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LETTERS to JAMES and ISABELLA

OVER 130 years ago the Rev. James Caufield Browne came to Berkhamsted as curate of St. Peter's. He was newly-ordained, happily married to a charming lady named Isabella, and the father of a family which eventually consisted of nine daughters and four sons.

It was the age of large families—and of "runaway" marriages. Mr. and Mrs. Browne eloped when the bridegroom was but 18 years of age. The "stumbling block" was the bride's mother, who, despite her husband's persistent entreaties, refused to have anything to do with her headstrong daughter.

Grandson of a Peer

Not that there was any question of Isabella marrying into an "inferior" family. The bridegroom was the son of the Hon. Howe Browne and grandson of Lord Kilmaine, and many a mother would have swooned with delight at the prospect of a connection with the peerage.

Isabella's father soon realised that his daughter had married a worthy young man. He gave the pair £100 a year, the equivalent of perhaps £400 at the present day.

This—and much more—we may learn from a series of letters written by the bride's father in 1822-3. The letters are in the possession of one of the granddaughters of the marriage, who is 85 years old and lives in Berkhamsted.

The parental advice has a Jane Austen flavour. The bride was warned of the "snags" of living with "in-laws" and advised to make herself amenable to her husband's friends. The final letter gently rebuked the young couple for en-

A 19th CENTURY ELOPEMENT

couraging guests by keeping a spare bed, and Isabella was told that it would be false economy to make her own jams and bake her own bread.

First, a few facts about Mr. Browne and his connection with Berkhamsted. He lived at Boxwell House from 1830 to 1842, and was a popular curate.

No Sunday Trading!

However, as a strict Sabbatarian he made a few enemies. Cottagers who tried to earn a few coppers by selling garden produce on Sundays were incensed when Mr. Browne, on his way to church, knocked cabbages off the window-sills and sent them spinning into the gutter!

But a contemporary said that Mr. Browne "had nothing of the ascetic about him, but was open, candid and genial, ready at all times to meet friend

By Beorcham

or foe with a smile." He won the respect of the labourers who built the railway—a notoriously rough and irreligious body of men—and when it was known that Mr. Browne would conduct the funeral of one of the navvies, the whole labour force, between 300 and 400 strong, donned clean white slops and attended the service.

Mr. Browne was among the men who helped to revive Berkhamsted School, and he built the houses opposite the school entrance, hoping that they would be used as boarding houses or as homes for the masters. This undertaking resulted in heavy financial loss.

From Berkhamsted, Mr. Browne moved to Compton Martin, Somerset, where he had the path to the Rectory widened so that his nine daughters could walk abreast. Afterwards he was vicar of Dudley, Worcs., for thirty years.

"Objectionable" Correspondence

The first of the seven letters, dated April 30, 1822, was addressed to Mr. Browne before the marriage:

"Sir,—Had I not received previous intimation on the subject of your letter of the 26th inst., it would certainly have much surprised me, and I cannot refrain from expressing my disapprobation that a correspondence should have been so clandestinely carried on with my daughter. . . Your age appears to be about 18—much too young to think of making an immediate matrimonial connection. I can therefore only say that for the present it is inconsistent with propriety for my daughter to carry on any correspondence with so young a man. Should the same sentiments be in force at the period when you are nearly of age, I may consider the view you propose in a very different light, but for the present even yourself must see how objectionable any correspondence must

be between my daughter and yourself. . . I remain, Sir, Your very humble Servt., John M."

The second letter, dated May 8, 1822, though not quite so severe, reiterated "the impropriety" of Isabella's corresponding with "so young a man."

After the Elopement

We have to wait seven months for the next letter. In the meantime Mr. Browne had eloped with and married Isabella. Dated December 20, 1822, the letter was addressed to "My dear Isabella," who was staying with her mother-in-law at Amphill, Beds:

"Should you find some circumstances not pleasant to you, let me entreat you to bear them in silence, and not to render James unhappy or uncomfortable by complaints or desiring for a change. And I cannot sufficiently urge it to you to make yourself in every way agreeable to Mrs. B. [her mother-in-law]. . . Do not shun or absent yourself from any society to which she may wish to introduce you, and receive all her friends or your husband's with politeness and urbanity. . . I hope and trust for the best and that you will always find in James a kind and affectionate husband and that his attachment to you will be ensured by your prudent and good conduct. . ."

"My dear James"

In the spring of 1823 Mr. and Mrs. Browne were expecting their first child. The following letter was sent to "My dear James" (a pleasant change from "Sir"!) on March 1:

"I am grieved to report that in every attempt at reconciliation . . . I have completely failed, and her Mother remains inflexible and professes that she will not be moved with maternal feelings even at a moment when nature most awakens them. . ."

Another letter to James was written on April 2, 1823:

"I have at length performed my promise of making an application to Mrs. M. [the bride's mother] for the store of articles she has saved that might be useful to Isabella, but without success. She remains inflexible and inexorable to everything and I fear, if possible, increasingly so, though I cannot grasp from what cause.

"As a change of abode will undoubtedly put you to heavier expense, I shall make an addition of £20 to that of the £80 now allowed, making £100 per annum as I first proposed to do. . ."

"I am happy to hear that your purpose to pursue your original plan of a Cambridge admission with a view to the Church. . . and I am glad to find I have an opportunity of getting you introduced to some respectable families in that place."

[The "Brat"

Evidently "brat" was a term of endearment, for a letter dated May 21, 1823, addressed to "My dear James," states:

"I hope that dear Isabella is in good health and . . . will in due time happily contribute to realise your anxious anticipation of becoming the parent of a healthy brat—a consideration which without doubt must create in your mind

pleasing and serious reflections.

"In regard to your sojourn at Cambridge, I should imagine you would find lodgings cheaper than a college, but I am ignorant of what may be your resources and wish you to consider that I cannot make any addition to the allowance now granted by me. . ."

The letter adds that Isabella's sister "will purchase the silk you mentioned, which is as well for I am no judge of female fashions and unaccustomed to make such purchases, and I could not persuade her mother to go about it."

Household Economy

Here is the last of the seven letters, dated July 16, 1823, and addressed to "My dear Isabella":

"You are quite right not to furnish more than present means will afford, and you will excuse my saying I think it is a pity for you to have a spare bed, as it will be an inducement to you both occasionally to invite a friend, and that is what your present finances will not well admit: besides, if you have not a room prepared of course none of your friends can be displeased or disappointed. When I or your brothers come to see you we do not mind sleeping at an inn.

"I will ask for the receipts you mention, but to be economical I would recommend you not to make any jams, etc., yet awhile—all these little things add to aggregate expenses more than you are aware of. I do not recollect the quantity of bran used for brown bread, but as you will have the flour to buy at a baker's, you will not save anything by baking at home. I believe the saving arises by having a whole or half sack of flour from the miller's, and your establishment would not consume that in a hurry.

"I shall be glad to hear that you form a few good and respectable acquaintances. A little society is a great solace in life and I think absolutely requisite.

"Give my kind love and best wishes to James, whose name I hope some day hence to see among the distinguished Members of Cambridge."

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