

Friday, October 16, 1696

She was not beautiful. Nor was she charming, a word so often used to describe a woman who was not beautiful but who was, nevertheless, appealing in some ineffable way to her many admirers. There were no admirers.

Her hair was not silky and abundant, nor did it curl loosely around her face in soft tendrils. Her eyes were neither sparkling nor full of mischief, her nose neither slender nor pert. Her laughter did not tinkle merrily, nor did she giggle delightfully. On the rare occasion when she might be persuaded to smile, no captivating dimples appeared on rosy cheeks. There was nothing at all soft or sweet or yielding about her. And she was no longer young.

Nor could she be described as elegant or graceful. She dressed plainly, with no regard for what might be considered flattering, much less fashionable. Although she carried herself with dignity, she was awkward, holding herself stiffly, her back rigid with a kind of stubborn pride.

She had no interest whatsoever in cultivating the dainty arts for which women were so widely admired and praised—she did not sing or play or draw or embroider. Nor did she involve herself in the pastimes with which women of her class filled

the otherwise empty hours of their days: she did not pay afternoon visits or amuse herself at cards or attend balls or go to the theater. She did not exchange pleasantries, encourage gossip, or engage in tittle-tattle.

And, then, she was not at all deferential, nor was she soft-spoken. In her conversation, she was straightforward, her words few and to the point. This habit of directness might be admirable, but it could prove troublesome: she was at times impatient, even abrupt, and she could also be a little condescending. She was frequently curt, her tone sharp, her criticism unsparing if honest.

While she was acknowledged as that most unlikely of creatures, a woman of reason, she could on occasion be so certain of the truth of her own views that it was difficult to persuade her that she might be mistaken. She was also possessed of a fierce intelligence, although many who encountered her considered this to be among her most lamentable attributes.

On that bitterly cold October evening, as she made her way across London in the rain, home to Chelsea, she was troubled. She may even have muttered to herself as she walked, a deep furrow creasing her brow.

Still, while she was not beautiful or graceful or delightful in any way, while there was nothing about her that would appeal to any young admirers, much less inspire them to flattery or to acts of gallantry, there was something about her. More than one man was struck by her figure as she passed by him that evening. And once he had observed her, no man could ignore her or forget her.

But she paid none of these curious observers any mind as she walked on, through the evening and the rain, intent as she was on reaching Paradise Row.