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Emma

Written by
Alexander McCall Smith

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Emma

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For my daughters, Lucy and Emily

1

Emma Woodhouse's father was brought into this world, blinking and confused, on one of those final nail-biting days of the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was a time of sustained anxiety for anybody who read a newspaper or listened to the news on the radio, and that included his mother, Mrs Florence Woodhouse, who was anxious at the best of times and even more so at the worst. What was the point of continuing the human race when nuclear self-immolation seemed to be such a real and imminent possibility? That was the question that occurred to Florence as she was admitted to the delivery ward of a small country hospital in Norfolk. American air bases lay not far away, making that part of England a prime target; their bombers, she had heard, were on the runway, ready to take off on missions that would bring about an end that would be as swift as it was awful, a matter of sudden blinding light, of dust and of darkness. Quite understandably, though, she had other, more pressing concerns at the time, and did not come up with an answer to her own question. Or perhaps her response was the act of giving birth itself, and the embracing, through tears of joy, of the small bundle of humanity presented to her by the midwife.

There are plenty of theories – not all of them supported by evidence – that the mother's state of mind during pregnancy may affect the personality of the infant. There are also those who believe that playing Mozart to unborn children will lead to greater musicality, or reciting poetry through the mother's stomach will increase the chances of having linguistically gifted children. That anxiety may be transmitted from mother to unborn baby is an altogether more believable claim, and indeed Henry Woodhouse appeared to be proof of this. From an early age he showed himself to be a fretful child, unwilling to take the risks that other boys delighted in and always interested in the results when his mother took his temperature with the clinical thermometer given to her by the district nurse.

'Is it normal?' was one the first sentences he uttered after he had begun to speak.

'Absolutely normal,' his mother would reply. 'Ninety-eight point four. See.'

This disappointed him, and he always showed satisfaction when a doubtful reading required the insertion of the mercury bulb under his tongue a second time.

In due course this anxiety took the form of dietary fads, one after another, involving the rejection of various common foodstuffs (wheat, dairy products, and so on) and the enthusiastic embracing of rather more esoteric fare (royal jelly and malt biscuits being early favourites). These fads tended not to last long; by the time he was eighteen and ready to go to university, he was prepared to eat a normal vegetarian diet, provided it was supplemented by a pharmacopoeia of vitamin pills, omega oils, and assorted enzymes.

'My son', said his mother with a certain pride, 'is a valetudinarian.'

That sent her friends to the dictionary, which gave her additional satisfaction. To dispatch one's friends to a dictionary from time to time is one of the more sophisticated pleasures of life, but it is one that must be indulged in sparingly: to do it too often may result in accusations of having swallowed one's own dictionary, which is not a compliment, whichever way one looks at it.

Henry Woodhouse – known to most as Mr Woodhouse – did not follow the career that had been expected of generations of young Woodhouses. While his father had assumed that his son would farm – in an entirely gentlemanly way – the six hundred acres that surrounded their house, Hartfield, the young man had other plans for himself.

'I know what you expect,' he said. 'I know we've been here for the last four hundred years . . .'

'Four hundred and eighteen,' interjected his father.

'Four hundred and eighteen, then. I know that. And I'm not saying that I want to go away altogether; it's just that I want to do something else first. Then I can farm later on.'

His father sighed. 'You would be a gentleman farmer,' he said. 'You do know that, don't you?'

The young Woodhouse smiled. 'I've never quite understood that concept. What exactly is the difference between a gentleman farmer and a farmer pure and simple?'

This question was a cause of some embarrassment to the older Woodhouse. 'These matters shouldn't need to be spelled out,' he said. 'Indeed, it's not a question that one really likes to answer. And I'm surprised that you feel you need to ask it.

A gentleman farmer . . .' There was a pause, and then, 'A gentleman farmer doesn't actually farm, if you see what I mean. He doesn't do the work himself. He usually has somebody else to do it for him, unless . . .'

'Yes? Unless?'

'Unless he doesn't have the money. Then he has to do it himself.'

'Like us? We don't have the money, do we?'

'No, we don't. We did once, but not any more. And there's nothing dishonourable about that. Having no money is perfectly honourable. In fact, having no money can often be a sign of good breeding.'

'And a sign of poverty too?'

There was another sigh. 'I feel we're drawing this out somewhat. The point is that it would be a very fine thing if you chose to farm rather than to be . . . what was it you wanted to be?'

'A design engineer.'

This was greeted with silence. 'I see.'

'It's an important field. And we need to do more engineering design in this country or we'll be even more thoroughly overtaken by the Germans.' This, the young Woodhouse knew, was a fruitful line of argument to adopt with his father, who worried about the Germans and their twentieth-century lapses.

'The Germans do a lot of that sort of thing?'

'They do,' he assured his father. 'That's why they've been so successful industrially. Their cars, you know, go on virtually forever, unlike so many of our own cars that I'm afraid won't even start.'

'Engineering design,' muttered his father – and left it at that. But the argument had been won by the younger

generation, and less than a year later Mr Woodhouse was enrolled as a student of his chosen subject, happy to be independent and away from home, doing what he had always wanted to do.

It proved to be a wise choice. After graduating, Mr Woodhouse joined a small firm in Norwich that specialised in the design of medical appliances. He enjoyed his work and was appreciated by his colleagues, even if they found him unduly anxious – some even said obsessive – when it came to risk assessment in the development of products. The work was interesting, but perhaps not challenging enough for the young engineer, and in his spare time he puzzled over various drawings and prototypes of his own invention, including a new and improved valve for the liquid-nitrogen cylinders used by dermatologists. This device was to prove suitable for other applications, and once he had patented it under his own name – rather to the annoyance of the firm, who mounted an unsuccessful legal challenge – he sold a production licence to a Dutch manufacturer. This provided him with financial security – with a fortune, in fact, with which he was able to renovate Hartfield, revitalise the farm and set up his increasingly infirm parents in the gatehouse. Their ill health unfortunately robbed them of a long retirement, and within a very short time Mr Woodhouse found himself the sole owner of Hartfield.

He had married by then, and in a way that surprised people. Everyone had assumed that the only person willing to take on this rather anxious and obsessed engineer would be either a woman of great charity – and there are plenty of women who seem prepared to marry a *project husband* – or a woman whose sole interest was financial. His wife was neither of these, being

a warm and personable society beauty with a considerable private income of her own. Happily married, Mr Woodhouse enjoyed the existence of a country gentleman even if he continued with his engineering job for some years. A daughter was born in the year following their wedding – that was Isabella – and then another. This second daughter was Emma.

When Emma was five, Mrs Woodhouse died. Emma did not remember her mother. She remembered love, though, and a feeling of warmth. It was like remembering light, or the glow that sometimes persists after a light has gone out.

Had he not had the immediate responsibility of looking after two young daughters unaided, Mr Woodhouse could well have lapsed into a state of depression. With the irrationality of grief, he blamed himself for the loss of his wife. She may have died of exposure to a virulent meningeal infection as random and undetectable as any virus may be, but he still reproached himself for failing to ensure that her immune system was not in better order. If only he had insisted – and he would have had to insist most firmly – that she had followed the same regime of vitamin supplements as he did, then he believed she might have shrugged off the virus in its first exploratory forays. After all, the two of them breathed much the same air and ate the same things, so surely when she encountered the virus there was every chance that he must have done the same. In his case, however, Vitamins C and D had done their job, and if only he had persuaded her that taking fourteen pills a day was no great hardship, if one washed them down, as he always did, with breakfast orange juice . . . If only he had shown her the article from the *Sunday Times* which referred to work

done in the United States on the efficacy of that particular combination of vitamins in ensuring a good immunological response. She scoffed at some of his theories – he knew that, and took her gentle scepticism in good spirit – but one did not scoff at the *Sunday Times*. If only he had taken the whole matter more seriously then their poor little Isabella and Emma would still have their mother and he would not be a widower.

Such guilty thoughts commonly accompany grief and equally commonly disappear once the rawness of loss is assuaged. This happened with Mr Woodhouse at roughly the right stage of the grieving process; now he found himself thinking not so much of the past but of how he might cope with the future. In the immediate aftermath of his wife's death he had been inundated with offers of help from friends. He was well liked in the county because he was always supportive of local events, even if he rarely attended them. He had given generously to the appeal to raise money for a new scout hall, uncomplainingly paid his share of the cost of restoring the church roof after a gang of metal thieves had stripped it of its lead, and had cheerfully increased the value of the prize money that went with the Woodhouse Cup, a trophy instituted by his grandfather for the best ram at the local agricultural show. He never went to the local pub, but this was not taken as a sign of the standoffishness that infected some of the grander families in the neighbourhood, but as a concomitant of the eccentricity that people thought quite appropriate for a man who had, after all, invented something.

'He invented something,' one local explained to newcomers to the village. 'You don't see him about all that much – but he invented something all right. Made a ton of money from it, but

good luck to him. If you can invent something and make sure nobody pinches the idea, then you're in the money, big time.'

He was surprised – and touched – by the generosity of neighbours during those first few months after his wife's death. There was a woman from the village, Mrs Firhill, who had helped them in the house since they had returned to Hartfield, and she now took it upon herself to do the shopping for the groceries as well as to cook all the meals. But even if day-to-day requirements were met in this way, there was still a constant stream of women who called in with covered plates and casserole dishes. Every Aga within a twenty-mile radius, it seemed, was now doing its part to keep the Woodhouse family fed, and at times this led to an overcrowding of the household's two large freezers.

'It's not food they need,' remarked Mrs Firhill to a friend, 'it's somebody to tuck little Emma in at night. It's somebody to take a look in his wardrobe and chuck out some of the old clothes. It's a wife and mother, if you ask me.'

'That will come,' said the friend. 'He's only in his thirties. And he's not bad-looking in the right light.'

But Mrs Firhill, and most others who knew him, disagreed. There was a premature sense of defeat in Mr Woodhouse's demeanour – the attitude of one who had done what he wanted to do in the first fifteen years of adult life and was now destined to live out the rest of his days in quiet contemplation and worry. Besides, it would try the patience of anybody, people felt, to live with that constant talk of vitamins and preventative measures for this and that: high-cocoa-content chocolate for strokes, New Zealand green-lipped mussel oil for rheumatism, and so on. It would not be easy to live with that no matter what

the attractions of Hartfield (eleven bedrooms) and the financial ease that went with marrying its owner.

And in this assessment people were right: Mr Woodhouse had no intention of remarrying and firmly but politely rejected the dinner-party invitations that started to arrive nine months after his wife's death. Nine months was just the right interval, people felt: remarriage, it was generally agreed, should never occur within a year of losing one's spouse, which meant that the nine-month anniversary was just the right time to start positioning one's candidate for the vacancy. But what could anybody do if the man in question simply declined every invitation on the grounds that he had a prior engagement?

'There's no need to lie,' one rebuffed hostess remarked. 'There are plenty of diplomatic excuses that can be used without telling downright lies. Besides, everybody knows he has no other engagements – he never leaves that place.'

The fact that no new Mrs Woodhouse was in contemplation meant that something had to be done about arranging care for Isabella and Emma. With this in mind, he consulted a woman friend from Holt, who had a reputation for knowing where one could find whatever it was one needed, whether it was a plumber, a girl to work in the stables, a carpet layer, or even a priest.

'There's a magazine,' she said. 'It's called *The Lady*, and it's – how shall we put it? – a bit old-fashioned, in a very nice sort of way. It's the place where housekeepers and nannies advertise for jobs. There are always plenty of them. You'll find somebody.'

He took her advice, and ordered a copy of *The Lady*. And just as he had been told, at the back of the magazine there were

several pages of advertisements placed by domestic staff seeking vacancies. Discreet butlers disclosed that they were available, together with full references and criminal-record checks; trained nannies offered to care for children of all ages; and understanding companions promised to keep loneliness at bay in return for self-contained accommodation and all the usual perks.

He wondered who would still possibly require, or afford, a butler, but the fact that butlers appeared to exist suggested that there was still a need for them somewhere. It was easier to imagine the role played by 'an energetic, middle-aged couple, with clean driving licences and an interest in cooking'; they would have no difficulty in finding something, he thought, as would the 'young man prepared to do a bit of gardening and house maintenance in return for accommodation while at agricultural college'. And then, at the foot of the second page of these advertisements, there was a 'well-educated young woman (26) wishing to find a suitable situation looking after children. Prepared to travel. Non-smoker. Vegetarian.'

It was the last of these qualifications that attracted his attention. He thought it hardly necessary these days to mention that one was a non-smoker; it would be assumed that any smoking would be done discreetly and away from others, it now being such a furtive pastime. Far more significant was the vegetarianism, which indicated, in Mr Woodhouse's view, a sensible interest in nutrition. And as his eye returned to the text of the advertisement he saw that even if it was included in a column in which it was the sole entry, that column was headed 'Governesses'.

Governesses, he thought, were perhaps on the same list of endangered species as butlers. He did not know anybody who had had a governess, although he had recently read that in Korea and Japan, where ambitious families took the education of their children in such deadly earnest, the practice of hiring resident tutors to give young children a competitive edge in examinations was widespread. These people, if female, could be called governesses, and were probably no different from the governesses that British families used to inflict on their children in the past. Of course the word had a distinctly archaic ring to it, being redolent of strictness and severity, but that need not necessarily be the case. He recalled that Maria von Trapp, after all, was a governess – as well as being a former nun – and she had been anything but severe. Would this well-educated young woman (26) possibly have a guitar – just as Maria von Trapp had? He smiled at the thought. He did not think he would make a very convincing Captain von Trapp.

The advertisement referred to a box number at the offices of *The Lady* and he wrote that afternoon asking the advertiser to contact him by telephone. Two days later, she called and introduced herself. He noticed, with pleasure, her slight Scottish accent: a Scottish governess, like a Scottish doctor, inspired confidence.

'My name is Anne Taylor,' she said. 'You asked me to phone about the position of governess.'

They arranged an interview. Miss Taylor was available to travel to Norfolk at any time that was convenient to him. 'I am not currently in a situation,' she said. 'I am therefore very flexible. There are plenty of trains from Edinburgh.'

He thought for a moment before replying, reflecting on the rather formal expression *not currently in a situation*. There were plenty of people not currently in a situation, and he himself was one of them. Some were in this position because they had tried, but failed, to get a situation, and others because they had a situation but had lost it because . . . There were any number of reasons, he imagined, for losing one's situation, ranging from blameless misfortune to gross misconduct. There were even those who lost their situation because the police had caught up with them and unmasked them as fugitives on the run, as confidence tricksters, even as murderers. *Murderers*. He imagined that there were non-smoking, vegetarian murderers, just as there were nicotine-addicted carnivorous murders, although he assumed that as a general rule murderers were not regular readers of *The Lady* magazine. Murderers probably read one of the lower tabloids – if they read a newspaper at all. The lower tabloids liked to report murders and murder trials, and that, for murderers, would have been light entertainment, rather like the social columns for the rest of us.

Miss Taylor noticed the slight hesitation. She was not to know, of course, of his tendency to anxiety and the way in which this operated to set him off on a trail of worries about remote and unlikely possibilities, worrying about murderers advertising in *The Lady* being a typical example.

'Mr Woodhouse?'

'Yes, I'm still here. Sorry, I was thinking.'

'I could come at any time. Just tell me when would suit you, and I shall be there.'

'Tomorrow,' he said. 'Tomorrow afternoon.'

'I shall be there,' she said, 'once you have told me where *there* is.'

There was a delightful exactitude about the way in which she spoke, and he suspected, at that moment, that he and his daughters had found their governess.