

# Guile and Gullibility

by

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Miss Constance Possett smiled broadly to herself, a little embarrassed at her own pleasure on spying the letter that had been temporarily abandoned on the writing slope in Miss Austen's bedchamber.

A huge flutter of excitement rose up inside her at the prospect of being mentioned very specifically by name in the esteemed authoress's letter to her great friend, Miss Elizabeth 'Eliza' Snodgrass. Miss Austen had spoken many times of her great friend, Miss Eliza Snodgrass, during her surprise visit to Bickering on Sea. It seemed that the two had a close friendship indeed, and here was Miss Austen, writing in her letter of a liking for her, Constance Possett, of all people. This was an extraordinary happening indeed! She read again the extract which lay uppermost.

*"We found Bickering on Sea to be a most charming Summer resort, though it lacks proper assembly rooms. There are some seven families of note in the region, most prominent among them the Possetts. I confess I took a great liking to Miss Constance Possett, with whom I enjoyed much lively conversation over dinner at the home of her uncle, the Reverend Ronald Possett; by whose kind invitation we dined. According to our appointment, upon the following morn, she and I took a turn along the promenade, which, although short, is not without points of interest, affording as it does an excellent view of the ruins of Bickering Castle. I was greatly diverted by tales of the Castle ruins, which Miss Constance was kind enough to show to me. I must own that I pressed hard for her to do so. This once magnificent edifice predates her own delightful home of Bickering Hall by several hundred years and gives rise to many delightfully macabre tales including a thrilling headless monk. All in all, I was much enamoured of Bickering on Sea. The*

*nearby town of Squabbling on the Wold, in contrast, was a great disappointment. It claims that its cultural influences are Dutch, due to its wool trading with the Netherlands. It certainly puts one in mind of a collection of Nether Regions.”*

Constance forgot herself sufficiently to take up the missive and hug the momentarily purloined letter to her breast in utter joy. Then, remembering herself with horror, hastily replaced it, lest she crease it and leave tell-tale signs of her interference on the momentous sheet of paper. She smoothed it hurriedly on the writing slope, satisfied herself that it once again lay flat in the same position, and turned, retracing her steps to the corridor and closing the door of Miss Austen’s room firmly but silently behind her.

She was just in time to observe Miss Austen herself, ascending the staircase from the landing below. Evidently, as she was wearing her coat and outdoor gown, Miss Austen had been for a walk. At their first, wonderful, chance meeting, she had declared herself tremendously keen on walking and was wont to walk, early each morning, down to The Tides Inn on the harbour to visit her aging Aunt, Miss Millicent Frobisher.

Constance had not been able to persuade Miss Austen to bring her aunt to stay at Bickering Hall, although she herself had by this point stayed upwards of ten days. Miss Frobisher had arrived but five days earlier, Miss Austen at once explaining that she must pay her aunt a duty call at least twice a day. It was an inconvenience, as Constance had so much enjoyed the luxury of having the great authoress to herself but, being a generous hearted girl, she could not truly begrudge the elderly relative her share of Miss Austen’s wit and kind attention.

“Miss Constance!” exclaimed the great lady warmly. “Were you looking for me?” Constance declared that assuredly she was. “I rose early this fine morning and have been already to see my Aunt Frobisher, so that you and I might spend the whole morning together, should that please you.” Constance felt overwhelmed with Miss Austen’s kindness. “How delightful,” she uttered. “I have some calls to pay in the old town, and the Reverend

Baxter has asked Clarissa and me to call later for lunch. He very much asked that you join us if that would please you.”

“I should be very pleased indeed to accompany you and Miss Possett,” Miss Austen affirmed. Clarissa, being the elder sister, was of course, ‘Miss Possett’, while Constance, as the younger, must make do with ‘Miss Constance’. Miss Clarissa Possett was to be married at the end of the month to Augustus Marchmont, the third son of Lord Godfrey Marchmont of Little Mithering, and it seemed that the Reverend Baxter wished to confirm some of the arrangements. Constance was to accompany her as their dear Mamma had passed away several years before, and Papa could not be spared from his business concerns to discuss ‘female fripperies’. To have Miss Austen with them was a great social coup, as everyone in Bickering on Sea must acknowledge.

“I confess,” said Miss Austen, as the three set out together, “I wonder that your uncle, the Reverend Possett, is not to conduct the ceremony, Miss Possett. Is he not greatly put out not to be officiating?” Miss Possett smiled. “Not he, for my Uncle Possett is not overfond of performing wedding ceremonies, not for these several years. You will have noticed, when we dined with him, will you not, that he is apt now to be somewhat hard of hearing, and he declares that it is a great source of consternation to him not to be able to hear the responses of the bride and groom. Therefore, he would far rather leave the officiating to his curate, Reverend Baxter.”

Miss Austen appeared to be suppressing an answering smile. “I see,” she said, “That must be most incommodious for him.”

“For most services, it does not seem to matter,” Clarissa pronounced decidedly. “It matters very little what the congregation utters, as long as they listen.”

“And he does say that on some occasions, when the singing is not very tuneful, it can be a blessing,” added Constance. “If you happened to notice Mrs Knatchbull singing this Sunday last, you would understand.”

“Would that be the lady with the purple satin gown, splendid lace and large straw bonnet?” asked Miss Austin.

“That is she,” affirmed Constance. “A kind lady and full of good works, but sadly lacking in tunefulness.” The sisters giggled, somewhat shamefacedly.

“Perhaps I shall put her in a story,” mused Miss Austen.

“The only thing that truly puts Uncle Ronald out is that he has misplaced his silver snuffbox once again. He is also inclined to be a little forgetful these days,” Miss Possett said, frowning. “We do sometimes forget that he is not so young as he once was.”

The three fell silent as they made their way along Melus Lane towards the old town centre. They passed a pleasant morning, paying social visits to Miss Araminta Linton of Samphire Cottage, the Misses Collingford of The Red House and Mrs Morton at the Old Forge, for whom Miss Possett had brought a basket, containing freshly baked bread, calves foot jelly and a jar of honey.

Then, after hurrying back to Bickering Hall to refresh, they set off together to take luncheon with the Reverend Baxter at Curling’s Roost, a modest red brick house provided by the Parish of St Jude’s for the incumbent curate. Adam Baxter was a tall, startlingly handsome, sandy-haired young man with piercingly blue eyes and the look of a Greek statue. He had a fine Roman nose, Miss Austen noticed, and a particularly deferential manner towards Miss Constance. Miss Austin flashed him her most becoming smile as she dropped the customary curtsy, causing him to raise a finely sculpted eyebrow as he returned the formality with a slight bow.

“How charmingly appointed your sitting room is,” Miss Austen complimented him, glancing at a small water colour of a very young woman, set in a silver frame, which sat upon a card table.

“Thank you, my sister Amelia’s influence. I can take no credit.” Reverend Baxter’s voice was low, melodious and very pleasing.

“And is this she, in this fine water colour?”

“Indeed yes, although that was some years ago. Pray, do be seated, ladies,” he urged. They thanked him, and Clarissa and Constance took what appeared

to be their customary seats on an elderly but spotless and apparently comfortable chaise longue, while Miss Austen seated herself on a high-backed upright chair.

“Reverend Baxter painted that charming water colour of Miss Baxter himself,” Constance ventured, blushing slightly. So, the attraction is mutual, thought Miss Austen. She made a mental note of their looks, dress and dispositions for possible future fictional use. “What exceptional talent you have, Reverend Baxter,” quoth Miss Austen. Miss Constance’s becoming colour deepened very slightly. The Reverend waved away the compliment modestly and gazed a little distractedly at Miss Constance.

“You wished to discuss the ceremony with me, Reverend?” prompted Miss Clarissa Possett. He seemed to recall himself to the present. For some five and twenty minutes, he and Miss Possett the elder discussed the fine details of hymns, readings, prayers and procedures, while Constance and Miss Austen took a leisurely turn about the room. Miss Austen greatly admired a set of silver apostle spoons which lay upon the small piano, on which the Reverend no doubt practiced his hymn singing.

“I wonder, Miss Constance, if you have noticed the Reverend’s keen regard for you?” she whispered discreetly to the younger girl. That modest flush of colour reappeared. She opened her mouth as if to disagree, frowned, then seemed to change her mind. “Do you really believe so, Miss Austen?” She confided very quietly, “I could hardly dare to think so myself, for he is much admired and so very accomplished.”

Miss Austen smiled. “As are you, my dear Miss Constance.” She leaned forward confidentially as they glanced out on the well-ordered garden. “As you must discern, I flatter myself that I am a keen observer of people, and I observe in the Reverend more than one sign of love.”

“Really, is it truly so?”

“I must say I believe that it is. He sits discussing the forthcoming nuptial service with Miss Possett, yet he glances towards us and smiles at you more often than would suggest his full occupation with matters matrimonial – matters matrimonial for Miss Possett and Mr Marchmont at least. Indeed, I

suspect that he has matters matrimonial on his mind for someone else entirely.”

Miss Constance blushed again. The effect really was most attractive. Fortunately, it was taken in by a sweeping glance from Mr Baxter, just as Miss Austen had described, not two seconds before. Miss Constance grasped Miss Austen’s hand and did her best to look away modestly, her dark eyelashes brushing her pink cheeks.

“Courage, Miss Constance, I believe that all will be well,” urged Miss Austen.

The Reverend Baxter sighed. What a very fine woman Miss Austen is, he thought. He had, much to his father’s consternation, always been attracted to intellectual prowess in a woman. His own dear mother had been a rapacious reader who, in consequence of her studies, could converse at the dinner table on all manner of subjects, having made herself more knowledgeable and well informed than many a man of her family’s social circle. Of course, as a young girl, she had not been allowed to indulge in such pursuits but, as a married woman, her doting husband had permitted all kinds of intellectual diversions as had not interfered with the smooth running of the household. Indeed, for some years, the Reverend Stephen Baxter had enjoyed the repute of the wit and intelligence of his beloved wife, attributes which were tolerated in Branchestershire society due to her also being a great beauty.

However, some years after the birth of Amelia, she had contracted brain fever. Her constitution, doubtless weakened by such intellectual exercise as Stephen Baxter had himself permitted her, had at last given out. He blamed himself, grieving bitterly for her loss and the motherless state of their dearest Adam and Amelia. His resolve not to let Amelia strain her mental resources in the same way had led him to insist on her education consisting only of a certain prowess in pianoforte, singing, needlepoint, sketching and water colour, with a little conversational French. Indeed, he was equally anxious over Adam’s obvious intelligence, although in his case, he relied on the young man’s stronger male constitution to carry him safely through life.

But Adam had always shown a preference for intelligent women, and the elder Reverend Baxter had often sighed and prayed that his dear son did not suffer the same fate as himself, that of loving and, therefore, inevitably losing, an intellectual wife. Adam Baxter wondered idly what his father would make of an infatuation with Miss Jane Austen; a novelist, of all things, and several years older than himself, he would judge, although a handsome and charming woman without doubt.

The wedding preparations settled, lunch passed very agreeably indeed; a cold collation served by Reverend Baxter's housekeeper, Mrs Henchman. When all were replete, Reverend Baxter announced his intention of accompanying the ladies on their way as far as St Jude's, which they must pass on their return to Bickering Hall.

The afternoon was warm and sunny, and Miss Austen took great care to engage Miss Possett in conversation as they strolled, leaving Miss Constance and Mr Baxter to fall naturally into step at the rear of the party. Miss Constance could have sworn at one moment that she perceived Miss Austen winking at her. She told herself that she must have imagined it.

She wondered, not for the first time, at Miss Austen's attire in such warm weather, for the latter chose to carry a large muff and to wear a small cape, despite the mild, almost humid, air. Perhaps the rumours were true, she thought, and that Miss Austen's health was beginning to fail, causing her to feel the cold most keenly. Her modest travelling bag certainly seemed large, so as to contain more warmer clothes than might be thought usual for the time of year.

Reverend Baxter, on the other hand, was looking at Miss Constance properly for the first time, despite Miss Austen's previous ruminations, and was both surprised and pleased by what he saw. He recalled her thoughtful observations over the lunch table, her astute observations of the people of the town as communicated to Miss Austen, a stranger to the region. How clearly she had summed up and explained the tensions between Bickering and



Squabbling on the Wold, he thought. How sensitively she had commented on the afflictions besetting the poor of the parish.

He endeavoured to engage Miss Constance further in conversation and found her lively of mind and charming of speech. He swallowed hard as he noticed her exceptionally fine blue eyes.

All too soon, he found, they reached the portals of St Jude's. "Perhaps I could show you some of the church's finer points of interest, Miss Austen," he ventured, hoping to prolong the encounter. "Oh yes, Miss Austen, there are some very fine treasures," encouraged Miss Constance. Miss Austen agreed that it would be most pleasant, and the four entered the church together.

They passed a further educational quarter hour or so, the Reverend Baxter explaining the creditable influence of past generations of Possetts on the church; at which the two Miss Possetts looked appropriately demure and modest. He drew Miss Austen's attention next to the splendid Bickren tomb, in which reposed several generations of the Bickren family, whose name had been granted to the town itself, several centuries before.

Then he showed, much to her delight, the magnificent silver which reposed on the altar, a gift from Sir Edward Possett, the famous privateer who had himself been married at St Jude's and who had built Bickering Hall. She admired the filigree work greatly, causing him to feel a swell of pride. Then he drew their combined attention to the excellent altar screen, painted some sixty years earlier by Sir Norris Monkton, the well-known painter, also at the behest of the Possett Family.

"What treasures you have here," exclaimed Miss Austen, casting a meaningful eye first at Reverend Baxter, then at the altar screen, then, even more intentionally, at Miss Constance. The slightly reddening curate seemed to catch her meaning. "Indeed, I am most fortunate to serve here," he agreed, casting his own sideways glance at Miss Constance.

Miss Austen and Miss Possett exchanged glances. You catch my drift, Miss Austen seemed to say. I do indeed, Miss Possett appeared to reply silently, with a small, conspiratorial smile.

“Would you care to dine with us, this evening, Reverend Baxter?” asked Miss Possett. He beamed in reply. “Assuredly, that would give me very great pleasure. You are most kind, Miss Possett,” he uttered, barely taking his eyes from Constance. Miss Austen smiled and nodded, satisfied.

“Then we should return to the Hall,” Miss Possett announced. “There is much that I must attend to.” They filed out of the church. Just as they emerged, they came upon the Reverend Ronald Possett, who expressed his delight at meeting them so fortuitously. It seemed he was in need of spiritual discussion with Reverend Baxter.

“Dear me, I must have dropped my fan,” exclaimed Miss Austen, “and it was a gift from my mother. I must retrieve it.” With that, she slipped back inside the church, while the others engaged in brief, necessarily quite loud, conversation with the hard of hearing cleric.

“Did you find it?” asked Miss Possett, as Miss Austen emerged. She shook her head, noticeably vexed. “Ah, dear me, no, for I recalled that I lent it to my Aunt Frobisher when I called this morning. She does feel the heat so and could not place her own.”

“Then you must borrow mine, until you retrieve your own,” offered Miss Possett at once. Miss Austen attempted to wave away the offer. “No indeed, I must go and call on my Aunt Frobisher now in any case, so I can retrieve it forthwith.”

“But we are almost home, and you have a far longer walk to reach The Tides Inn in the heat of the day,” exclaimed Miss Possett. “I insist you take my fan for the journey. Then, when you return, you will have two by which to cool yourself.”

Miss Austen grasped her hand. “You are kindness itself.” Miss Possett pressed the silver and pearl handled fan into Miss Austen’s hands and the five made their farewells. The Reverend Baxter reluctantly allowed himself to be led away to the vicarage, the Misses Possett turned towards

Bickering Hall, and Miss Austen set off for the fresh breezes of the harbour and The Tides Inn.

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The Tides Inn was quiet, it being the lull after luncheon and the time when most patrons were at rest following the midday repast. Old Miss Frobisher sat on the wide sea-facing veranda, snoozing. Miss Austen looked down at her, gently removed her spectacles, set them and her unread book carefully on the small table beside her, and quietly lifted her purse.

She made her way inside the inn, up to the first floor and tapped gently on the third door on the left. It was at once opened by a sly, dark-eyed man of some six and thirty years. “Are we set, Sidney?” asked Miss Austen. He grabbed her by the elbow and hauled her roughly inside the room. “Yes, we’re set. Now what have you got today?”

For reply, Miss Austen tipped out onto the low truckle bed the contents of her capacious muff and smaller handbag. As well as three fine silk handkerchiefs, a small silver framed water colour of a young girl, six silver apostle spoons and a small golden chalice, there emerged a silver thimble, an ornate silver snuff box, two ecclesiastical silver candlesticks and a well stuffed purse. There were also a cameo brooch, a pair of mother-of-pearl hair combs, a jade ring and a string of pearls, all of which Clarissa and Constance would fail to find when dressing for dinner that evening. For good measure, she threw a silver and pearl handled fan onto the spoil heap.

“Not bad,” nodded the young man. “Whose is the purse?”  
“The old Frobisher biddy asleep on the porch.”  
Sidney drew in his breath sharply, “We’d better get going then, before she raises merry hell. She never sleeps for very long.” Their bags stood ready packed, Miss Austen having conveyed hers and entrusted it to Sidney’s safekeeping earlier that morning. “Don’t be bashful, Aggie,” he grinned.

She struck him playfully on the shoulder and set about changing her clothes, as was her usual *modus operandi* on departure from such situations. With his assistance with buttons and bows, it took no more than a few minutes. She donned a drab, inconspicuous, possibly third-hand dress of brown linen, a battered straw bonnet and a well-worn shawl that had also seen better days. Her transformation effected, they had only to take hold of their bags and descend to where the afternoon stage to Brancaster was already waiting, this being their appointed hour of departure.

“So, Aggie, where next?” It was Sidney’s habit to defer to her for planning and execution, his own expertise lying in the disposal of trinkets for pecuniary advantage in shady pawnbrokers’ establishments after the takings had been secured. Naturally, he lifted a few items here and there himself, but he would be the first to admit that he didn’t have her knack. He had always regarded her as the brains, ever since they had been in service together with the Snodgrass family, where that writer woman, that Jane Austen, often came to stay.

It had been Aggie’s idea to impersonate her, and she couldn’t half take off that posh accent – and she could read and write like a good ’un too. “Squabblin’ on the Wold for a few days, I reckon, then Branchester.” “Squabblin’ on the Wold? Ain’t that a bit close for comfort, Aggie?” She shook her head. “You might fink so, but they don’t never talk to each uvver. Bickerin’ on Sea and Squabblin’ on the Wold is sworn enemies. We won’t push it, just a couple of days and then we’ll move on.” He nodded. By the time the old biddy had awoken, they were long gone. Aggie glanced behind them out of the tiny rear window, as Bickering on Sea disappeared behind their coach in a cloud of summer dust.

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That evening, the Reverend Adam Baxter brought ill tidings to Bickering Hall. The search party for Miss Austen had been called off. She was not lying bruised and injured in some hollow, set upon by footpads. She had not twisted a delicate ankle or met with some calamitous accident.

She was not even Miss Austen, it had emerged.

Far from being her aunt, Miss Millicent Frobisher was no relation at all. Indeed, Miss Frobisher had once made the acquaintance of the real Miss Jane Austen whilst staying with her cousins in Bath, and could readily testify that the young woman whom she had seen at a distance from time to time at The Tides Inn, and who had nodded to her politely on each occasion, was most definitely not the noted authoress.

Many items of value had gone missing from the neighbourhood. At this revelation, Miss Constance had broken down in tears, confessing the loss of her mother's pearls and jade ring. Reverend Baxter had done his best to comfort her.

They were married some three months after the wedding of Miss Possett and Mr Marchmont. Their own was a simple, though charming ceremony, marked by particularly loud wedding vows, the Reverend Ronald Possett officiating. The bride and groom presented him with a silver snuff box in honour of the occasion.

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In July 1954, a trunk was discovered in the attic of Bickering Hall. The tall, broad, Eastern European gentleman who helped out in the gardens and generally assisted when brawn was required, was imposed upon to bring the trunk down to the library, and to help Miss Andrea Possett and Mrs Gladys Briggs to go through the papers contained within it.

“This letter she finds,” declared Yevgeny, indicating Andrea with a slight movement of his head. “Is hex.” Gladys looked sharply at him then across at Andrea's enraptured expression. “Not so loud,” she instructed. “...and you mean hoax.”

He shrugged. “Is obvious,” he insisted in a low whisper. “Paper and ink look contemporary genuine, this is so. But you make me to read Northanger Abbey. Is pile of rubbish, but give opportunity for clear analysis of author

sentence structure, syntax and, how you say? Turn of phrase. This not her work. Is fake. Counterfeit. Flim-flam. Is forgery – yes?”

Gladys narrowed her eyes. “Ask yourself, Yevgeny, which would we rather? That the people of Bickering on Sea get distracted about a newly discovered letter which might, or might not, be the work of Jane Austen, place it in their museum and enshrine it in their history? Or that they take a closer look at the Ice House?”

The huge man considered this very seriously.

“Miss Endrea,” he pronounced at length. “This, very great moment, yes? Most – historical.”

Andrea Possett beamed at him, nodding enthusiastically.

It would be over a decade before Gladys could persuade Yevgeny to read *Pride and Prejudice*.

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