be taken as evidence of divine favour? Or are we confusing cause and effect, placing the cart where the horse should stand? If riches were indeed a proof of righteousness, history would read very differently.

The missionaries say their purpose is to save Indian men and women from the “falsehoods” of their native faiths, to replace what they call idolatry and superstition with Christian morality and truth. Yet I ask myself—who can claim so purely to know truth as to erase another’s gods? Hinduism and Islam, whatever their divisions, have sustained vast civilisations for countless centuries, while our own country grows ever more troubled by industrial greed and social unrest. Which vision, then, is the purer or the wiser?

At times I even dare to ask—when did God tell the English they were His chosen people? Was not that honour already bestowed upon the Jews in the desert of Egypt? And why should English society, which cannot adequately maintain its own poor or its own virtue within its narrow shores, presume itself the best in the world?

Forgive my philosophical temper, dear cousin but I cannot silence these thoughts. Perhaps, as so often, good intentions have been yoked to power and faith has become the handmaid of empire. If only our missionaries sought understanding as earnestly as they seek conversion, I think both nations might yet be enriched.

I long for your reply from Simla, where you see these contradictions unfold before your eyes. Does the missionary’s cross still shine as beacon—or has it begun to cast a long and troubling shadow?

### 1884: Simla to Sussex

I read your letter with the same mixture of admiration and rue that your fine sense of inquiry always inspires. Your questions on the true purpose of the evangelical missions in India are indeed the questions that so few of our countrymen dare to ask aloud. Your words have travelled farther than you perhaps imagine, echoing precisely what so many of us here observe—and cannot easily say.

It seems to me, watching the curious zeal of our missionaries, that their project is far less about spreading the word of God than about extending the moral circumference of England itself. One might almost say that the Bible is their passport and civilisation their cargo. They come, often well-meaning and sincere, yet unable to distinguish between conversion and conquest. You asked if the aim is to bring a people to a single God or to an English way of life; here in India, they

appear to believe the two are indistinguishable. The flag and the cross march together and woe betide the soul who asks which leads the other.

There is now a growing language of superiority—blended of race and faith—by which all this is justified. The notion of “Anglo-Saxon moral destiny”, as they call it, is much in fashion. It comforts both churchmen and soldiers to think that Providence has awarded them their empire not through ambition but through design. Yet if one peers closely, as we must, it is curiously self-serving theology. To claim that military success and mercantile wealth are proof of Divine favour is surely to place the cart before the horse. By that logic, Mammon himself would count as a saint.

As to the purpose of their work, I fear it is not merely to save souls from supposed falsehoods but to replace every native custom with the reflection of our own. The Hindu and the Muslim are treated as schools of childish fable, to be exchanged for the “manlier” faith of Christ—as if wisdom were a thing confined to latitude. One might almost believe their mission is to correct the Almighty for allowing such variety in His creation.

And yet, I wonder with you—when, precisely, did God proclaim the English His chosen people? Was it in Egypt or perhaps in the tea rooms of Brighton? We are quick to exalt our virtues yet cannot mend the cracked streets of our own cities. India is to be redeemed, we are told, while Manchester starves on Sunday bread. Our society is no shining example of perfection; it merely shouts louder about its righteousness.

You ask what the missionaries fear and I think I know the answer: they fear difference itself. It unsettles their tidy hierarchies, their confidence that order is moral and that obedience is holy. Their sermons against “idolatry” seem less directed toward God than toward the preservation of English self-image.

Forgive this heat of tone; the mountain air in Simla is sharp and bright and one grows bold under its clarity. Still, I confess it pains me to see faith used as the handmaiden of Empire. Religion ought to enlarge the soul, not shrink it to fit the pattern of conquest.

### 1885: Simla to Sussex

I must share with you a truth long concealed beneath the polished surface of our missionary enterprise here in India—a truth that I find increasingly difficult to soften with polite words. The women who come from England clad in white habits, proclaiming their sacred duty to evangelise and uplift, often cause far more harm than good. Their efforts, though wrapped in the rhetoric of charity and salvation, are in

reality instruments of cultural domination that fracture communities and disrupt established ways of life under the guise of piety.

These so-called missionaries dare enter the zenana, the private quarters of Indian women, yet their visits bring not gentle understanding but judgment and control. They do not simply teach reading or health; they impose their own narrow Christian morality upon women who live according to very different—and no less valid—traditions. In casting Hindu and Islamic faiths as superstitions and idolatry, they dismiss deep and rich cultures in favour of an imposed Englishness that is neither wanted nor fully comprehended.

Moreover, while they claim to liberate these women, they often marginalise the very local healers and midwives who have served their communities for generations, branding them as unhygienic or backward. Such actions destroy more than faith; they unmake social bonds and sour relations between communities. I have no doubt that many of these women act with sincere belief, yet sincerity does not justify the arrogance with which they assert moral superiority, nor the blindness with which they propagate Anglo-Saxon supremacy under the banner of religion.

Their presence here is but a thread in the imperial tapestry, embroidered with control and the suppression of difference. The “Christian charity” they dispense is, in effect, colonial conquest by other means—enshrining not religious enlightenment but social domination. It is a curious and bitter irony that in their zeal to “save souls”, they often strip them of their identity and humanity.

I fear that such missionary work, far from redeeming India’s people, fuels divisions, fosters resentment and strengthens the fortress walls between coloniser and colonised. They bring not peace but cultural rupture—and for what? A few converts whose faith may be more a homage to power than to God?

### 1885: Sussex to North Lodge

Your query about how the work of women missionaries in India reflects that done by their sisters in England is a most insightful one and I find it bears upon the complex conditions of our age. Though separated by geography, the missions abroad and the charitable and teaching endeavours at home are bound by a common thread: the effort to impose a particular idea of morality order and female virtue upon a world perceived as in need of reform.

In England, women engaged in missions, schools and social work often come from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds, exercising what little influence is allowed them within the strict

confines of Victorian society. Their work provides a rare vocation outside marriage and family, offering a sense of purpose and, indeed, power within a limited sphere. The same can be said of missionary women in India, whose efforts to educate, heal and convert Indian women are as much about securing their own positions within the Empire's social order as about any spiritual calling.

Both at home and abroad, these women act as agents of cultural and moral control, supporting patriarchal values by promoting female chastity, obedience and domesticity as ideals. The "saving" of souls in India parallels the reform of working-class or impoverished English women, regarded as wayward or needing civilising. In both settings, education and religion are wielded less as tools of liberation than as means to sustain existing hierarchies—whether those of class in England or race and empire in India.

Yet the roles of missionaries in India are further complicated by their position within a colonial context. Their work, ostensibly benevolent buttresses imperial rule by assimilating Indian women into English Christian norms, disrupting native customs and identities. While English women at home use mission work to carve out autonomy or defy limited societal roles, their counterparts abroad become unwitting instruments of empire, translating Victorian ideals into colonised terrain.

Thus, the missionary efforts of women, whether in Lancashire or Calcutta, reveal the tensions of a time when expansion, religion, gender and power intersect with uneasy concord. Each mission, whether domestic or foreign, sustains a vision of order that both restricts and empowers women within the constraints of their world.

### 1885: Sussex to Simla

I have been reading the latest anthology of "morally improving tales", which, like so many of its kind, manages to speak endlessly of obedience but scarcely a word of imagination. It set me thinking—perhaps too freely for propriety—about what we call education in England and what it truly means to instruct the young.

It appears to me that the status of a Count is now the count of status; in other words, it is not virtue or intellect that determines one's place but the inherited arithmetic of birth. Our educational system, rather than correcting this imbalance, only rehearses it. The little boys are taught to see the world as theirs to command, the little girls to see the home as theirs to maintain and all are told that such divisions are ordained by wisdom, not convenience. I begin to suspect it is not wisdom at all but habit.

The curriculum, as sanctioned for our schools by men of learning, seems less devoted to cultivating the mind than to shaping a form of social obedience. We teach our children of wars and victories as though aggression were the highest virtue. They can recite, with perfect decorum, every year of Marlborough's campaigns yet have never heard the name of Hypatia or Sappho or indeed of a single woman whose thought shaped civilisation. Are children being raised as servants to the Empire, I wonder, rather than as citizens of the world?

I have lately examined the prescribed reading in several of the girls' academies and find it narrow in the extreme. Books on science and philosophy remain the preserve of the masculine syllabus, while the "female" course concerns itself with decorum, needlework and that ever-elastic notion of "character". Foreign histories are omitted altogether, as if one should only need to know the English narrative of triumph and possession. What wisdom can arise from such smallness? To understand England without understanding the world is to know the shell but not the creature.

It troubles me, too, that nearly every book we place in the hands of our daughters has been written by a man. One may hardly find a single page in their texts through which a woman's mind has spoken in her own right. It is little wonder that girls grow to see the world only as something described for them rather than by them. There are reformers—Miss Dorothea Beale at Cheltenham, whom I admire deeply—who would offer a broader education: mathematics, literature beyond the moral tale, the serious study of history and art as quest rather than ornament. Yet these remain rare exceptions.

I sometimes think we are educating our daughters for an Empire already fading, rather than for the century to come. If our children must learn loyalty, let it be loyalty to truth, not to form; if pride, let it be pride of understanding, not pedigree. For I fear that we are raising minds trained to obey rather than to think, to accept rather than to see.

Were I to design a curriculum, it would balance Homer with Kalidasa, Milton with Christine de Pisan, Newton with Mary Somerville. Perhaps then, the next generation might grow not as servants to the Empire but as heirs to the world.

### 1885: Calcutta to Surrey

I write to you amidst the din of this distant city, reflecting upon the nature and purpose of our English mission here in India. Recently, my thoughts have been drawn to a stirring declaration made long ago by William Wilberforce in 1813:

“Let us endeavour to strike our roots into the soil by the gradual introduction and establishment of our own principles and opinions; of our laws, institutions and manners; above all, as the source of every other improvement, of our religion and consequently of our morals”.

This statement seems to encapsulate the very spirit of our Empire’s civilising mission. Yet it also raises a question I must place before you with utmost sincerity and curiosity: do you agree that the English race is indeed superior and that it is not merely our right but our solemn obligation to follow Wilberforce’s course—to implant our principles, laws and religion upon India, thus guiding its people toward greater refinement?

The belief that we carry a divine mandate to civilise “lesser” peoples weighs heavily on the conscience of many here. It colours our interactions, shapes our education of the natives and informs the work of missionaries and administrators alike. And yet, I confess, this very conviction prompts in me a troubling reflection: how are we to reconcile this sense of superiority with the knowledge of our own country’s struggles—poverty, unrest and social discord—that might give pause before asserting such an unquestioned right?

Still, the words of Wilberforce echo on in numerous government halls and mission schools, driving a determination to remake this vast land in England’s image, by law, custom and faith. This, it seems, is both the burden and the pride of our nation’s role in the world.

I await your thoughts with keen interest, dear cousin, for no subject could be more vital to the understanding between us.

### 1885: Surrey to Calcutta

As an earnest servant of the Lord and a humble observer of our Empire’s duties, I must confess I fully concur with Wilberforce’s vision. The English race, by Divine Providence, has been entrusted not only with governance over vast and varied lands but, more importantly, with the sacred commission to bring light and salvation to those less favoured by fortune. It is indeed our solemn obligation to extend our laws, our customs and above all, the blessed truths of the Christian faith to those who have not yet known the redeeming grace of our Lord.

The superior wisdom and moral rectitude of English institutions have been proven, not in pride but through their undeniable fruits of peace order and progress. Though we are imperfect and face our own trials at home, our nation’s shining example stands as a beacon to guide others toward civilisation and virtue. The successes of the British Empire—its rule marked by justice, the rule of law and the Christian

gospel—are surely signs of God’s favour upon us and a mandate to continue this holy work.

Thus, I hold steadfast to the belief that our mission to India, noble and arduous as it may be, is both righteous and necessary. The introduction of our religion is not merely a formality but the source of all improvements in morals and society. Without it, laws and institutions lack the higher purpose and soul that faith alone can provide. By offering Indian souls the saving knowledge of Christ, we bestow upon them true freedom and enlightenment.

I pray this conviction guides your steps even as it strengthens my own in these uncertain times.

### 1885: Sussex to Surrey

I feel compelled to expand upon my earlier thoughts regarding the role our countrywomen play within missionary efforts here at home and in distant India, for their actions hold profound and troubling implications. Far from being simple bearers of light or charity, these women have been co-opted into a grand design that intertwines patriarchy, imperial ambition, religious zeal and social control in a manner both subtle and pernicious.

At home, missionary work provides women who are otherwise confined to the narrow avenues of marriage and domesticity a rare sphere of influence. This, regrettably, binds them to uphold not only the Christian faith but the very social order that confines women: ideals of obedience, chastity and submission remain the pillars sustaining the patriarchal regime. Their labours amongst the poor and working classes often impose a vision of moral rectitude that serves to regulate and discipline rather than empower.

Abroad, the complexity and gravity of their role deepens. Entering the zenana—the private quarters of Indian women—the missionary ladies serve as agents of empire, exporting Victorian norms and English Christian morality to a people whose ways are neither understood nor respected. Their schools and hospitals, while outwardly benevolent, function to overwrite indigenous cultures, suppress native healing traditions and enforce moral conformity apt for colonial rule. The native women find themselves caught between the imposition of foreign values and the erosion of their own identities.

Such missions are not acts solely of religious conversion but instruments of cultural conquest. The zeal with which Hinduism and Islam are discredited reveals an arrogance sustained by notions of Anglo-Saxon superiority—religious and racial—that justify cultural erasure in the name of divine mandate. The self-certainty of these

women missionaries extends beyond spiritual matters; it reshapes bodies, minds and communities to align with imperial will.

Moreover, the missionary ladies' work is supported and reinforced through publications and social networks that perpetuate myths of their sanctity and indispensability, even while they deepen the divides they profess to heal. They become conduits of colonial power, ensuring that patriarchal, racial and imperial hierarchies persist under a veil of Christian charity.

This troubling reality weighs heavily on me: women who might otherwise champion emancipation instead become agents complicit in subjugation. Their embrace of empire's civilising mission, even when unintended, enacts a paradox—a mission of salvation that confines both the saved and the saviours to roles mapped by power and oppression.

Our sisters in the mission field require more than praise; they require scrutiny and, I hope, reform—lest we continue to play unwitting parts in a design that diminishes us all.

### 1885: Bombay to Sussex

I must confess that my patience grows thin with the endless meddling of the missionary ladies who have taken it upon themselves to improve the morals of India. They have become, to my mind, the great spoilers of happiness, disturbing what was once a world content in its own fashion. The maharanis, in their palaces, were perfectly at ease within the only system they had ever known—rich in ceremony and quiet pleasure—and yet these earnest, sermonising women descend upon them as though the very grace of their existence were some moral offence to be scrubbed away.

The missionaries, I believe, mistake restlessness for virtue. They cannot endure a society that does not mirror their own. Their talk is all of salvation and enlightenment but what they bring instead is confusion—uprooting what has grown organically here over many centuries. Yes, hospitals and schools may be useful things and I will grant them that; they bring comfort to the body and some light to the mind. But in their zeal to teach “truth”, they demand that every act of charity come shackled to the British catechism and the English conscience.

Surely, if education and faith are to be shared, ought not the Indians be taught from within their own grand traditions—of philosophy, devotion and art—instead of being moulded to suit the sensibilities of a damp northern isle? India's civilisation, with its temples, poetry and splendour of faith, has long flourished in ways that climate and temperament have shaped. What sense is there in transplanting a

religion born of rain, restraint and grey constraint into a country that thrives on sun and ceremony?

The trouble, dear cousin, is that these well-meaning women cannot imagine goodness expressed in any form but their own. They confuse moral fervour with mastery and piety with possession. They bring Christianity, yes—but mixed so thoroughly with English sewing circles and cold baths that even heaven would feel like a boarding school.

I continue to find my life here contented enough, though it is increasingly overshadowed by lectures and leaflets. Were the missionaries only to permit others to live as they themselves wish to live, we might all breathe more freely beneath this generous Indian sky.

### 1886: Calcutta to Sussex

Your last letter found me in one of those curious moods that Calcutta so easily provokes—half languor, half reflection. The city teems with life, sound and colour and yet, for all that abundance, I find myself scarcely part of it at all. The truth is that my entire life here is built upon an intricate web of hierarchy. From dawn until dusk, I exist within the tight circle of the English conclave: calls, dinners, small entertainments and the predictable gossip that binds the European colony together. I am, in every sense, enclosed—living in India but not of it.

With the exception of speaking to my servants, I know no Indians in any intimate or human way. Their names appear in my household books—the cook, the ayah, the gardener—but only as entries in service of my comfort. It occurred to me, almost shamefully, that I have never written an Indian name except in command or payment. Their faces pass daily before me, deferential, alert and silent, while I remain blind to their lives. Ours is a curious blindness, cultivated by habit as though seeing were too costly a luxury.

I read lately of cousin Alice in Simla—how she has taken to learning the Indian tongues, exploring local customs, even studying their philosophies with apparent delight. There are whispers, of course, that she has gone “native”, but I confess to a sort of envy. She seems to inhabit this country rather than merely occupy it, while I, for all my experience, remain an echo of Brighton—a foreigner even in my own perception. It makes me wonder whether her courage is mistaken for impropriety because she refuses the comfort of ignorance.

Have I made a social mistake in all this invisible living? Perhaps propriety demands such seclusion; perhaps there is safety in it. Yet I cannot help but feel that I am missing something essential, that my Englishness has become its own confinement. How is one meant to

escape being English when one understands so little of the world around her, when every rule of society insists that seeing too much would be perilous?

Sometimes, as I sit on the veranda at twilight, hearing the chants drift faintly over the river, I imagine how vast life must be beyond the pale of our colony—and how small our lives appear against it. To be invisible among so many visible souls is, I think, the real solitude of this place.

### 1884: Simla to Sussex

I enclose within this packet a letter I have just received from Dr. Aziz at Chandrapore—a man of refinement and feeling, whom perhaps you have heard me mention before. A physician of rare sensitivity and a poet by temperament, he is much admired by those amongst us who know him beyond the customary formalities that divide English society from Indian life. Yet this admirable man's fortunes are now in utter disarray, for he has been falsely accused by a naïve Englishwoman of an act of violence he neither conceived nor committed.

His letter, which I send to you in trust and confidence, is one of dignity and despair—a plea not merely for himself but for justice within a structure that has long forgotten the meaning of the word. The matter has revealed, with dreadful lucidity, the racial tensions that simmer beneath our supposed civility. I have known Dr. Aziz for years; in our many conversations he has shown himself every inch the gentleman—attentive, courteous, possessed of a refined wit and education. His poetry, which he reads aloud with grave delight, speaks of deep affection and moral grace. He loved his late wife tenderly and his devotion to his children is among the purest things I have witnessed in this hard country.

Yet now, one heedless accusation undoes him utterly. What astonishes me most is the swiftness with which our newly arrived English family—who know nothing of India beyond the boundaries of their club—took offence and sided blindly against him. So brittle is their sense of superiority that it breaks at the first touch of imagination. They dwell among people they neither understand nor wish to and live in constant fear that civility may be mistaken for equality.

There is, too, a darker truth we women must face: many of these young Englishwomen, repressed from childhood and taught to mistrust their own bodies, find in Indian men a mirror both forbidden and fascinating. Their imaginations, starved of experience, distort courtesy into threat and kindness into presumption. To claim pursuit where none has occurred is, to them, less a falsehood than a twisted

vindication of their own desirability. It is vain, cruel and tragically predictable. The same society that forbids them freedom teaches them to find power in victimhood.

I confess the whole episode leaves me heartsick. This country humbles arrogance with every sunrise, yet arrogance persists undiminished. Dr. Aziz remains, in his dignity, proof that grace may dwell in hearts not English and that refinement is no monopoly of race or Empire. I shall write to the proper authorities on his behalf, for justice must not remain a privilege of complexion.

### 1886: Bombay to Sussex

The time has come, at last, for me to take my final leave of India. In little more than a month, I shall embark for England, there to retire from what I can only describe as the most extraordinary chapter of a life that has at times resembled a roman à clef—apparently fictional in its twists and turns, yet altogether real in its living. Two decades under this golden sun have left me both richer and wearier than I had imagined possible.

You will understand, perhaps better than most, that my time in India has been varied beyond description. I have been, by turns, treated as the Duke's granddaughter and as a maharani in the courts of native princes. I have stood with some little grace astride two civilisations—English and Indian—and have, in spite of my profession, been received with the utmost courtesy on both sides. I daresay it is because I dealt not in politics but in pleasure; for the one divides and the other unites. It was never my ambition to be powerful—only to be agreeable; and in so doing I discovered that influence often lies hidden in laughter and that affection bought honestly is worth more than love professed.

I have learned the art, as every woman in my peculiar station must, of listening closely and speaking rarely. Secrets have been my coin and I have spent none of them. Unlike our London cousin, who seems delighted to parade her adventures in print, I shall never write my memoirs, for that would be to betray not only others but myself. Discretion is, after all, the final luxury of the well-born sinner.

When I look back, I can scarcely credit that I have dined beneath chandeliers in Calcutta, danced at viceregal balls in Simla, recited verses at a mehfil in Hyderabad and exchanged pleasantries with men who governed half the world by breakfast. Yet I have also sat barefoot among jasmine vines, listening to Hindustani songs that conjure both love and loss in a single breath. I have known splendour and simplicity and I cannot say which has been the truer pleasure.

I do, however, tremble a little at the thought of England. After these bright, perfumed nights, how shall I bear the grey restraint of her skies? What does one do, I wonder, with a spirit accustomed to monsoon rain and Mughal marble when faced again with drizzle and drawing rooms? Still, I think I shall retire peacefully into the countryside, far from the feverish pretence of society. There I mean to grow old, if not respectable, at least content.

### 1885: Simla to Sussex

Your letter upon education reached me this fortnight past and I have turned it over in thought during several misty mornings upon the Mall, watching the clouds descend into the valley as though to veil the mountains from reproach. I was much taken with your reflections—your suspicion that we are raising our children not for enlightenment but for service to the Empire—and your words set me musing upon the very nature of what we call civilisation.

Permit me, then, a fanciful image: civilisation, to my mind, is rather like a great pond. Upon its bright surface swim the ducks—sleek, confident, untroubled by the depths. They paddle elegantly above the current and, now and again, dip their tidy heads beneath the waters to peer at the middle classes below them, whose feet, though unseen, work furiously to keep their station. Those nearer the pond's floor peer in turn at the dim shapes beneath them—creatures half invisible, the lowest forms of life, whose labour alone keeps the muck from stagnating entirely.

It is, I think, a perfect model of society. So long as the ducks forbid any creature but themselves to skim the surface, the pond remains precisely as it is—placid above, restless below, never clear, never in motion save for the occasional ripple of reform which soon laps itself to sleep. The ducks declare themselves masters of the element, yet they are forever dependent upon the unseen teeming life beneath. Should one of the deeper kind attempt to rise, there is much flapping and indignant splashing till the threat is subdued.

This, dearest cousin, is power—the power of men over other men and, alas, over women of every sort. For we, whether by birth or education, are pressed to the pond's edge, neither admitted to the surface nor permitted to stir the depths. We may watch and we may reflect the sunlight prettily but heaven forbid we should learn to swim. The female mind, you see, is thought too delicate for such exertion, lest we prove the water not nearly as cold as custom declares.

Your question—are children being trained as servants to empire?—finds its answer in this same tranquil pond. They are taught to glide, not

to dive; to admire the ducks, not to question the water; to read only enough to know their place within the reflection. And so the pond endures—a mirror to its own vanity.

I flatter myself that you and I, at least, have learned to paddle a little against the current. Whether we reach the middle or beyond, I cannot say but the attempt itself feels like the beginning of motion.

### 1888: North Lodge to Sussex

How strange the English summer grows as one advances in years. The air carries less innocence than I recall and even my garden, in all its loveliness, seems to bloom against a world losing its sense of the natural. The Dorothy Perkins' climb bravely over the pergola, their petals like small blushing faces against the stone. Old tea-roses, *Rosa odorata*, flourish still in their patient grace. Yet in their abundance I detect something that feels almost mournful—beauty persisting in defiance, not from harmony. Perhaps it is I who have grown melancholic but I think the roses know what I mean.

When I was a girl, the world seemed to possess its own rhythm—untidy, certainly but human. Now, all appears trimmed and registered, measured like accounts in some divine bureaucracy. I sometimes wonder what Saint Augustine might make of the manner in which we go about our “Christian” improvements—doing, as he might say, the devil’s work in God’s name. His notion that all creation, even the smallest creature, praises its Maker simply by being itself, seems forgotten. Had he walked through our new England, with its railways, schedules and ledgers, I imagine He would have sighed and said that man has learned bookkeeping but forgotten reverence.

Everywhere I look, life is being rendered uniform—souls reduced to categories, colour and creed smoothed into proper boxes. Christianity, which once embraced mystery, now demands order; religion has become the clerk of empire. The multiplicity of the world—its marvellous unevenness—is treated as error. Our sermons speak of salvation, yet in practice we practise subtraction, killing off the wildness in man and nature alike. Even our gardens are ranked by symmetry; we forget that God Himself planted Eden, not Versailles.

I sometimes think the old Flood, dreadful as it was, at least retained a kind of grandeur. There was purpose and cleansing in that deluge; but our age, my dear, dissolves difference grain by grain rather than wave by wave. We no longer drown—we erode. I suppose that is civilisation. Yet part of me believes that when the next “ark” comes, it will not be of timber but of thought: a handful of minds who still refuse to be flattened, who keep alive some spark of variety and wonder against the

monotony. Perhaps we, with our endless letters and arguments, are to serve as its frail crew—still perceiving diversity as sacred, still daring to question.

And yet, even Heaven seems these days a sort of business office. The angels no longer sing, they balance books. I almost pity the Almighty, condemned to accountancy of every soul—debit virtue, credit sin. Perhaps, when He wearies of our systems and ledgers, He will once again wash His books clean.

### 1899: Surrey to the Empire

This may well prove to be my final letter to you. Not least because we enter a new century with our great and glorious Queen Victoria still on the English throne. But also because I am grown more tired and these new-fangled spectacles fail in their promise to restore the sight of my youth.

As I so rarely receive letters from you to keep me informed of the progression of the Mallard flock through the ranks of the British Empire, I have decided it is better to rely on other sources. Send your letters to Jeanne or her daughters, share your news with them. I will gain it second to hand.

But do not think I am chiding you. Our lives have followed materially different paths. Where I have been fortunate and remained always on our fair shores, you have lost your looks from harsh sunlight and your charms have been sullied from being too distant from the warmth of English soil.

This is how I have often seen the collapse of polite society. I understand there is a new scientific word to describe what happens when one society dissolves within another and loses its sense of self. This seems to be what has transpired with you in India: a loss of the decorum and dignity, Indian Runners.

One can only hope that our investment in education this last century will make of your children better Englanders and I draw your attention to the booklet I have enclosed. It is a copy of *Instruction of Young Mallards*, 1892 from the archives of the current Duke of Mallard. He was gracious in his lending of it to me and I repeat it here as the standard bearer for the correct behaviour of Mallard ladies and gentlemen.