

Dutiful and Affectionate Son

On 20 February 1786 George Canning, six weeks short of his sixteenth birthday, made the twenty mile journey from Eton to London to meet his mother, probably at her lodgings in Great Wyld Street, not far from Drury Lane. Mary Ann Hunn had come up from Exeter some three weeks earlier. There were rumours that a new theatre company was to be formed in the Capital and she had hopes of joining it. Failing that, she had her contacts with provincial managers – Norwich, Ireland and Yorkshire were all possibilities. But her first thought was to see her son. They had not met since a hurried interview at his school in Winchester almost seven years earlier. She had been pressing for a meeting for three years, but George's uncle and guardian had, until now, refused permission. Even now, he had only conceded because she might be going across the sea to Ireland. George had all along seconded his mother's requests, and was excited at the prospect of seeing her, but he was also anxious. He insisted that the meeting should be in Town; he didn't want her to come to Eton. Mary Ann too must have been apprehensive. She had assurances of his affection in his letters, but she didn't know what his uncle and aunt had told him about her. She feared his mind had been poisoned.

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The train of events that led to the separation between mother and son began a quarter of a century earlier, when George's father, also called George, quarrelled with his father, Stratford Canning of Garvagh in County Londonderry. George Canning senior was a barrister, poet and political pamphleteer, living in London, running up debts. Old Stratford Canning's property was worth £3,000 a year, but he refused to pay an allowance to a son who had rebelled against his authority and would not apply himself to the law. As the eldest son George found it easy to borrow money against his expectations, until the money-lenders heard rumours of the family quarrel. The feud was common knowledge in Dublin, and old Stratford was notoriously obstinate and unpredictable. Pursued by his creditors, George went into hiding. At last the family prevailed on Stratford to pay the debts, which he did with his usual gracelessness, imposing two ignominious conditions: George was forced to surrender his rights as eldest son to his middle brother Paul, and to take uncongenial employment as London agent for a Dublin wine-merchant. It was at this point that he met Mary Ann Costello, a penniless Irish girl of seventeen, living in London with her grandfather, a retired diplomat called Melchior Guy-Dickens. Mary Ann's mother was Melchior's daughter by his first

marriage; he also had three children by a second wife. These children were now grown up and, seeing their father's fondness for his pretty grand-daughter as a threat to their inheritance, they made repeated efforts to get her off his hands. When George came along they made no attempt to save her from an obviously imprudent marriage.

George and Mary Ann were married in 1768, when she was eighteen (or twenty-one – her mother was never able to tell her for certain whether she was born in 1747 or 1750) and he was 32. They lived in a succession of lodgings, ending up in an expensive West End house full of unpaid for furniture. Their first child, Laetitia, died in infancy, a shock that sharpened Mary Ann's interest in medical matters. After three years George died, leaving Mary Ann with a son of one year old (George, the future statesman) and another child on the way – and with a tangle of unpaid debts. Old Stratford promised a small allowance for the children, but denied having any responsibility for Mary Ann. Melchior Guy-Dickens was now senile and under the thumb of his daughter, Mary Ann's aunt, who now offered some temporary help to the young widow, but refused any long-term maintenance. Mary Ann's only support was from her brother-in-law, her husband's youngest brother, known as Stratty, who was just making his way in business in London and was also on bad terms with old Stratford.

By the summer of 1772 she had weaned her second son, Thomas, and was looking about for a means of supporting herself. She was willing to consider almost any of the limited range of options open to her, and she was not without influential friends. The friendly Duchess of Ancaster took up her case and held out the prospect of royal patronage, including employment as wet-nurse for the Queen's next child. Mary Ann believed that the King vetoed these plans out of animosity towards her dead husband who had written pamphlets attacking the Court party. An enterprising doctor spotted a gap in the market for a female dentist and offered to help her establish herself amongst his aristocratic clients, but this fell through because she had no capital. The same problem blocked another plan, for opening a school for young ladies. The Duchess had favoured the school, despite Mary Ann's protests that she had herself received no schooling and was therefore ill-qualified to teach others. Her lack of education also inhibited her from taking up another of the Duchess's suggestions, that she should revive a project of her husband's for publishing a book that would shame the Canning family into making provision for her.

Her position was becoming increasingly difficult. Stratty, who had provided business advice, emotional support and surreptitious gifts of money, was himself planning to marry. His bride-to-be, Mehitabel Patrick, though well enough disposed towards Mary Ann in her distress, was understandably jealous of the intimacy that existed between Stratty and his beautiful and interesting sister-in-law. Mehitabel saw two obvious solutions: find another husband or take a position as governess or children's nurse. Mary Ann utterly ruled out the latter option: throughout her life, no matter how desperate her circumstances, she clung to her independence. It would be an insult to her late husband and her sons to descend into servitude, however lucrative. As for marriage, she turned down an offer from Charles Phipps, the second son of Lord Mulgrave, saying that she did not approve of second marriages. Her real reason may have been less idealistic. Phipps had fallen in love after catching sight of her in a public place, just as George Canning had, and although his family seemed more friendly towards the proposal than the Cannings, she may well have been unwilling to trust the impulsive promises of another young man captivated by her beauty. Although she never admitted that her marriage to George Canning had been anything but blissful, it's clear that she had not been altogether happy with him. A clever, charming man, he had inspired the loyalty of those few who knew him well; he had taken pains to initiate his young wife into the pleasures of sexual love; but he had also been moody, domineering, peevish, obstinate and secretive – like his father – and even while he was alive Mary Ann had been glad of the more relaxed company of his kindly brother.

There was one possibility which some of her friends raised as soon as her predicament became clear, and which had hovered in the background during all the discussions about her future: a lovely woman with a good voice and a lady-like manner could surely make a living on the stage. Stratty was vehemently opposed. He and Mehitabel had no prudish disapproval of the theatre as such. They were old friends of the Sheridans, and must have known that the standing of the acting profession had improved during the reign of Garrick at Drury Lane. But still, when Sheridan married Elizabeth Linley, the foremost singer of her day, he put an end to her performing career. A woman appearing in public put her reputation at risk. It was a matter of social caste as much as morality. Mary Ann would become public property. Her face, her body and her voice would be appraised in the newspapers. Immersed in the mystery of her craft Stratty feared she would no longer be the Mary Ann he had loved. Once she entered the theatre she would be lost to him.

To prevent her taking this step Stratty was prepared to put up a very large sum to buy her a partnership in a millinery business, but Mehitabel intervened to stop him. Thereupon Mary Ann entered negotiations with David Garrick at Drury Lane, and eventually, in November 1773, she appeared opposite him as Jane Shore in Nicholas Rowe's tragedy. In one sense this role was a safe choice for her début. The play was an established favourite, most of the actors were familiar with it and the performance as a whole could be relied on to go smoothly. In another sense it was riskier. Jane Shore is a fallen woman, 'Sense and Nature's easy fool', and there was always the titillating temptation to identify the actress with the character she played, especially when she was not a professional but an unknown young lady, making her first appearance on any stage. Shortly before, a well-known courtesan had played the part and been painted in character by Joshua Reynolds. Appearing as Jane Shore underlined the risk Mary Ann was taking with her reputation.

The record of young ladies catapulted into major roles on the London stage was mixed – some sank without trace, others achieved instant success. For all his experience, David Garrick's judgement in the matter was not infallible, but he clearly thought the experiment was worth trying. The actors and writers who helped Mary Ann prepare for her ordeal (for that is what it was, stepping out for the first time in front of the huge Drury Lane audience) similarly thought she had the makings of an actress. Her initial notices were divided, but most were prepared to give her the benefit of the doubt. *Jane Shore* continued for half a dozen performances before Garrick withdrew, pleading an illness. Advising Mary Ann to seek help from one of the company and to gain experience on the provincial stage, he referred her to Samuel Reddish, one of the leading men at Drury Lane and also one of the managers of the theatre in Bristol.

Unfortunately Reddish was also extravagant, irresponsible, socially and professionally insecure, and a notorious womaniser. His succession of mistresses was known as the 'bundle of Reddishes'. Mary Ann was in awe of his genius as an actor and perhaps also impressed by his luxurious house; he was taken with her beauty and probably impressed by her genteel connections. Before long there were rumours about the two of them. Mehitabel made pointed comments. Mary Ann had made no friends among her colleagues, and nobody had warned her about the bundle of Reddishes. It was not until she had compromised herself that Reddish confessed that one of the bundle, still living, was legally married to him. As the gossip spread Mary Ann found that Reddish was her only

friend at the theatre. The prompter, William Hopkins, whose two daughters were aspiring members of the company, was a powerful enemy. After her Benefit night, which, thanks to the Duchess of Ancaster, was quite successful, Mary Ann was surprised to be told that her contract would not be renewed for the following season. She was by now pregnant.

The gossip spread outside the theatre. Her doctor, who had become a friend, heard about it and saw it as an opportunity to make her his mistress; when she refused he sent in a bill for all the medical attendance over the past three years, including the inoculation of her two boys. The upholsterer who had willingly furnished her house on credit, suddenly pressed for payment, and had her arrested for the debt. Stratty arranged matters and came to the sponging-house to have her released. They embraced. He begged her to go to France to have her baby, and leave it there, and not come back until the scandal had died down. She refused to go without her two boys; he, in the name of the Canning family, forbade her to take them. In great distress, he tore himself away from her, and never saw her again. From now on they communicated, if at all, through intermediaries. Mary Ann's sister Esther would take George and Thomas to Stratty's house in the City, reporting back on Mehitabel's ill-natured remarks; Stratty would send his business partner with messages to Mary Ann. When she went to work the summer season at Reddish's theatre in Bristol she was warned that if she tried to remove her sons from London they would be taken off her for good. She left them in the care of her mother and sister. On her return to London she found Thomas on the point of death.

She tried to separate herself from Reddish, but needed his support to get work both in Bristol and, occasionally and in the teeth of opposition from Hopkins and others, at Drury Lane. By the end of 1774 their baby had been born and christened Samuel, and she had taken the name Mrs Reddish. In addition to her sons she had to support her mother and sister, and also her father. Reddish was happy to take all this on. In return she shared his bed, comforted him in his black moods, and tried to sort out his tangled financial affairs. Although Reddish doted on George, in preference to his own son, Mary Ann was by now aware of his chronic unreliability. In 1776, to ensure George's future, after much hesitation, she agreed to hand him over to Stratty and Mehitabel, on the understanding that she would see him during his school holidays. In the event she never did see him in the holidays, at first because she was away from London, but later because Stratty would not permit it.

Later that year she made her last attempt on the London stage, in the part of Azema in a translation of Voltaire's *Semiramis*. She was not given a chance; a section of the audience hissed her from the moment she appeared throughout the performance. Some said it was no more than an over-reaction to a bad performance; others that it was a put-up job by her and Reddish's enemies. Mary Ann wrote a series of long letters to the *Morning Chronicle* giving in minute detail her side of the story. Theatrical affairs were staple fare for the newspapers, but the space devoted to the matter over a period of weeks was quite exceptional. The letters demonstrate her skill as a writer, although the relentlessly detailed self-justification and the sarcastic tone are not altogether attractive. She was ill. Her enemies claimed to see signs of insanity in her disordered appearance and in the intemperate language of her newspaper letters. Henry, her second child by Reddish, died when she could not feed him. Disgusted with the theatre she turned to writing a novel. *The Offspring of Fancy*, a short epistolary novel, contains an idealised portrait of what her life might have been if she could have married Stratty, while anatomising the different ways in which vicious or ineffectual men ruin women's lives. The several plots move at a lively pace, the characters are convincingly drawn, and the novel makes serious points about the position of women, but it's not known how well it sold, and it seems that Mary Ann was not encouraged to make a second attempt in this line.

Reddish had now quarrelled with everyone at Drury Lane and resolved to leave London, persuading Mary Ann to accompany him on a year-long Irish tour, followed by time in Scotland and in the west country, Plymouth and Exeter. Under Mary Ann's management and away from the irritations of Drury Lane, he prospered. Mary Ann too was a success, leading one to ask why she had failed so utterly in London. Undoubtedly the standard was less exacting in the provinces, and the theatres very much smaller. Perhaps Mary Ann's figure was too slight and her voice too weak for her to impose herself on the vast London audience. The one sympathetic professional comment on her acting that has come down to us is that it was more characterised by judgement than genius, which suggests that she was unable to give her roles the full emotional treatment that audiences expected. While in Dublin she gave birth to a daughter, Mary.

Back in London Reddish was given a lucrative contract at Covent Garden. Mary Ann prepared to settle down as the consort of one of the best-paid actors in Town. Reddish's Hamlet was eagerly awaited; the audience was spell-bound, applauding warmly right up until the duel

scene, where disaster struck. Laertes accidentally knocked off Hamlet's wig and the audience dissolved in laughter. The experience finally unhinged Reddish. When the time came for him to appear as Posthumus in *Cymbeline* he was still wandering in his wits and unable to leave the house. A few weeks later the doctors and the theatre gave him up and his salary stopped. At this point Mary Ann gave birth to her son Charles, but was too ill to feed him, and he would have died if not rescued by Mary's Irish nurse.

When she recovered Mary Ann fixed herself up with an engagement in Plymouth, but she and Reddish could not leave London until their debts were paid. She coaxed the invalid back into a semblance of sanity and persuaded the theatre management to permit him one last benefit night, in his favourite role of Posthumus. Colleagues from both London theatres joined together to support him, old animosities forgotten. Reddish acquitted himself well on stage (better than ever, some said) but on his way to the theatre, and even in between his scenes, he believed that he was to play not Posthumus but Romeo. It was an occasion that became part of theatrical legend. Enough was raised to settle Mary Ann's parents and sister with the children in London and to go down to Plymouth for the summer. On their way west Mary Ann had her first sight of George in almost three years when she called at his school in Winchester.

Down in Plymouth things went well, with hopes that Reddish might recover, but then his madness returned and for the first time he showed signs of violence towards Mary Ann, who was pregnant again with her last Reddish child, William. Eventually she was persuaded to hand Reddish over to the managers of the Actors' Benevolent Fund, who arranged for his incarceration in the Asylum at York, where he died in 1785. She remained in the West, where she attracted a following as the leading lady in Plymouth, Plymouth Dock and Exeter. Her admirers included several doctors and their wives, and members of the local gentry, and also a draper, Richard Hunn, a man of some substance, the son of an Alderman, a devotee of the theatre who wrote waspish reviews in the Plymouth newspapers. He was one of those who had rushed backstage to her rescue when Reddish attacked her.

In 1783 she married Hunn. Now at last she could provide for her children and leave the stage; she could discard the shameful name of Reddish and persuade Stratty that she was respectable enough to meet George. George seconded her plea, but Stratty proved himself as obdurate as his father. The baffled thirteen-year-old passed on the sickening

refusal, telling Mary Ann that Stratty had ‘expatiated’ on her bad conduct. At the same time Mary Ann learned that marriage would not bring her the respite she hoped for: Hunn hungered for the theatrical life, longed to appear in heroic parts, and had married her in order to further his ambition. He sold his shop and bought a share in the theatre, only to be swindled out of half his money. He soon lost the other half in another theatrical venture, which left Mary Ann as the sole provider. In 1785 she applied again to meet George. He had shown an interest in the theatre, probably only out of sympathy for Mary Ann’s difficulties, but nonetheless raising the fear in Stratty’s mind that she would draw him back into her life; he would not let them meet until George was worldly wise enough to resist the temptation. By 1786 Hunn had quarrelled with the theatre management in Plymouth and Exeter, which meant Mary Ann had to look for work elsewhere. She came to London and took lodgings close to Drury Lane.

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When he was six years old George had a dangerous fever and the doctor ordered his luxuriant curls to be cut off. Shortly afterwards he left the house in Bloomsbury where he lived with his mother and Reddish, his half-brother Samuel, his grandmother and his aunt Esther, and went to live in Clements Lane with his other aunt and uncle and their growing family. The Bloomsbury house may well have been uncomfortable. Mary Ann’s mother quarrelled continually with Reddish, and little Samuel’s nurse protested loudly at any favouritism shown to George. Things were probably more relaxed in Clements Lane, but just as noisy. Mehitabel was keen on boisterous games, and by 1776 there were already two little cousins. George was quiet, studious and reserved. It was a common enough thing for children to be farmed out to relatives, and it’s unlikely that anyone worried about the effect of prolonged separation from his mother. To start with Stratty and Mehitabel probably expected to honour the promise to allow Mary Ann to have George to stay for part of every year. Although Mehitabel was outspoken and thoughtless – she once referred to Samuel as a player’s brat and reprimanded George for referring to him as his brother – she was not malicious. As for Stratty, it’s impossible to tell what he thought, but he must have remembered the hold she once had on him, and this made him fear her influence on her impressionable son.

As the years passed George thought about the father who had left nothing but debts and a few unremembered volumes of poetry, and the

mother whose memory was gradually receding. He wrote to her, and kept in touch with her through Aunt Esther, who lived with her mother in London and whom he was permitted to visit. He would ask about his father's poems and about the growing family of Reddish offspring. As he watched his cousins he wished that he too could kiss his little brothers and sister. When he began to visit the theatre (in particular when staying near Norwich with another of his Canning aunts, aunt Bess, and her clergyman husband William Leigh) it prompted him to wonder still more about his mother's life, and to spin romantic stories about her. He was ill again in 1782, and this preceded another move, from the school in Winchester to Eton, where at first he was unhappy and unsettled. This may have been why he begged to see his mother, and equally may have been why Stratty forbade it. It was painful for Stratty to say no, painful to tell the thirteen-year-old that his mother had behaved badly and consulted only her own pleasure. He waited until the night before the end of the school holidays before giving his answer so that he would not have to witness George's disappointment. It was the same two years later when once more he had to tell the boy why a meeting could not yet be permitted.

Irrespective of the mystery hanging about his mother, it was hard for the nephew and ward of a not very successful City merchant to make his way amongst the sons of aristocrats and nabobs. He didn't join in games and kept himself to himself. Through talent and hard work, however, he soon began to shine, attracted devoted friends, and was marked out as a leader. But he remained unsure of himself, unsure where he belonged and where his future lay. His school-friends might encourage him to dream of politics, but the down-to-earth City men, Stratty's circle, told him to set his eyes on a solid career in the law. And then again, was he an insider or an outsider, was he Irish or English? While it was hard enough to discuss these questions, it was quite impossible to say anything at all about the deeper secret of his mother. Some of his doubts were resolved when Stratty took him to Dublin to meet the Cannings. The tyrannical Stratford was long dead, the younger brother Paul who had inherited the estate was also dead, and old Mrs Canning was keen to be reconciled with Stratty and to see the only child of her wayward eldest son. She was already paying something towards George's keep, and he was to have a small legacy when she died. He may have wondered how his father lost his right to the family property, but he accepted that it was firmly in the hands of his cousin, Paul's son, another George. There was nothing for him in Ireland. Still the visit may have encouraged a feeling that his future lay more with the comfortable, well-to-do Cannings than with his romantic

and elusive mother. At all events, Stratty now at last felt there was little danger that he would be tempted to follow his mother's career. The meeting, so long anticipated, could now take place.

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When he went to the house in Great Wyld Street George hardly knew what he would find, but he was undoubtedly expecting to meet a lady. Beyond that, his ideas were vague, based on childhood memories and ten years of romantic idealisation. In 1776, Mary Ann had been living among actors for almost three years, but she was still a pretty young lady, recognisably the grand-daughter of Melchior Guy-Dickens, of Cavendish Square, formerly ambassador the courts of Prussia, Sweden and Russia. The friend of the Duchess of Ancaster, she had looked down on Mehitabel the banker's wife from Dublin as provincial and unfashionable. Since then she had lived for ten more years amongst actors, and amongst the shopkeepers, doctors and lawyers of Plymouth and Exeter. She had worked hard, gone hungry, suffered illness and disappointment, undergone five more pregnancies. She was now a middle-aged woman, not particularly well dressed, emotional and theatrical in her manner. He had expected the simpering heroine of a theatrical print, a glamorous star like Sarah Siddons who was then at the start of her glorious career, appearing that night, as it happened, as Jane Shore at the theatre round the corner from Mary Ann's lodgings. What he found seemed more like a harridan out of Hogarth. His revulsion was extreme. Somehow he got through the interview – they spoke mainly of her prospects of finding work – and made his way back to Eton more than ever determined to keep the secret from his school-friends. It seems not to have occurred to him that he could simply repudiate her, have nothing at all to do with her – his first duty in life was to make provision for her – but if he was to make anything of himself he had to keep her at a distance, and hidden.

Mary Ann professed herself satisfied, overjoyed, with the meeting, with seeing her beloved George on the brink of manhood, and if she picked up something of what he felt she had no time to dwell on any disappointment.

The 1780s were a boom time for the provincial theatre and there were several chains of theatres owned by enterprising actor-managers, such as Charles Whitlock (Lancaster, Chester and Newcastle), Samuel Butler (Harrogate, Beverley, Ripon, Whitby, Northallerton and Richmond), and, most famous of all, Tate Wilkinson (Hull, York, Wakefield, Doncaster and Leeds). The companies of actors would progress round the circuit, taking

care to time their arrival in each town to coincide with the assizes, the race meetings or the great fairs. There were also strolling bands of players, still technically illegal, but usually tolerated by the local authorities. They might be permitted to use the established theatres at less lucrative times of the year, or else would set up a temporary stage in a tavern or barn.

When Mary Ann and her husband set out from London after the meeting with George they joined Butler's company, first at Beverley, then at Harrogate, Northallerton and Whitby. She played leading roles and hoped to make enough from her salary and benefits to pay school fees for her children (the boys in Yorkshire, Mary in Exeter). Hunn was always dissatisfied with the meagre parts entrusted to him. He quarrelled with the manager, and when Mary Ann couldn't in reason support him he quarrelled with her. Eventually they parted from Butler and were reduced to playing in barns and taverns. They were appearing on a makeshift stage in a barn in Bury, Lancashire, when the roof collapsed, killing and injuring many people. Mary Ann emerged unhurt and was soon back on the road.

At school, George read of the Bury disaster, but had as yet no idea that Mary Ann was involved. His own life was eventful enough. Old Mrs Canning died at the end of 1786 and he came into part of his legacy – most of it would have to wait until he was 21. He immediately decided to make his mother a yearly allowance of £50, but Stratty persuaded him to reduce it to £20. Six months later Stratty himself died, leaving his own and George's affairs in some disarray. George's guardians were now his uncle William Leigh, and Stratty's business partner Walter Borrowes, neither of whom could withstand his determination to allow his mother £50 a year. He left Eton in the summer of 1787 after a glorious final year in which he distinguished himself with 700 lines of Latin verse on the subject of the Restoration of Charles II (not a subject that George Canning senior would have approved of), and, more particularly, as one of the authors of *The Microcosm*. This parody of the literary reviews of the day started as a school magazine, but was so successful that it was sold to the public and numbered the king among its admirers. Before he left the school George was introduced to the king on the terrace at Windsor.

Uncertain how to proceed with his education, George consulted two family friends. Sir George Macartney, once a fellow-student of George Canning senior, was an ambitious politician, currently embroiled in complex disputes following his time in India. He received his old friend's son coldly, a humiliating experience which left an indelible impression on the young man. Richard and Eliza Sheridan were intimate with the

Cannings (a fact which Mary Ann was quick to point out when Stratty and Mehitabel objected to the theatre as a career), and Sheridan now took the young George under his wing, giving him his first taste of London life. It's not known what advice he gave, but it's possible that he was the one person to whom the boy could unburden himself about his mother – he had known her in her Drury Lane days, and had tried (or so he said) to support her in the *Semiramis* affair. Almost certainly Sheridan was among those steering George in the direction of politics. George's great gifts, his skill with words, his charm, his capacity for hard work, were already apparent, and Sheridan assumed they would be put at the disposal of his own Whig faction. Although in the event he took the opposite side in politics, George retained much gratitude and affection for Sheridan. One thing that impressed him was that, however useful Sheridan might be to his party, the contamination of the theatre kept him out of the innermost circle.

After Bury Mary Ann went to Wigan, and there she and Hunn had a lucky meeting with a former colleague from Plymouth days. Elizabeth Kemble, daughter of a large theatrical family, sister of Mrs Siddons, had started her career in Plymouth. She gave herself airs and made herself unpopular with the company, but Mary Ann, as the leading lady, and as one who knew too well the effects of professional jealousy, protected her. Now married to Charles Whitlock, and leading actress in his theatre company, Elizabeth persuaded her husband to employ Mary Ann to share with her the leading female roles, and also to take on Richard Hunn to fill any bit-parts that might come along. Gratitude may have played a part in this offer, but there was an ulterior motive. Mary Ann had compensated for the humiliating circumstances in which Elizabeth found her at Wigan by boasting about her son, his success at Eton, and his intimacy with Sheridan. Sheridan's connection with the famous Mrs Crewe (wife of the Foxite MP John Crewe) was well known – they had been lovers, and were still close political friends. The Crewes were the leading family in and around Chester, where the company was about to open for the season – their patronage would be invaluable, and couldn't Mary Ann ask George to ask Sheridan to ask Mrs Crewe to lend her name? Nothing came of this, but the following year, when the company returned to Chester from Newcastle (where Mary Ann had left her latest child, Maria, with a nurse), the Whitlocks made the same demand. This time the situation was more complicated because George himself, just about to start his second year at Oxford, was due to be a guest of the Crewes during the theatrical season in Chester. George wrote to Mrs Crewe explaining why he couldn't make the

proposed visit, and asking her directly to support his mother's benefit night. The letter must have been difficult to write. In the end Mrs Crewe refused his request, saying that in view of the coming election she had to be careful what use was made of her name. George explained all this to Mary Ann, assuring her of Mrs Crewe's sincerity, but he can have had no idea of the disastrous consequences of the refusal.

Now that it was evident that nothing could be made of Mary Ann's vaunted connections, the Whitlocks decided they could dispense with her services altogether. The company set off for Newcastle, leaving the Hunns penniless in Chester. The experience persuaded Hunn to abandon for good his theatrical ambitions. Mary Ann raised funds by selling some of her theatrical costumes and sent him down to London, telling him to borrow money from George and then go on to Bristol to find work and somewhere for them to live. She would go to Newcastle, collect baby Maria, and follow him south. But when she reached Newcastle she was ill. She had friends there who looked after her (writing to George to alert him and ask for money) but she was not well enough to travel until after her confinement – she had twins, Ann and Frederick. It was late summer before she set sail for London, with her servant and three babies. After a nine day voyage she had another meeting with George before taking the coach to Bristol.

There followed the worst period of her life, during which she was ill, neglected by her husband and anxious about her children. Her eldest child by Hunn, Richard, had been born in 1785 with a disability of some sort. Of her twelve children she had already lost three in infancy, Laetitia and Thomas Canning, and Henry Reddish. It's often said that in those days of large families and high infant mortality parents were less affected by loss than we are today, but it was not necessarily so. Letters that Mary Ann received from her Canning sister-in-law Mollie testify to the pain both women felt when their little ones died. Ever since Laetitia, Mary Ann had been acutely concerned with breast-feeding, and now she found herself too ill to do justice to her twins, while Hunn, until pressed by Mary Ann's doctor, refused to pay for nurses. He suffered under a tyrannical employer, and took out his frustration on the children, particularly on Mary Reddish who had left her school in Exeter in order to help out at home. Twice during this period George came to visit his aunt and uncle Leigh in Bath, and took the opportunity to come across to Bristol, but Mary Ann concealed from him the extent of the breakdown of her marriage. At the end of eighteen months she and Hunn reached a new

arrangement. She would go down to Plymouth, where she still had friends. The little children would be left in Bristol with nurses. Poor Richard seems to have been cared for by his father's sisters in the country. The Reddish boys were at school in Yorkshire, and Mary would go back to Mrs Moore who had agreed to take her as an apprentice teacher, if a premium of 100 guineas could be raised. Hunn himself would be out on the road as a travelling salesman. The plan was to join up the following year, but in fact they never lived together again.

Among the Plymouth friends was John Bernard, a prominent actor-manager who had taken over the Frankfort Gate theatre. Mary Ann took lodgings near the theatre (rent-free because they were said to be haunted) and agreed to appear for Bernard in the coming season. The prospect of her returning to the stage alarmed and angered George – and Hunn too, but by now nobody was taking much notice of his feelings. In a series of emotional letters George begged her to change her mind. Any line of life, he said hyperbolically, would be preferable. He was now of age and due to receive his Canning legacy, out of which he promised to pay Mary's premium. Mary Ann gave in and promised not to perform again. Was the hundred guineas a bribe? George did not say it was conditional on her acceding to his wishes, but perhaps it didn't need to be said in so many words. On the other hand, perhaps she was threatening him. Was her plan to return to the stage no more than an attempt to pressurise him, or Hunn, by drawing attention to her desperate situation? Although the position Bernard was offering her was less arduous than her northern labours, she may not have been particularly keen, at the age of 41, to go back to her career, if she could avoid it. Because of delays in getting his money from Ireland Mrs Moore accepted George's promise to pay at a later date. Influenced perhaps by what he had heard about his father's chaotic affairs he felt there was something shady about this; he only reluctantly accepted Walter Borrowes's assurance that it was everyday business practice.

Having now persuaded his mother to give up her profession George felt that what had before been a general obligation to care for her had now become a strict contract; providing for her was to be his first consideration in life. He applied himself assiduously to his legal studies, and found employment devilling for one of the barristers representing the government in its action against so-called subversion and treason. But at the same time he still hankered after politics. Through Walter Borrowes and Mehitabel's brother Paul Patrick he had contacts among the Irish community in London, which was on the whole politically radical. He

used to attend their meetings, mainly as an opportunity to practise public speaking. He attracted attention as something of a radical himself.

The winter of 1792/93 saw Mary Ann once more in London, living with her mother in Somerstown. Apart from caring for her mother, her main business was to settle the future of young Charles Reddish, and to try to reach a new accommodation with her husband. Charles was happy in his school in Yorkshire, but was costing his mother £16 a year; at fourteen he was old enough to leave and learn a trade. An old acquaintance called Morton, a coachmaker, agreed to take him on, but was dilatory in finalising the arrangement, forcing Mary Ann to come repeatedly to his house in the evenings to discuss matters, which meant she had to walk home through the dark, damp, wintry streets. The only thing that cheered her during this dismal season was Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which she read with enthusiasm and joy, for the dignity to which, she said, Wollstonecraft had raised the female sex. In the end Charles was taken on by Morton. Since Samuel had already left school and joined the army, and Mary was happily settled with Mrs Moore, the only one of Reddish's children to be provided for was William, who was still at Mr Milner's school in Yorkshire. Milner was owed substantial sums in unpaid fees for the three boys.

Something that happened at Morton's house highlights the ambiguities of Mary Ann's situation. A clergyman who met her there was puzzled that such an educated woman should want to make her son a coachmaker. Was she or was she not a lady? When Morton explained something of Mary Ann's past the clergyman felt emboldened to offer her a post as companion to the daughters of a wealthy widower. The terms were very attractive, promising an income for life, but she still refused, as she had twenty years earlier, to become a servant of any sort. The clergyman had misread the signs; in her own mind she was unquestionably a lady.

As for Hunn, he had fulfilled none of his undertakings, but as he blamed this on the dishonesty of his Bristol employer there was some hope that things would improve now that he had found a new position. He refused to come to London (perhaps fearing that he would be confronted by George) and made Mary Ann go to Guildford to meet him. There he agreed to a quite generous settlement for her and their four children. They also discussed a new venture. Mary Ann's father had passed on a recipe for an eye ointment, which she had been using on her own eyes with, she thought, beneficial results. She now proposed to manufacture and sell this ointment, and Hunn agreed to collaborate. He told her to enter

negotiations with an established seller of patent medicines, a London printer called Francis Newbery. Hunn later had doubts about the enterprise, but Mary Ann and Newbery forged ahead. As for the money Hunn had promised Mary Ann over the next three years, he sent one instalment, but then nothing more.

George meanwhile had come to a decision. He could not afford to enter politics on the Whig side, because the Whigs were divided and unlikely to achieve power, and while it was all right for a rich man like Charles James Fox to spend his life in opposition, a poor, friendless man could only think of a political career if there was a good chance of paid office. He therefore sent out feelers in the direction of the Prime Minister, William Pitt, and Pitt, seeing him as a young man of great promise, granted him a secret interview. This abandonment of the radical Whig principles which he had hitherto espoused would never be forgotten and the word *tergiversation* was to pursue him throughout his career, but his decision was not based entirely on mercenary considerations. His legal work had given him a glimpse, as he thought, of a whole network of seditious and treasonable activists. In fact these were merely associations calling for constitutional reform, but George accepted the government's interpretation that they were seeking to import the French Revolution into Britain. His own contacts with the radicals had also alarmed him. He held discussions with William Godwin, who had been impressed by his speeches at the Irish Club and foresaw a prominent position for him in a democratic future. Thinking that Godwin was trying to lure him into supporting violent revolution, George concluded that Pitt's policies, suppression of dissent and resistance to France, were entirely justified. The upshot was that Pitt, regarding him as a valuable acquisition for the government, offered to find him a seat in Parliament.

In 1793, just as Mary Ann was holding her discussions over the ointment with Francis Newbery, George was returned as member for the rotten borough of Newtown in the Isle of Wight. Mary Ann was ecstatic at the news, but it gave rise to the first serious quarrel between her and George, inaugurating more than a decade of misunderstanding and ill-feeling. Newbery, always alert for opportunities for publicity, saw that something could be made of the emergence of George as Pitt's protégé and the newest arrival in Parliament. When, he asked, would Mary Ann be acknowledged as the mother of George Canning, MP? Mary Ann, perhaps thoughtlessly, or perhaps deliberately, hoping to push him into an answer, related this conversation to George. His response was immediate and

staggering. Never, never would he publicly acknowledge her or receive her in his home. He would always be her dutiful and affectionate son (as he signed every one of his letters throughout her life) and he would do everything he could for her comfort, but there was to be no mixing of families. These were, she said, the first bitter words he had ever written to her.

He believed that he had laid down, once and for all, the terms on which they were to live. He thought he had made himself absolutely clear, but in fact his words had been awkward and vague, understandably so in view of the delicacy of the situation. Over the following weeks, shocked by the pain he had inflicted, he blurred things still more by showering kindness upon her, asking after her ailing mother, asking how Charles was getting on at the coachmaker's, sending her gifts of money and linen, and even offering encouragement for the ointment enterprise – he suggested the name under which it was to be marketed, Costello's Collyrium. The business received a serious setback when Newbery, finding himself deceived over the connection between Mary Ann and the political prodigy of the moment, withdrew his support. Once again George saw that he had interfered with his mother's efforts to earn a living; his obligation to provide for her was reinforced.

The next year, 1794, saw George making his maiden speech and advancing in his intimacy with Pitt. The relationship between these two was unusually close. They were both of them intelligent, hard-working and honest, in a political class where these virtues were rare. They drew roughly the same line between principle and pragmatism: they believed in liberty but saw a need to curtail it fiercely in the name of suppressing subversion; they believed in the abolition of slavery, but accepted that it could not be achieved in the current crisis; and the same policy of 'not possible yet' applied to the vexed question of Catholic emancipation. There were those in the Tory Party who resented Canning, the man from nowhere who flaunted his intimacy with the great leader. Up until now George's only confidants had been Bess and William Leigh, and he continued to write regularly to them for the next fifteen or twenty years, but he now began to acquire political friends, including Charles Ellis, a wealthy, modest, gentle, generous and unambitious man, who was also one of the most extensive slave-owners. Making light of their disagreement over slavery, he and George became very close. Ellis said that the only reason he remained in Parliament was to be useful to George.

At the end of 1795, after some prompting, Pitt kept his promise of finding a Government post for George, appointing him under-secretary at the Foreign Office, where he would have not only a salary but an opportunity to work furiously hard and gain experience and reputation. Hitherto George had told no-one outside the family about Mary Ann, partly for fear they would think he was angling for financial help. Now he had a salary of his own, and also a friend in Charles Ellis whose discretion and understanding he could trust, and so could relieve himself of the burden of secrecy. Ellis pointed out that George's salary was not secure, and offered to provide Mary Ann with an annuity. George could not accept this, but having yet again deprived Mary Ann of an income, he felt his own obligation still more acutely. He took the problem to Pitt, who undertook to arrange a pension for Mary Ann when George left the Foreign Office.

Meanwhile George was in constant contact with Mary Ann. He condoled with her over the over loss, in 1794, of two of her children, William and Ann. William died at school in Yorkshire, well cared for, it seems, by Mr Milner and his wife who were encouraged to be kind by a small sum of money that George sent them. Ann's death was accompanied by some unspecified cruelty – she was probably living with Hunn's sisters when she died, and perhaps they excluded Mary Ann from the funeral. Mary Ann's mother died early in 1795, and George was present at her deathbed, reluctantly dining with his mother after the funeral. All through the 1790s he was plagued, as he put it, by the problems posed by her unsatisfactory husband, her remaining children, and most difficult of all, the question of where she should live. Hunn refused a lucrative post in the West Indies, so George eventually found him a sinecure at home on condition that he agreed terms of separation. Samuel Reddish had joined the army and in 1794 went to Botany Bay as part of the guard on the convict ship *Surprize* – his prisoners included the political prisoners Thomas Muir and Thomas Fyssh Palmer. Samuel was dissatisfied with his lot and George tried, not very hard and without success, to secure promotion for him. By the time he came home and left the army George had sufficient pull to have him appointed as a tax collector in the West Indies.

The necessity, from George's point of view, of getting Mary Ann's family out of the country was highlighted by the case of Charles Reddish. He left Morton's in disgrace, and Walter Borrowes and Mehitabel's brother Paul Patrick found a number of alternative positions, all of which he tried but soon gave up. At the outset George was sympathetic, making excuses for

him when he fell out with his employers, but he soon lost patience. He was an irritating boy. He suffered from fits and refused to take his medicine. He would drop in unannounced on George at his lodgings, was at once slovenly and extravagant in his dress, wrote him illegible letters about nothing just for the pleasure of directing to *George Canning MP*, and encouraged all his friends to take advantage of George's right, as an MP, to free postage. Then George detected him in telling lies. But the root of the problem was that he wanted to go on the stage, which on no account would George allow. George would do anything to prevent this, even to the extent of asking a close political colleague for a favour in order to procure a commission in the Indian army. It was a post for which Charles was physically and temperamentally unsuited, but never mind, it was a long way away, and he was unlikely ever to come back. Charles Reddish is the saddest figure in all this story. As a child he knew that his mother didn't love him as she loved George; as a young man his ambitions were thwarted because George had a horror of the theatre. He was shipped abroad just because it was inconvenient for George to have him in London.

The problems of Hunn and the Reddish boys dragged on and on, but the longest-running plague was the matter of where Mary Ann should live. Once her mother had died and Aunt Esther was married (to a Plymouth man, Joseph Murch) George could see no reason for Mary Ann to stay in London. She spent much of the time down in Devonshire, but she would keep coming to Town, often with an excuse of some sort, but in fact, he suspected, simply in order to see him. He objected to this, partly because of the potential for embarrassment, but also because he found their meetings painful. He had not go over the shock of that first encounter in 1786. In the end he proposed a compromise. In one of the suburban villages around London he would be able see her more often and more easily than in Plymouth, and more discreetly than in her usual London haunts, near the theatres or in Bloomsbury or Grays Inn Road. He therefore commissioned Walter Borrowes to find somewhere suitable, and he came up with a house in the village of Totteridge, near Barnet. She and Mary moved in with high hopes at the beginning of 1798, but almost at once she discovered the difficulties of housekeeping in a place where there were no shops. Her social position too was awkward. Those she considered her equals tended to have liveried servants, which she could not afford, and in a place where nice social distinctions were closely observed the ambiguity of her status made people wary of her. George spent one night under her roof; she kept the pillow he slept on as a relic, declaring that she hoped to die upon it – precisely the sort of emotional

extravagance that he most disliked. Within a year what he called the Totteridge experiment had ended amid mutual recriminations. She believed that he had placed her in a house and a village that were beyond her means intentionally in order to demonstrate that it was impossible for her to live near London; he believed that she had been discontented because she could never be satisfied, because she always wanted him to give her more and yet more of his time. They were both right.

When she left Totteridge she did not go straight down to Devonshire as he hoped but returned to Bloomsbury, where she stayed for almost six months. In the end he had to speak very roughly to get her to move – more bitter words which she did not forget. As always, his subsequent letters were propitiatory: he sent a note for Mary, whom he had met at Totteridge and towards whom he said he felt almost brotherly, he described his efforts to complete Hunn's business, and he asked for advice on the best way of applying the eye ointment. He was also soon able to give her the first news of the pension.

George's affairs were moving forward. No longer a hard-working under-secretary, he had become a Commissioner at the India Board, a less onerous position, giving him more scope for speaking on a range of issues in support of the government. It gave him time to think of marriage. His first choice was a beautiful Irish girl called Miss Newenham, but her family was involved in the Irish rebellion, so he dropped her. He then became embroiled with a married woman (according to some it was not just any married woman, but the Princess of Wales) but he extricated himself before he had compromised himself. Then, with some encouragement from Pitt, George fell in love with Joan Scott, youngest daughter of the late General Scott of Balcomie, in his time the richest commoner in Scotland. She had a fortune put at £100,000, and was the sister of the Marchioness of Titchfield, and yet was not too grand, her father having been a somewhat disreputable figure whose fortune was said to have been based on gambling, although it's likely that much of it came in bribes from his Edinburgh associate Lawrence Dundas. The Marquis of Titchfield didn't think much of George as a husband for his sister-in-law, but he could not hold out against the various forces pushing for the marriage – Pitt, the Princess of Wales, Henry Dundas and his wife Lady Jane, and Joan herself, who was very determined. In the course of the negotiations George wrote a detailed account of his resources and prospects, and included a frank discussion of his relationship with his mother. He described the shock of the encounter of 1786, and said categorically that

Mary Ann's immoral behaviour made her unfit to mix with his wife and family. He would never disavow his connection with her or fail in his duty towards her, but it was between the two of them alone. He admitted no relationship with her illegitimate children, and there would be no connection between her and his wife.

All through the 1790s Mary Ann had accepted that George had no home for her to visit – he was a bachelor in chambers who himself spent most of his free time visiting his friends in their country houses – but she had assumed that once he settled down with a wife she would find a place at his hearth-side. Since the explosion over Newbery she understood that she would not be invited to grand social occasions, but surely, in private, she would be made welcome. At the time of the wedding (conducted by William Leigh, and witnessed by Pitt and George's friend John Frere) Mary Ann wrote to Joan, and received a frostily correct reply in which Joan said she understood the reasons why they could not meet. When Joan was expecting her first child Mary Ann tried again, bombarding her with advice, but receiving another cool response. Mary Ann read her fate in these chilling letters.

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George had despatched Mary Ann down to Exeter in order to avoid trouble, but in the event it was something that happened in Devonshire that precipitated the most serious threat to his peace of mind, and the most furious of all their quarrels. Mary Reddish, who used the surname Hunn, was twenty-one when she stayed with Mary Ann in Totteridge. She was shy and suffered from poor health. She did not strike George as likely to cause him any embarrassment. At Totteridge she received an offer of marriage from a struggling barrister and businessman called Richard Thompson. The last thing George wanted was to have another man in the family looking to him for advancement, so he was pleased when Mary declined the offer. She had no apparent wish to be married, and it therefore came as a shock when, down in Exeter, she fell in love. The object of her affection was a young naval officer called Edward Parker. He came from a distinguished county and naval family, and was aide de camp to Nelson. His family did not approve of the match, but Edward seemed inclined to persist. All this would have mattered less to George had it not been that all the correspondence with Captain Parker passed through his hands, because all Mary Ann's letters came to him to be franked. This had the advantage that he was able to monitor what was being said, but the disadvantage that anything that was sent to Parker would appear to have

his approval. In conducting his own love affair George had gone out of his way to do nothing underhand, had even annoyed Joan by refusing to apply what he thought was unfair pressure on the Titchfields, but now his mother was involving him in an attempt to deceive and cajole young Captain Parker and his family. The deception, he feared, was threefold: first she was passing off Mary as Hunn's daughter and so hiding her illegitimacy; then she led the Captain to believe that Mary was received by George in his home; and thirdly she suggested that she could use her influence with George to advance his career. Hesitating to dwell on the painful facts of Mary's birth and her exclusion from his home, George concentrated his anger on the third point. He sent back the letter in which she hinted that he could use influence on Captain Parker's behalf ordering her to re-write it. She inserted a warning that the Captain should understand that she was not promising anything, but this, George thundered, only made it worse, because it implied that she could promise if she wanted to.

As a favourite of Lord Nelson Edward Parker probably had little need of George's assistance. The whole affair fizzled out. Mary wrote a dignified letter which George approved and sent on to him. Within less than a year Parker was dead, a national hero, fatally wounded in the ill-fated raid on Boulogne. Mary Ann reflected that Mary was fortunate not to find herself a widow.

George's fury seems disproportionate. He was conscious of his weak position when it came to patronage. Outsiders saw him as a government insider and supposed him capable of producing jobs and other favours on demand, but he knew that things did not work that way. Patronage was a complex system of give and take with its rules and conventions. A poor man, with no powerful friends to call on, if George wanted a favour he had to beg for it. He had nothing to trade. He forced himself to seek favours for the Reddish boys, but he was always angry when Mary Ann pushed him too far or asked him to do the same for her friends. She loved to talk about George, reminding everyone who would listen how devoted he was to her, and this inevitably prompted them to ask her to ask him to fix them up with a job or a pension – or even to vote a certain way in Parliament. She never learned not to pass on these requests, and inevitably they would trigger an outburst of anger. He said he found her solicitations on behalf of friends painful because he couldn't explain and justify his refusal without divulging the secrets of his always fluctuating relationships with political colleagues.

But in fact the problem went deeper. Throughout his career George was exceptionally careful about his reputation. Sensitivity on points of honour was a feature of politicians at the time – hence the number of duels that they fought – but he was particularly sensitive because, he said, he had no claim on the loyalty of his supporters except his ‘character’. If his honour was impugned or his motives questioned he would counter-attack unmercifully, and indulge in pedantic self-justification, all of which inflamed his enemies and increased still further his reputation for deviousness. His attitude is understandable. A poor man in politics was particularly likely to be suspected of corruption, and Mary Ann’s pension was never forgotten by his enemies amongst the radicals in the streets, while within Parliament his subtle and flexible approach to complex problems led bluff Tories to denounce him as an opportunist. The manner in which he had entered politics left him open to accusations of disloyalty and betrayal. Nonetheless, there are episodes in his career when his squeamishness seems not entirely rational, and where it’s tempting to see the effect of his early insecurity and uncertainty about his origins and identity. His mother was a flaw in his armour, and he never knew when his enemies might find it and wound him through her.

His anger over the Parker affair passed. Almost immediately he was plunged into a political crisis which resulted in the first setback in his career, when the government fell and he followed Pitt into opposition. But Mary Ann, having no such distraction, fell into a deep depression. She felt the breach with George was irreparable, and blamed his grand marriage. In his anxiety to distance himself from the Parker negotiations he had given her the impression that he wanted to wash his hands of her affairs altogether. She declared that she would bury herself in the country and have nothing more to do with him. Mary feared her mother would die, and she blamed herself for the whole business. When Richard Thompson renewed his offer she felt obliged to accept, not because she wanted to be married but because she hoped it would please George and Mary Ann. George was pleased enough with the match. Thompson seemed to be prospering, and it would be useful to have a sensible man on hand to deal with Mary Ann’s business affairs – Walter Borrowes would not be around for ever. Mary Ann too was glad to have another of her children taken care of. The disabled Richard having died about this time, she now had only Maria and Frederick on her hands. Frederick, who was still at school, caused a minor irritation by sending George an obscene anonymous letter.

Thompson's business interests were all in London. Mary Ann now had an excuse for staying permanently in Town, at first with Mary in Millbanke Row, and then (despite George's clear wish that she should go back to Devonshire) just round the corner in Tufton Street. As always George tried to efface the unpleasantness with kindness, which expressed itself in enthusiastic use of the ointment on his over-worked eyes, but his irritation at her presence in London was obvious. The arguments went on and on. He now had two little boys, and Mary Ann was determined to see them, to enjoy what she called 'the Embrace of Nature'. He said she could not meet his family; she said that he had changed towards her, growing cold and arrogant following his rise in the world; he said no, it was consistent with the rule he had laid down back in 1793 at the time of the Newbery affair. He always tried to explain his attitude in terms of the world's prejudice against the theatre, but when she pressed him too hard he had to refer to the real reason: that she had forfeited her right to be part of his family by the immorality of her liaison with Reddish. In the end, around the time of her birthday in January 1803, he snapped and declared he would not allow her to 'contaminate' his wife. In response she shut herself away and determined to write her life story, to show that she had been a victim of circumstances and had done nothing that justified such a word.

Her account, which runs to some 65,000 words, is one of the two main sources for the story told here (the other being the 2,000 or so letters that George wrote to her between 1780 and the day of her death in March 1827). She describes her childhood in Dublin, her time with her grandfather in London, her marriage to George Canning, her widowhood, the cruelty of the Canning family, her alienation from Stratty, and the steps that led inevitably to her going on the stage. She describes with gusto and some fascinating detail the phases of her theatrical career – London, Ireland, Plymouth, the North. She sometimes blurs the sequence of events, and she never admits that she wanted to be an actress, insisting that she only took it up because she was left with no alternative. While biographers of Canning represent her in a series of caricatures – first the pretty girl trying her luck on the stage, then the middle-aged battle-axe embarrassing the rising politician and always demanding more attention and more money, and finally the old woman babbling over the tea-cups about her famous son – Mary Ann's own account offers another stereotype, the victimised woman in a hostile world.

She was obliged to take this negative view of the matter so as not to offend George's prejudices, but it does not do her justice. Undoubtedly she

was a victim, a powerless woman in a masculine world, struggling against prejudice, legal restrictions and lack of education. But she was also an energetic, enterprising, intelligent and, it must be admitted, often unscrupulous woman. In Mary Wollstonecraft's words, she was 'raised to heroism ... by the misfortunes of widowhood'. She won't say it explicitly, but her account makes it clear that she found satisfaction in the theatre not only because it gave her a measure of independence, but also because of the scope it gave for developing and exercising her talents in a valuable profession. An acute observer of a later generation, Florence Nightingale, wrote that women were attracted to acting not for the glamour and fame, but because it was one of the few fields open to them that offered opportunities to learn from their mistakes and progressively improve and expand their mental skills. After sixteen years labour Mary Ann may well have been pleased to give up, but at the outset she undoubtedly had positive reasons for making her choice. The glamour and flattering attention of the great Garrick may well have entered into it, but there was also the intellectual and physical excitement and challenge of the work.

She had to be even more cautious and negative over her affair with Reddish. The only good things she says about him are that while she was living with him he didn't drink or chase other women, that he was a man of great talent, and that he always preferred George to his own unfortunate and neglected children. He was kind to her in her misfortunes, deferred to her on practical matters, and protected her from the hostility of colleagues – he also seduced her and led her to think he would marry her. There's no room in her account for talk of love, no admission that she was sexually attracted, or that she derived any pleasure from the affair. Given the purpose of her account it could hardly be otherwise. She is, in any case, writing as a woman of 53 with her eleven pregnancies well behind her, who has forgotten or de-valued the feelings of her 24-year-old self. And how could she have expressed herself differently? She might have used the language of *Jane Shore* where the seduced woman is described as 'Sense and Nature's easy Fool'. Less pejoratively, she might have written, as Mary Wollstonecraft does, of a girl giving in to the impulse of her sincere and affectionate nature, and then, as a woman, honestly and loyally standing by the man who is the father of her children.

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George was intimidated by the thickness of the packet containing Mary Ann's account. He read it, eventually, in the course of a solitary journey to Welbeck Abbey, where Joan was visiting her sister the Marchioness. He

was shocked to learn the extent of her sufferings and said that what he had read had not diminished his affection for her – not a great response to the effort and emotion she had put into the writing. He sent her a more detailed response later, and it was her turn to be afraid to open it, and when she had read it he made her return it so that it could be destroyed. There was no immediate result, but the following year, in great secrecy, with all the servants except the cook sent on ahead to the country, there was a carefully orchestrated exchange of visits. He, Joan and the eldest child, little Georgey, walked across the Park to Tufton Street, and the next day Mary Ann, Mary and Richard Thompson paid a return visit to Somerset House, where they saw all the children, three of them now, with the birth of Harriet that year. It's not clear why George changed his mind. There was a strange atmosphere of excitement that summer, with an extreme heat-wave and a succession of invasion scares – perhaps this put matters in a new perspective. Or perhaps Joan was more down-to-earth and level headed than he expected and told him not to make so much fuss. He probably hoped that the concession would persuade Mary Ann to give in and leave Town. If so he was disappointed. But nothing terrible happened: the story did not leak out, and Mary Ann, although she stayed put, did not press for further concessions.

As she stayed and stayed his tactics became more cruel. He suspected that she had not told Richard Thompson the whole truth, in particular had not told him that Mary was illegitimate. It's likely that Thompson had worked it out for himself, and he probably would not have been particularly bothered about it anyway, but Mary Ann could not have been sure of this, and for Mary's sake she must have wanted to avoid having matter dragged into the open. Counting on some such sensitivity as this, George made an explicit threat. If she stayed on in Town it would become obvious that she was not received in his home. If she lived in the country this fact could be glossed over, but so long as she was in London it would be noticed and commented upon, by people in general, and by Thompson and his relations in particular. So far he had allowed her to insinuate that her exclusion, the non-mixing of families, was due to his pride in his exalted position, but if she continued to give this impression he would not hesitate to contradict it, and tell people the real reason. The threat worked. In 1805 the visits of the previous summer were repeated, and shortly afterwards she left London, and in 1807 settled in Bath, where she remained for twenty years until her death.

So George had won, as he was bound to, because he held all the cards. He could have won more easily if he had been more callous, but for all his faults he was not a callous man. He wanted to do right in an impossible situation which, as he repeatedly insisted, was not of his making, which had been created before he was born. He signed every letter as 'ever my dear Mother's Dutiful and Affectionate Son', and that was what he aspired to be. But affection was difficult. It took many years to forget the revulsion of 1786 and it was not until thirty years later that he was willing for people from his own circle to know about her and see her. He visited her, wrote to her, and provided for her and her family – wasn't that affection enough? But she felt it was only done out of duty, cold duty. The conflict between them comes down to their different understanding of these two terms, duty and affection. For him, affection is dictated and circumscribed by duty; for her, duty should be enlarged by affection.

Her writings are full of invocations of Nature. Sometimes they read like empty rhetoric, but sometimes there is more to it. It's a lesson she learned from George's father. In one of his letters written during their courtship he rebukes her for having said, like a good eighteenth century girl, that she will love him according to his deserts. No, he protested, love cannot be measured, it is nothing if it's not a spontaneous feeling that flows between two sympathetic hearts. She demanded many things from George at one time or another, she gloried in having such a son, but through it all what she really wanted was the spontaneous love of a child for his mother. She was always on the look out for signs of it, even when the tension between them was at its worst – for example one day when he stayed with her an extra hour, and seemed to enjoy it.

In Bath Mary Ann soon had a circle of friends, including several of the city's doctors, and she kept in touch with the theatre. She was known for her habit of talking too much about George. He wrote to her almost every week, even when he was abroad, and visited her about once a year. He still kept an eye on her correspondence, and rebuked her now and then for unsuitable friendships. She continued to anger him by passing on requests for patronage, but when she sought help for herself or her children he always did what he could. Frederick Hunn joined the Navy and pestered him to interfere in his disputes with the Admiralty. When Charles Reddish died leaving an orphan daughter George arranged for her upkeep and set up a fund to provide a dowry – on condition that she stayed in India. Most of this he did for Mary Ann's sake, but there were two members of the family he seems to have liked for themselves, Mary

and Aunt Esther. After her husband's death Mary lived most of the time with Mary Ann. She remained timid, and latterly suffered some crippling illness. George once warned his mother to deal more gently with her. Aunt Esther settled in Cullompton where her husband kept a bookshop. She went on and on, always available to look after children or nurse the sick. In 1823 George was made a Freeman of Plymouth. On his way down for the ceremony he and Joan and Harriet stopped in Bath to see Mary Ann, and as they made their way across Devonshire he called on Aunt Esther and bought a copy of Crabbe's poems. She is a largely silent character in the story, only two of her letters having survived, one of them an extraordinary outpouring of joy as she told Mary Ann all about George's visit.

Mary Ann died in March 1827. She may have been told of the stroke suffered by Lord Liverpool the prime minister, and the thought may have passed through her mind that now at last her son would reach the position he had so long deserved, but she didn't live to see it happen. After prolonged negotiations George became prime minister, but within months he too was dead.

His last five years, his second spell as foreign secretary, were his years of greatest triumph. They were also years of weariness, ill-health and depression. He knew he had achieved less than he might have done, and that it was largely his own doing. In these last years a new tenderness seems to creep into his feelings for his mother. If she had made bad decisions in her life, why, had he not done the same? His letters are still just short notes scribbled to catch the post at the end of the week, his pen worn down and his hand shaking with fatigue, but his assurance that he is her dutiful and affectionate son seems more whole-hearted than in the past. Now, far from dreading their meetings he seems positively to look forward to them. Perhaps most telling of all, far from keeping his feelings for her a guilty secret, when once or twice an attack of gout in his writing knuckle made him unable to hold a pen he got his secretary or Joan to write to her on his behalf. An epilogue to *Jane Shore* bids the audience, 'Be kind at last and pity poor Jane Shore.' George is kind at last – or so one hopes, for his own sake as much as hers.

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We should certainly think more highly of George Canning if he had achieved this kindness sooner. It was an appalling thing to tell his mother that contact with her would contaminate his wife – and all for a lapse

committed thirty years before. It's hypocritical too, because he and his wife mixed happily with men who had fathered bastards, and even with those women whose wealth and high birth made one forget their lapses. Could he have done otherwise? And was he motivated by concern for his public reputation and pride in his exalted social position? He sometimes lets it appear that he was afraid of the world's prejudice against the theatre, but he emphasised this aspect of the situation largely because it was less painful to blame her for being an actress than for being immoral. If she had never fallen into bed with Reddish all his social and moral qualms about the acting profession would still have made him keen to keep her out of the public eye, but he would have approached the matter more calmly. There would not have been the hysterical note that is suggested by the word *contamination*. His letters to her are in general witty, detached, down-to-earth, sensible, using irony and banter to keep her at bay, but he was less cool, less in control, than he seems. The shocks he received as an adolescent, Stratty's expatiation on Mary Ann's bad character, and then the traumatic meeting of 1786, left their mark.

As for Mary Ann, she wrote this to a friend in 1814: 'When I run up the account of a most eventful life I find the balance of good predominate, for George Canning is my son.' We might object to this on two grounds. First of all it shows a sort of monomania, which undoubtedly blighted the lives of her other children. Secondly it is a verdict which does not do her justice. We can see why she said it. Her intense, exclusive love for George did not date only from the days of his success, but went back right to his infancy. He was her first boy child, and was all that remained to her of the husband who had swept her off her feet and initiated her into the joys of sexual passion. And to have a son like George Canning was a triumph; there was nothing in her life to match it. But still we should not allow motherhood, even glorious motherhood, to eclipse everything else. She may not have been a great actress, but she learned the craft thoroughly and made a living by it for sixteen difficult years. She produced just one novel, but in it, as in her brilliant memoirs, she showed herself to be a highly intelligent woman, with a gift for writing, well read in the English classics and conversant with the advanced ideas of her day. Her business activity, the Collyrium enterprise, was not a runaway success, but it reflected an interest in science and medicine which went right back to her youth in Dublin. She build up a network of agents at home and abroad, and her products remained on the market for years after her death. All in all, she was a remarkable woman. She was also a woman who embodied some of the leading ideas and many of the tensions of her age. We can remember

her in her mother's house in Somerstown during that gloomy winter of 1792/93 when, with her affairs at a low point, she was thrilled by the *Vindication*, seeing the various phases of her own rackets life raised to dignity in Mary Wollstonecraft's accounts of the resourceful widow, the sincere and affectionate girl, and the loyal woman who did not desert the father of her children.

Note: this account is based largely on notes and transcripts made by Cedric Collyer in the 1950s and 1960s when he was cataloguing the Canning Papers at Harewood House. I have also had access to the collection itself, freely at first at the West Yorkshire Archive Service, and subsequently, to a limited extent, at Harewood House. I am grateful to the present Earl of Harewood and his father for enabling me to conduct this research.