



MARGARET JAMES

 A GREEN
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Note and Acknowledgement

A Green Bay Tree is set in England and Wales during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Whereas I have based my accounts of life in Birmingham and the surrounding district on historical fact, those parts of the story set in Wales owe rather more to my imagination. My Gower village of Llangynnydd is a Welsh-speaking community, which bears little resemblance to the real Llangennith – for this, together with most of South Gower, has been Anglicised since the Middle Ages. I have repopulated it with Welshmen.

I wish to thank Mr Robert Evans and his daughter Mrs Awen Brockbank, who kindly translated some phrases from this novel into the appropriate regional Welsh. Any errors in transcription are, of course, my own.

Chapter 1

"Call again, why don't you?" Irritably, the elderly man in the fusty black morning coat adjusted his wig. He frowned at the woman by his side. "Call again. He must be here somewhere."

Obligingly, the woman cupped her hands to her mouth. "Master Alex!" she cried. "Master Alex, where are you?" She turned to the tutor. "Yes, I know they're late for their lessons," she muttered. "But I have work to do. If you want them, you must find them yourself."

"Martha, please -"

"I'm sorry, Mr Sandford. I can't perform miracles."

Alex Lowell's nurse, long redundant but kept on at the house as a general servant, peered up at the roof of the stables. Perhaps she expected her former charge to materialise upon the tiles. He didn't. "It's my belief they've gone off to Martley," she said. "To the fair."

"Maybe." The tutor removed his spectacles. Spitting on the lenses, he began to polish them with his dirty pocket handkerchief. "Oh, I expect you're right," he admitted. He sighed. Unsteadily, he made his way back towards the manor house.

From the safety of the barn, the two little boys watched him. Now they breathed a sigh of relief. They resumed their interrupted conversation.

"Yes, as it happens, I do know how it's done." At ten years old, Ellis Darrow was as worldly-wise and infuriatingly world-weary as he'd be at sixty. He had greeted Alex Lowell's revelations with bored disdain. "I've seen the bull serve the cows. Arrowsmith says it's

the same with humans. You needn't think you're telling me anything new."

"Well! You never said anything to me." Annoyed to have had such interesting information deliberately withheld from him, Alex glared. "So when did you find out?"

Ellis yawned. "Years ago," he lied.

The two children were lolling comfortably amidst the hay which filled the upper storey of the biggest barn. From here, they had a clear view across the cobbled courtyard of the home farm. They could look right into the dairy where Lyddy Searle was skimming pans of milk, carefully taking off the cream.

Alex nudged Ellis. "Someone's been serving *her*," he said. "But it wasn't a bull."

"Wasn't it?"

"No."

"Who, then?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Ellis took a bite out of the apple he'd chosen from a heap by his side. "Yes," he admitted. "I would."

"Give me one," said Alex, pointing to the neat pile of fruit. "Then I'll tell you."

"Get your own apples," Ellis replied.

Alex kicked him.

Ellis kicked Alex back. A brief scuffle ensued, resulting in the whole pyramid of apples tumbling down and rolling all over the floor. Each child filled his pockets. Then they lay down on their stomachs and observed Lyddy Searle again.

"She's going to have a child." Alex poked Ellis in the ribs. "Didn't you hear me? I said, she's pregnant!"

"Is she?" Impressed at long last, Ellis stared. "How do you know?"

"I heard my mother talking about it." Alex grimaced. "She's very upset."

"Why is *she* upset? What's it to do with her?"

"Ah." Alex looked very knowing. "She's upset because

Lyddy was served by my father. So, she's going to have his baby."

"So it'll be your half brother! Or sister."

Alex shrugged. "It'll be a peasant," he said, shortly. "Like its mother." Standing up, he brushed the straw from his breeches. "It'll be a bastard. A peasant woman's brat. Nothing to do with me. Look! She's seen us."

Alex sniggered now, making Ellis grin too. Glancing up, Lyddy Searle stared coldly at the two boys. Her lips moved, but of course they were much too far away to hear what she said. They could, however, see her face was red. That she looked absolutely miserable. Meeting that desolate stare, Ellis had the grace to look away. But Alex glared straight back at her, and pulled a face.

Still blushing, Lyddy bent over her work again.

"I'd have thought your father was a bit old to - you know." Ellis frowned. "Well, he's an old man. Isn't he?"

"Oh, men can do it until they're a hundred," Alex replied. "Papa's nowhere near that. He was born in - oh, he must be about fifty now, I suppose. I'm twelve, and I was born in '48, so - "

"About the year ten." Ellis's mental arithmetic was much better than his friend's. "Your father must have been born in 1710."

"Yes. I was just going to say that."

"Liar." Cruelly, Ellis laughed. "As Mr Sandford says, *you* have all the mathematical genius of a backward donkey."

"Pig!" Alex punched him. Still Ellis grinned. So, shoving him on to his back, Alex got astride him. Easily dodging Ellis's flailing fists, he landed blow after blow on the younger child's face. "There, Darrow!" he crowed. "I can thrash you any day. So, do you give in? Do you beg for mercy?"

"No!" Bloody about the nose and cut above the left eye, Ellis squirmed and tried to wriggle away, but was held fast by the bigger child's weight. So he was obliged to stay where he was, and be hit.

Eventually, Alex got tired of thumping him, and rolled away. "Ellis?" he demanded. "What's the matter?" For his friend simply lay supine. "Are you all right?"

"I think so." Ellis staggered to his feet. Now he tried to staunch the torrent of blood which poured from his nose. "Yes. I'm fine."

"Come over to the pump. Get washed." Alex helped the smaller boy down the stairs. He led him across the yard, to the water trough.

"What shall we play?" Now a little cleaner, but still somewhat battered about the face, Ellis kicked a stone across the cobbled yard. "What about a round of quoits?"

"I'd rather fight."

"Only because you always win." Ellis dabbed at his sore face. "Why can't we ever have a game of anything?"

"Such as?"

"Tennis?"

"No. I hate tennis." Alex thought for a moment. "We'll play French and English," he said. "You be the Frog. I'll be the English Milord."

"Oh. Vaire well." A natural clown and mimic, Ellis shrugged in the approved Gallic fashion. "Then, *cochon anglais*, I damn your eyes. Defend yourself!" Twirling an imaginary cloak, he bared his teeth in a snarl. "What, you disgusting villain? Do you laugh at me?"

Alex grinned. Taught from birth to despise everyone and everything French, this sort of foolery delighted him.

Ellis liked a responsive audience. So now he posed and postured all the more.

The boys' mothers were distant cousins. But, whereas pretty Anne Chalmers had married wealthy Henry Lowell and now queened it over the entire parish, Jane Collins had been landed with Peter Darrow, who was a miser. An improvident miser, at that.

The first issue of Jane and Peter Darrow's uneasy union, Ellis often stayed at Alex's house. There, he was

company for Alex. He also spared his own parents the expense of bringing him up.

Despite his habitually barbarous treatment of the younger child, Alex loved Ellis dearly. On the day the storm finally broke, when Lyddy Searle dropped her lighted taper into the powder keg of his parents' marriage, he had been particularly glad of Ellis's company.

For, if he'd not had Ellis to thrash, to torment, if Ellis had not been there to provide a diversion, Alex would probably have battered his own head to bloody ruin against a convenient out-house wall. His nonchalant indifference to the fact of Lyddy Searle's pregnancy concealed a terror which was making him sick with fear.

That morning he had, as usual, sneaked into his mother's bedroom. There he meant to enjoy a clandestine embrace and a few minutes' conversation, before the real business of the day began.

Instead of lying back against her embroidered satin pillows, however, instead of placidly drinking her early morning chocolate, today his mother was up. She was dressed in a loose gown. In tears, with her hair unpowdered and disordered about her face – upon which the marks of her own fingernails plainly showed – she was pacing the floor of her room.

Alex's father was also there. Clad in his long padded morning robe, Turkish slippers on his feet and a purple silk turban on his head, he stood by the window, idly taking snuff. He watched his wife with the detached interest of a man observing a wild animal in a zoo.

Hiding in his mother's dressing room – for neither parent had noticed as he slipped in – Alex overheard the whole exchange. He learned how Lyddy Searle had had the effrontery to come to Mrs Lowell herself. To tell her, face to face, that she was expecting Henry Lowell's baby.

"She was here!" Meeting her husband's languid stare, Anne Lowell glared. "The slut sneaked past all the servants, and got in here. She told me you are the father of her child!"

"Indeed?" Henry Lowell took more snuff. Elegantly, he sniffed the powder up each nostril, smiling with gratification as the stimulant had the desired effect. "The assurance of the jade."

Alex's mother stopped pacing. She stood before her husband. "Well?" she demanded. "Will you have her whipped?"

"My dearest Anne, why ever should I have the girl whipped?"

"For her insolence, of course!" Mrs Lowell clenched her fists. "For lying. For slandering. For defaming a gentleman's character!"

"Ah." Henry Lowell smiled. "No, my dear Anne. I can't have her whipped for that."

"Why not? Henry, you're a magistrate. It's your duty to keep these dirty slatterns in their place."

"Anne, my dearest. Listen to me." Expressively, Henry Lowell shrugged. "You must understand that this particular dirty slattern was neither lying, slandering, nor defaming. She was merely - although I must admit it was extremely tactless of her - stating an established fact."

"What?" Anne Lowell's face lost all its colour. "What did you say?"

"I said - or as much as said - that the girl was not lying to you."

"She is pregnant? The child is yours?"

Alex's father bowed an elegant assent.

"It was conceived in this room?" Wildly, Mrs Lowell stared about her. "So that was how she knew the way. You and that creature came up here. You had her in my bed. You defiled my own clean sheets."

"Anne, you forget yourself." Henry Lowell shook his head. "I shall go and dress."

Mrs Lowell gaped at him. Her mouth hung open. Then, to Alex's horror, she threw herself against him. She punched his chest, she kicked his shins, and soon her nails had marked his face with the same sort of long, livid

weals which disfigured her own. "Beast!" she screamed. "Dirty libertine! Disgusting, filthy brute!"

For a moment or two, Henry Lowell stood quite still. He let her attack him. But then he raised his right hand. He slapped his wife across her upturned face, with a force that felled her to the ground.

Terrified, Alex ran. Scuttling from the dressing room, he was violently sick on the landing outside.

By late afternoon, Alex was feeling less distraught. He and Ellis had spent an hour or two in the orchard, climbing the apple trees and stealing the fruit. Now, a large heap of it was collected and secreted for their own private use. Then Mr Sandford came to fetch him. It was time to see his parents. He went meekly, leaving Ellis to enjoy a quiet hour alone, before the children had their supper.

Every afternoon, at four o'clock, Alex was washed, brushed and taken to see his mother and father. This was by way of a diversion before they went in to dinner. As the first family in the district, the Lowells dined fashionably late – their neighbours took their main meal of the day at three, or even two o'clock.

"Sir. Madam." Alex bowed to each parent in turn. To his relief, he saw that neither bore any visible marks of their morning's contretemps. But then, his mother and father painted so heavily that all the scratches, bruises and scars were bound to be concealed by thick, white cosmetic, rouge, and the usual profusion of patches.

His mother patted the sofa. "Sit down, child," she invited.

"Thank you, madam." Alex sat. Covertly, he glanced at her. He could have wept at what he saw.

Never robust, she now looked positively ill. On edge, too. Even a child of twelve could see she was barely in control of herself. A vein throbbed in her neck. Her hands were practically knotted together, their restless fingers twisting and fiddling with her rings.

But, as usual, she had dressed with the greatest care.

Her hair was powdered and curled. She was clad in the finest silks and satins, which rustled as she fidgeted in her seat. "Have you completed your lessons for today?" she enquired.

"Of course, madam," Alex lied. "Mr Sandford is very pleased with me. He especially commends my progress in grammar. He says I may go on to Book Six tomorrow."

"Indeed?" Henry Lowell looked first at his watch, then at his son. "Well, sir. You are evidently destined to become a great scholar."

Alex winced. Fond of pointing out that *he* had memorised the whole of Virgil by the time he was ten, it was plain Henry Lowell thought his son a blockhead.

An oppressive silence filled the room.

As Alex walked back to his own part of the house, he thought about Lyddy Searle again. He remembered his father as he'd just seen him. Immaculate in his powder-blue coat and breeches, in his white silk stockings and cream kidskin shoes, his fine cambric shirt had been of such snowy beauty that it dazzled the eyes. He could not imagine his handsome, beautifully dressed Papa so much as touching, let alone doing that filthy thing with a rough peasant girl like Lyddy, who always stank of wood smoke and mutton grease.

Perhaps it was nonsense. An adult's joke he had not understood. Surely a man who washed every day, who scented his face and hands with rose water and had his hair dressed by an Italian barber, could never have done that awful, intimate, sweaty thing with a girl like Searle's daughter?

As the two boys wolfed their supper, as greedily as if neither expected to see food again, Alex brought the subject up for the second time. "Ellis," he began, "do you think my father could have - well - "

"Could have what?" Ellis picked a shred of meat from between his front teeth.

"Could have made Lyddy pregnant."

Ellis shrugged. "You said he did."

"Yes, I know. But do you think he really – "

"I expect so." Ellis grinned. "My father does it with Nell Purvis. He takes her up to the attic in the east wing."

"How do you know?"

"I heard her telling one of the housemaids about it. She said my father gives her a shilling every time."

"Oh." Alex swallowed his bread, then gulped some ale. So it was quite normal, then. All gentlemen did it. There was no need to worry any more.

By the time September turned into October, Lyddy Searle's belly had swollen enormously. She walked awkwardly now. Her legs wide apart, her body was tilted backwards, to balance the ballooning weight of her unborn child.

Village women said the creature should be turned out of her parents' cottage, and sent to the Bridewell. "She ought to be well whipped," said one.

"At the cart's tail," added another. "That would teach the baggage some shame. I remember when Molly Lucas was tied up and flogged all along the Warwick road."

"Miscarried, she did."

"A good thing, too. Seeking to lay her bastard at the expense of the parish."

"Miss Lyddy needn't hold her head so high. This time next week she'll be in the House of Correction, picking rope."

"With her head shaved. Serve her right."

But, in spite of her neighbours' charitable good wishes, Lyddy met no such harsh fate. Instead, she paraded around Squire Lowell's estate sticking out her pregnancy for all to admire. Evidently, she was proud of it, for she stared boldly back at everyone who dared look at her.

Mrs Lowell was much pitied. As for Mr Lowell – well, said the village women, the slut had obviously encouraged him. He was, after all, a man. Mrs Lowell's maid added her mite to the debate by revealing in confidence – to

anyone who would listen – that her mistress had not allowed her husband into her bed since long before Alex was born. “So what else was the poor gentleman to do?”

Denied the society of siblings, Alex thought of Ellis as his little brother. Scared of the dark, he always wanted Ellis’s company at night. Then, curled round each other like a pair of kittens, one blond and one dark head resting on the same pillow, the two children kept each other warm.

“Ellis?” murmured Alex, as they lay in bed one evening, on the point of falling asleep. “Ellis!”

“What?”

“I wish you were here all the time.” Alex levered himself on to one elbow. “I was thinking. If I asked Papa, perhaps he’d allow it. You could share Mr Sandford with me. Your father could pay off the curate then.”

A thin, grey-haired, gentle old man, Mr Sandford was nearing the end of his teaching career. Kindly and over-indulgent, he had so far failed to push anything much into Alex Lowell’s thick head. On the other hand, Ellis rather liked Mr Newstead, the local curate who taught him. He thought about Alex’s suggestion, and decided it would not be a good idea.

“I don’t think I’d want to share Mr Sandford,” he said. “He smirks at me.” Ellis imitated Mr Sandford’s leer. “He makes my skin crawl.”

“That’s because you have lice,” retorted Alex. “Not because Sandford smirks at you.”

“I haven’t got lice. But you’ve got fleas.” Ellis grinned. “I saw one on your shirt yesterday.”

“You didn’t.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Beast!” Picking up a pillow, Alex hit his friend over the head with it. The ticking burst open. The room filled with feathers. “I haven’t got fleas!” Alex caught Ellis’s arm. He twisted it behind his back. “Say I haven’t!”

Ellis shrugged. "Let go," he said, equably. "You're hurting."

It was boring, torturing Ellis. However much Alex hurt him, the younger child would never cry, or beg for mercy. He simply waited for his tormentor to get tired. So now, Alex released him. "Will you stay?" he pleaded. "If my father agrees?"

"No. I've been here long enough. I must go home soon."

"Home!" sneered Alex. "That tumbledown hovel. That great barn, that cowshed. How can you call that place home?" Gazing all around the warm, airy chamber in which the children lay, he sighed. "Ellis, surely you like it here?"

"Yes, I do. But –"

Indeed, Ellis was sorely tempted. The Lowells' home was a new mansion, raised on the ruins of a Jacobean manor house. The huge cellars and vaults of this still survived, and were the most marvellous of playrooms.

The place was so comfortable. So warm. Even in the children's rooms, fires always burned. The windows were a snug fit, so excluded all draughts.

The whole house was light. The gracious oblong case-ments let in all the sunshine. This lit up the pale Georgian greens and blues in which the interior was decorated. It illuminated the neat candy stripes of the wallpapers in the large drawing room and dining room downstairs.

By contrast, Ellis's own home – a Tudor hall in the last stages of dereliction and decay, riddled throughout with worm and rot – was a hovel indeed.

Seeing Ellis wavering, Alex pursued his advantage. "Stay!" he cried, pathetically. He hugged his friend around the neck. "Stay, stay, stay!"

"I can't, Alex." Ellis pushed him away. "I must go home. To see Lally."

Chapter 2

Lyddy Searle's father was the village blacksmith. A devout, God-fearing man, he was a Dissenter of the most narrow-minded, puritanical kind. He was also a mainstay of the local chapel.

He had no time for women. In his opinion and experience, they were feckless, irresponsible and generally contemptible. All the same, his own daughter's disgrace was a terrible burden for Jeremy Searle's broad shoulders to bear.

Lyddy, however, seemed not to feel her shame. When the alteration in her shape finally brought her condition to her father's attention, he took her into the kitchen to examine her soul. He did not find it clad in the white raiment of repentance. Instead, he discovered it was very black indeed.

"Well? Did you encourage the squire?" he demanded, of a surly, silent Lyddy. "Set out to entice and ensnare him? So that the man, being but flesh, was tempted beyond resistance?"

Despising this Presbyterian cant which she had, in any case, heard a thousand times before, Lyddy was silent. Her father took this to mean she gloried in her disgrace, and was not in the least repentant of her sins.

"Speak to me, child!" Jeremy glared at her. "Tell me now! Have I not brought you up in godliness and righteousness? Have I not taught you to conduct yourself as a Christian maiden should?" He shot a spiteful glance at his wife, who sat weeping quietly in the chimney

corner. "Did I not seek to check the sinful indulgence of your mother, and guide your steps in the ways of holiness?"

Lyddy neither spoke nor moved.

So, grind his teeth and glare at her though he might, Jeremy Searle failed to bring his daughter to a proper state of contrition. Worse, Lyddy as good as admitted she had led the man on – so he was in no position now to go up to Mr Lowell's house and cross-examine the other sinner in the case, the father of this little child his daughter was about to bear.

Had Lyddy wailed and wept, had she declared herself a poor innocent seduced by a vile adulterer, Jeremy would have hauled her up to the great house there and then, to confront the squire with the evidence of his crimes. But since she sat and said nothing at all, what could Jeremy do?

Detesting both the idolatrous Church of England and the Tory squirearchy which supported it, for years the blacksmith had been a thorn in the side of the squire. A fierce and outspoken critic of almost everything Henry Lowell did, Jeremy Searle particularly opposed the squire's determination to enclose most of the local common land. For such enclosure robbed the peasants both of grazing rights, opportunities to gather fuel, and any chance to keep livestock of their own.

As far as the squire was concerned, the blacksmith did not know his place. Jeremy Searle never touched his forelock to Mr Lowell. He never shrank into the hedge as the gentleman's coach swept by. He never crept or fawned or asked a single favour of the lord of the manor. He would rather have starved than beg.

Now the squire had taught him a lesson. Had sired a bastard grandchild upon him. Was this simple retribution? If so, for what? For the squire's hunters being kept waiting at the forge, while the tenant farmer's work horses were shod? For the making of Mrs Lowell's fancy wrought-iron