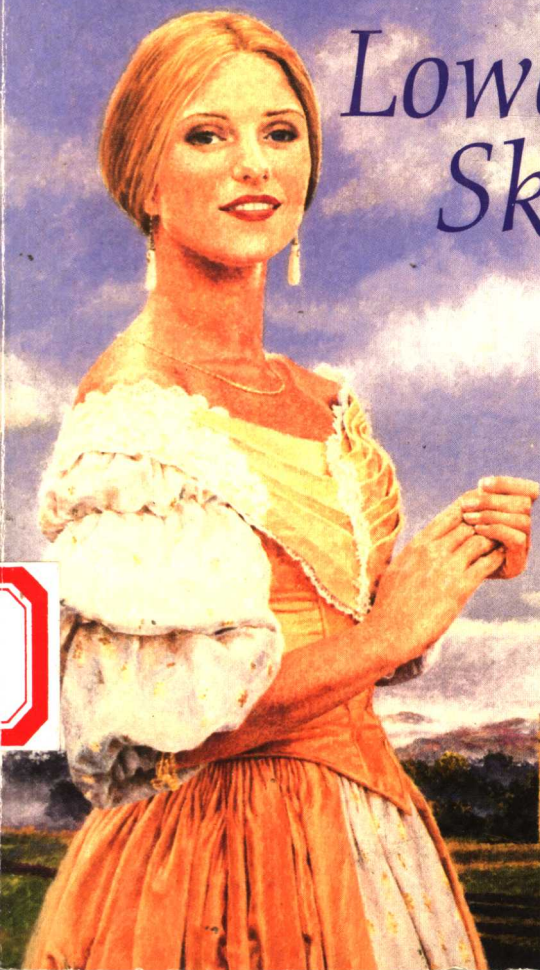


PAMELA OLDFIELD

Lowering Skies



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Pamela Oldfield



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IMPASSIONED YOUTH

'Maria!' he said softly.

'Don't say it, Hugo, I beg you,' she stammered. 'I am nigh on thirteen and nearly grown. I do not think like a child, I do not feel like a child. Oh Hugo, I need to know how you think of me. I beg you – say something to comfort me. My mind is torn to shreds with wanting you, and that's the sum of it.'

Hugo looked at her as she stood in the darkened room, wraith-like in her pale gown.

'I'm sorry –' he began.

'You do not care for me?' she whispered.

He shook his head.

Pamela Oldfield worked as a primary school teacher for eleven years and wrote her first book for five-year-olds. An immediate success, *Melanie Brown Goes To School* was followed by more than fifty books for children.

Pamela Oldfield writes a novel every year, and has been translated into Finnish, French, Afrikaans, Swedish and Japanese. Her adult novels are described as a blend of historical fiction and family saga, each one thoroughly researched with the help of her husband, Joseph, who photographs and videos the various locations necessary for the backgrounds.

Apart from her own writing, Pamela takes a keen interest in writers-to-be and is well known around the country for her talks and workshops, including residential tutoring at Fen Farm and speaking on both radio and television.

For Murray and Gina

While researching this novel, I read many fine books. My thanks to the staffs of the County Library, Maidstone, and Westcountry Studies Library, Exeter, for helping me to find them.

CHAPTER ONE

Devon 1552

A slight breeze lifted the grasses and freed the pollen, which rose in gauzy clouds into the air and drifted across the meadow into the orchard. Here Maria sat beneath a plum tree, her lap filled with the firm, golden plums. Sunshine filtering through the leaves above her set a burnished gleam to her dark head as she bent disconsolately over the fruit. Lifting her blue skirt, she reached for a layer of petticoat and rubbed the dust from one of the plums until it was to her satisfaction, then nibbled the warm fruit without enjoyment.

'I hate Margaret Kendal,' she repeated tonelessly. 'Hate her, hate her, hate her!' The muscles of her face sagged with misery, but her eyes burned with the intensity of her feelings. 'I *hate* her!'

A nuthatch appeared on the trunk of the next tree, making its way erratically downwards, picking earnestly among the tiny insects that lived in the crusty bark. Impulsively, Maria snatched a plum and threw it with all her might. It went hopelessly wide of the tree, but the small grey-blue bird noted its passage and took flight, in a sudden flutter of wing beats.

'Stupid creature!' she muttered.

She cleaned another small plum on the hem of her petticoat and put it into her mouth whole. As she bit into it, the juice trickled from the corner of her mouth and she wiped it away with the back of her hand, which she wiped in turn on her unfortunate petticoat. She wondered where they would be, what they would be doing, what they would

be saying – even how they would look at one another. Her bitterness grew with each fresh image.

‘And you’re a stupid creature, too,’ she told the absent Margaret. ‘A stupid, shallow –’ she racked her brain for further faults, but temporarily unable to marshal any, she spat the plum stone with great force into the grass and marked its position for future reference. The next plum was popped into her mouth without the benefit of petticoat and the sweet flesh hustled off the stone by Maria’s small even teeth. She swallowed the fruit hastily and spat again, but the stone fell short. The small failure increased her wretchedness.

‘And boring,’ she added. ‘How Hugo can bear to live with you, I cannot imagine.’

She scrambled awkwardly to her feet. She had been sitting there for nearly an hour and her legs were stiff. She held onto the tree and straightened up, smoothing her skirt. The last of the plums from her lap had fallen onto the grass, and she now stepped on each one, slowly and deliberately, hearing with satisfaction the slight sound as each skin split under the pressure of her small shoe. A voice, rough and low, surprised her.

‘Temper, temper!’

One of the farm labourers stood nearby, watching her with obvious amusement. Maria considered him for a moment and then said coldly, ‘I am not in a temper.’

‘Seems so to me,’ he said.

‘Then seeming’s wrong,’ Maria snapped.

This answer appeared to delight him. A huge grin spread over his moon-like face and he laughed loudly. For all his size – and he stood over six feet tall – the laugh was that of a young boy, eager and unselfconscious, like a puppy sensing a game. He leaned on the handle of his scythe and rubbed the dust from his eyes with a grimy forefinger.

‘What they ever done to you?’ he persisted, nodding his head in the direction of the trampled plums and glancing again at her face. Ignoring his remark, Maria wiped her

soiled shoe on the grass, adding a green stain to that of the plum juice. Smoothing her hair back from her forehead, she pulled forward a lock of her hair and began to twist it around her fingers as she studied the young man before her.

Already the sun had burned his body a warm brown, which went some way to hiding the pock marks, the familiar legacy of an early smallpox attack. His brown hair was bleached also, and hung untidily around his head and ears like an insecure thatch. As Maria looked, disappointment crept into his eyes. The anticipated conversation was not going to materialise. There would be no game. The broad grin wavered, and a further humorous remark died on his lips. Reaching up into the tree above her, Maria plucked another plum and held it out for him. He hesitated, stretched out his hand and then, changing his mind, withdrew it.

'For you,' said Maria. 'Take it.'

'For me?'

She nodded impatiently, and stepping forward took hold of his large hand and placed the fruit in it. The grin returned to his face as he ate it noisily, his head on one side, the better to assess its flavour.

'Catch!' cried Maria, and threw him another. His large hand flashed outward and he caught it easily. Now the promised game was developing. He laughed, and leaning the scythe against a tree, prepared to enjoy himself.

'You watch this,' he told her, and tilting back his head, tossed the plum into the air and caught it in his mouth. 'That's a rare trick!' he told her excitedly. 'A rare trick! See, I'll do it again -' He picked himself a plum and repeated the performance, following its successful conclusion with a further outbreak of boisterous laughter.

Maria watched him, and her eyes narrowed slightly as she recognised the boy's laughter in a man's frame.

'Can you catch this?' she asked him wickedly, and ran to pick an apple. Seizing it from her he threw it up. Determined to impress her, he threw it higher than before and its

extra weight brought it down with a painful thud against his waiting teeth.

'Ow!'

With a cry of surprise and pain, he released the apple and cursed under his breath, comforting his teeth with the back of his large hand. It did not occur to him that Maria was to blame for his pain and he nodded to her amiably over his hand; but the hurt in his brown eyes reproached her, and she watched guiltily, a slight frown on her face. He kicked the offending apple and it sped towards a tree, struck the trunk, and split open.

'That serves 'un right!' he cried triumphantly, his good humour immediately restored.

Maria smiled at him. 'What's your name?' she asked.

'Matt.'

'Matt what?'

'Cartright.'

She laughed. 'That's a rare name,' she mimicked. 'Mine's Maria - and aren't you supposed to be working?'

He looked vaguely around as though the question puzzled him.

'Working,' Maria repeated. 'Like this -' She swung an imaginary scythe, and saw a flicker of understanding in the brown eyes, but still he stood irresolute, his face screwed up with the effort of concentration. She waited patiently.

'I'm sent on an errand,' he said at last.

'Then you'd best be off,' she said.

He considered her remark for a moment, his head on one side. Then he said, 'Well, I'd best be off,' as though it was his own idea. With a cheerful nod, he picked up the scythe and made his way out of the orchard to the field beyond.

Maria, left alone, regretted her words. Any company was better than none, but it was too late now. He had gone. She sighed deeply.

'Oh, dearest Hugo,' she whispered fervently. 'Please come home. I can't live without you, indeed I can't!'

Maria Lessor was eleven years old, a passionate and

headstrong child. She was tasting, for the first time in her short life, the exquisite agony of unrequited love.

The mid-day meal at Heron was taken in the Hall. Thick walls kept out the bright autumn sunshine, and it was pleasantly cool within. Maria and Hannah dined alone, for Simon was at the mine as usual, and Luke, bed-ridden, would dine upstairs.

Maria ate her lunch in a preoccupied silence, summoning Hugo's dimly remembered face into her memory and giving free reign to her fancies.

'You have eaten so little,' Hannah remonstrated. 'Try another mouthful of the almond cream. I have promised to fatten you up, and here you are fading away before my eyes. I don't know what your mother will say to it!' She smiled encouragingly at her guest, but Maria shook her head.

'I'm full and more!' she said. 'Another mouthful and I shall burst like a ripe puff ball.'

'Oh, very well, I shall eat it myself. But the Lord knows what Simon will say. He calls me his "plump pigeon" already!'

Maria frowned slightly, irritated by Hannah's well-meaning attempts at humour. They disturbed her train of thought and obscured the hazy image of Hugo.

'When will he - they - come back?' Maria asked suddenly.

'Who?'

'Why Hugo, of course,' said Maria, 'and Margaret. They have been gone an age. When will the King pardon them?'

Hannah shook her head. 'Who knows what the King will do,' she said, 'or when he will do it! Tis out of fashion to be a Papist.'

'But many people are -'

'Ssh!' said Hannah, her tone unintentionally sharp. 'We

don't discuss such matters. They are dangerous. Suffice it that Hugo displeased the King and must suffer for it.'

'But tis scarcely just,' cried Maria. 'Minnie from Ladyford says that Simon also -'

'You must not listen to servants' gossip,' said Hannah. 'It may be well enough in London, but here in Devon we behave differently - and with *dignity*,' she added reprov-ingly, for their young visitor was proving herself not a little wilful and Hannah was already looking forward to her return to London.

But Maria was not reproved.

'Minnie says that Simon and Hugo *both* displeased the King -' she began, 'and if that be so, why then, Simon should also be exiled - or else,' she added hastily, seeing the look on Hannah's face, 'Hugo should be pardoned and allowed home.'

Hannah's expression had hardened. 'Hugo is very lucky to be alive,' she said. 'Without Luke's intervention they would have hanged him.' Then she looked into the girl's eyes and read her infatuation. Her tone softened a little. 'He will come home some time,' she said. 'Never fear.'

'But when?' she persisted. 'When will he - they - come home?'

Hannah shrugged. 'Who knows?' she said. 'Maybe soon. Maybe not.'

'And where will they live?'

'In London perhaps,' said Hannah, 'or here in Devon. They will buy a house, no doubt, and -'

'What with?' cried Maria, her voice rising. 'Minnie says they have no money. Minnie says they should live here rightfully! She says that -'

Suddenly Hannah brought her small fist down on the table, so that the pewter rattled. 'Stop this!' she said, her tolerance at an end. 'I will not allow you to talk this way. How dare you chatter with the servants on such a matter. Minnie shall go! She has no right -'

Suddenly her voice faltered and, to Maria's astonishment,

she burst into tears, and, jumping to her feet, hurriedly left the room.

Maria raised her eyebrows. So there *was* some truth in what the maid had told her. Hugo *did* have some claim to Heron! She relished the thought for a moment, and then her flash of temper was gone, leaving her repentant.

'But I do so long to see you, Hugo,' she told his ghost. 'I pray you do not stay away too long.'

Sighing, she stood up. Thoughtfully, she dipped a finger into the almond cream which Hannah had abandoned and sucked the cool custard from it. Then she went in search of Hannah, determined to make her peace. It would never do for poor Minnie to lose her place.

The following day found Maria in the kitchen, a large apron covering her gown. She was making a 'love twist' for Hannah, who had still not quite forgiven her for yesterday's outburst. She rolled a triangle of pastry until it was wafer-thin, sprinkled it lavishly with currants and cinnamon, then trailed a spoonful of honey backwards and forwards over the fruit. Then she rolled it up and twisted it into shape.

'That's fine,' said Beth. 'Now into the oven with it, and there's an end to it. And maybe I can have back the use of my table!'

Minnie and Maria exchanged delighted grins.

'I put plenty of honey on it – to sweeten her!' said Maria slyly.

'Then let's hope you didn't over do it,' said Beth, 'for the Mistress has a troublesome tooth and too much sweetness will aggravate it.'

Somewhat chastened, Maria watched the oven door slam shut. Beth departed to discuss the following week's menu, and the two girls were left alone.

'I'll make one for him when he comes home,' said Maria. 'A love twist for Hugo! I'll put even more honey on his – and I'll add a few nuts.'

Minnie sighed admiringly. She enjoyed Maria's romantic fantasies almost as much as Maria did herself.

'What'll you say to him?' she prompted.

Maria hesitated, then smiled. 'I'll say: *A love twist with love*,' she said.

Minnie giggled. 'And what'll Margaret say to that?' It was her favourite question.

'She'll never know,' said Maria. 'I'll give it to him when she's out of the room. She won't hear me say it.'

'I reckon she'll see the crumbs round his mouth when he's ate it!' cried Minnie. 'There'll be summat said then!'

Maria tossed her head. 'Then twill be for him to think of an answer,' she said. 'He's a grown man, not a child. I shan't cosset him.'

The little maid sighed again. 'I wish I was in love,' she said wistfully. 'I'd like that.'

'There's always Jon the stable lad,' said Maria.

Minnie wrinkled her nose thoughtfully. 'Jon? I do like him a little,' she said, 'but I don't think I love him. How do you know if you love someone? How do you know you love Hugo?'

'Because I can't forget him,' said Maria, rising to the bait. 'Because although I haven't seen him for three years, I hold his memory dear. Tis more precious to me than emeralds! More precious to me than —'

'But you was only seven!' protested Minnie. 'Only a babe.'

'I was not a babe,' said Maria earnestly. 'I'm mature for my age. And I recall so clearly . . . He played with me, tossing me up into the air and feigning to drop me, so that I screamed aloud for mercy!'

'I wager I'd scream louder!' cried Minnie, whose bleak childhood had lacked such luxuries. 'I'd swoon away!'

'I came near to it,' said Maria. 'And he chased me and — and searched for me while I hid — and threw rose-hips at me.'

'Jon never throws rose-hips at me,' said Minnie. 'He once threw a horse brush.'

'Tis not the same thing at all,' said Maria impatiently. 'A lover throws rose-hips and petals – and kisses. Oh, if only he was a King! He could come home and divorce Margaret and wed me!'

They eyed each other gleefully at this glittering prospect.

'And what would Margaret say to that?' asked Minnie in mock dismay.

'What indeed!' cried Maria, and they burst into shrieks of laughter until wisps of smoke curling from the edge of the oven brought them down to earth. The love twist, when they rescued it, was blackened and inedible.

Hannah sat at the long oak table, covertly eyeing Maria. The child was growing tall, outgrowing her strength. Her movements were clumsy and awkward, like an untamed colt. Her small oval face was pale and her large grey eyes full of shadows – haunted almost. Half child, half woman, thought Hannah. It was a difficult age. Maria was unpredictable, her mood swinging like a pendulum from deep gloom to wild excitement. She had been at Heron for three weeks, and all that time Hannah had tried to reach her, to understand her; but without success. One minute Maria would melt their hearts with her innocence; the next, she would wound them with her honesty. She was, Hannah mused, like a locked book: one day the lock would be unfastened and the story would be there for all to read. But for the present its contents must remain a mystery.

'So, Maria,' said Hannah cheerfully, 'shall you read to me? You read so well.'

'I have a slight soreness in my eyes,' she lied easily. 'I think it was the dust blowing from the cornfield yesterday.'

'A walk, then?' suggested Hannah. 'We could gather some lavender.'

'The truth is I am out of sorts,' said Maria.

'A sight too many plums, I'll warrant,' laughed Hannah. 'They play havoc with a young lady's constitution.'

'Not so young,' said Maria. 'I am eleven years old.'

'Eleven, is it?' Hannah smiled. 'You'll be choosing a husband soon.'

'I shall never wed,' said Maria, a secret smile on her lips.

'Never wed?' echoed Hannah, pretending wonderment. 'Now, there's a thing to say! And your mother happily wed before she was fifteen. Your mother will find a good husband for you, and -'

'Never!' said Maria firmly.

Maria leaned her elbows on the table, propped her head on her hands and looked at Hannah, who was re-threading her needle with blue silk. Then she slid slowly along the bench until she could see past her, through the open window and into the garden. This was large and symmetrical, as was the fashion, its lawns arranged in squares and circles, dotted with rose bushes and separated one from another by a gravel path or neatly clipped hedge. Statues graced many a corner, and the time of the day could be determined, in sunny weather at least, by a variety of sundials placed at strategic intervals. Further over there was an aviary, and beyond this was the orchard with its formal rows of trees and small cluster of beehives.

Abruptly, Maria left the table and leaned out of the window. Scents of rosemary, tarragon and thyme hung in the air from the herb garden below. She breathed in deeply, but her exhalation of breath became an unintended sigh. She closed her eyes, imagining herself to be once more with the only person whose company would satisfy her. Her lips moved silently.

'I would bear you a *live* son, Hugo.' This to remind him of Margaret's failure - a stillborn son. She was aware of Hannah joining her at the window. Still she did not open her eyes.