

A quaint, quiet life with a good husband. That was all her mother wanted for Charlotte.

If the husband happened to have a handsome annual income, then all the better.

It was of no real significance to the mother of three that her daughter happened to disagree.

Whims of youth would soon be replaced by the sensibility only marriage and motherhood could provide a woman with.

Charlotte was the youngest daughter of Henry and Emily Hammil. A proper family that lived comfortably enough if one was to ask Mr Hammily; wonderful marriage, two beautiful and modest daughters, a bright son, with a generous yearly income, thank you very much, if Mrs Hammil had anything to say about it.

They lived not three hours away from London proper by horse, a journey Charlotte had rarely enjoyed growing up.

She was also the only one of her siblings to remain under her parent's roof, a fact she had the luxury to forget, not with her mother around.

Marianne, her eldest sister, had married well and was living in a charming little village alongside her husband and young child. They had even employed all of five servants to tend to their small family, which was more than the Hammils could say for themselves. Mrs. Hammil had to rely on two measly workers at their state to help her with the chores and everyday burden of looking after the household. The two women had helped raise Charlotte, Marianne, and Arthur, the family's only boy.

Two years older than Charlotte, the promising young man was already a soldier of some repute in the British army and was raising through the ranks at an impressive rate. Henry Hammil boasted to anyone who would listen about his son's accomplishments.

Meanwhile, the youngest child, affectionately known as Lottie, had yet to secure a proper marriage for herself, even though she had already survived an entire social season. However, it wasn't a lack of beauty or grace that kept suitors from trying to catch her attention. She had truly been a vision in blue during the first ball of spring, at Mr. and Mrs. Thurnork's state, in a gown her mother had sown herself in the hopes it would attract many-a-suitors.

Until she opened her mouth, that was, Mrs Hammil reminded Charlotte over the course of several months and unsuccessful soires.

Though the Hammils were hardly wealthy, they were considered to be a respectable, well-liked, if sometimes high-strung family. The father traded fabrics and silk, making it easy for them to obtain exceptional materials for their gowns and suits which would otherwise be outside their means.

This had been cause for admiration when Marianne attended her first ball, and all eyes were on Charlotte during her debut in fine society. With flowing, blonde curls cascading prettily down her back, and beautiful gown matching her bright blue eyes, prospective marriage proposals seemed to be lining up in her future.

However, if any other trait could easily trump her beauty, it was her sharp tongue. Charlotte wasn't as proper as her brother Arthur nor as meek and agreeable as her sister Marianne. She spent her free time in the drawing-room, picking up the embroidery needle when her mother waltzed in, yet kept a book close by to lose herself in whenever she was left alone to her devices.

Lottie was opinionated and exceptionally bright, two characteristics that seemed to immediately dissuade any gentleman from remaining at her side for longer than a dance or two.

And so, though beautiful and graceful, Charlotte remained unwed after her first season. Her mother seemed determined to make sure history repeat itself.

Realizing direly this might be the last spring without a husband by her side, Lottie had her mind set on enjoying all her favorite pastimes, especially those Mrs Hammily would consider unladylike. Reading voraciously or walking unescorted down the often muddy paths leading to the moors and her friends' states were activities no proper woman should engage in unless she wanted to remain a burden to her parents, the older woman reasoned.

That fair morning, merely a month before the season started, Charlotte had strolled all by herself into town to mail a letter to her sister. Undoubtedly one of the servants should have performed such a common task. Still, she enjoyed the fresh air and warm morning breeze, a small luxury she did not take for granted.

Her simple yet flattering brown walking-gown had gotten ever so slightly damp thanks to the morning dew, as she gracefully made her way through the fields, avoiding puddles and tree roots with practiced ease.

She inhaled deeply, adoring the smell of wildflowers growing all around her. The day was delightfully warm, yet she couldn't enjoy it fully. Spring was halfway through, and once it ended, she could say goodbye to her days without a ring firmly placed around her finger. Charlotte knew better than to hope this season would be just as unfruitful as the one before: having a spinster as a daughter would not only humiliate her family, but also put undue pressure on her father's shoulders once he entered old age.

Distracted by such thoughts, Charlotte failed to hear the distant yet unmistakable clapping of hoofs striking the ground until it was far too late. She squealed with surprise, stepping away from the dark horse's way in the nick of time.

The skirt of her walking-gown became tangled up with a protruding root, and Charlotte found herself tripping backwards, landing heavily on the damp grass.

The rider swiftly came to a halt and, jumping off his horse, rushed to Charlotte's side.

"Miss, are you alright? Did you hurt yourself?" The dashing handsome gentleman asked earnestly, bowing next to her and offering Charlotte his hand. "You must be more careful while walking through the moors: you wouldn't want to get run over by a carriage or horse."

Charlotte stared up at him, meeting the stranger's eyes as she accepted his hand to get back on her feet, her dress stained and tattered due to the fall. He was handsome and tall, his hair a dark shade of brown, his skin strikingly pale. However, what caught her attention the most were his eyes, a dark shade of green that focused on her with a quizzical glimmer.

"I feel it should be the rider who minds his surroundings instead, kind sir," She retorted sharply, making the young man raise his brow in surprise. "I haven't hurt myself, if we exclude my pride, that is."

"I wouldn't want to hurt a young woman's pride any more than I'd want to harm her body," He replied with a charming little grin that would disarm most young women. Charlotte wasn't immune to such charms, yet she would be lying if she claimed to be unmoved by it. "I must apologize for my manners, miss. It wasn't my intention to startle you: The tall grasses obscured my vision. I'm afraid that with no third party present to properly introduce us, I must be bold enough to do so myself. I am William Atkinson, a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Charlotte Hammil," She replied, and she bobbed a curtsy to him as he bowed.

"Would you be offended if I offered to escort you back home, Miss Hammil? I couldn't forgive myself for abandoning you in the middle of this field, unescorted, after startling you the way I did."

"If you wish to escort me back to safety, I will not refuse your kindness," She replied, and the pair began to walk together, his black horse obediently following without the need of its master pulling at the reins. This seemed to delight Charlotte, who remarked "Your horse is quite well behaved."

"He's been my companion for several years, and I believe I've earned his trust as he has mine," William replied, making Lottie giggle softly. She had no fan to cover her mouth with, and though she knew her mother would disapprove, she didn't use her hands to do so either.

He enjoyed watching her laugh. It was a pure, pretty sound, one a young bachelor might grow quite fond of.