

# PART I

## 1

### A Vulnerable and Isolated Virtue

*In great families, when an advantageous place cannot be obtained either in possession, reversion, remainder, or expectancy, for the young man who is growing up, it is a very general custom to send him to sea.*

—Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*

In 1888, at 10 years of age and accompanied by her 12-year-old brother Tommy, Emily Hilda Blake was sent to sea. Not to work on board ship, but to emigrate to Canada. The two children were orphans—recent inmates of the Heckingham Workhouse (Loddon and Clavering Union). Hilda had been born to Henry and Sarah Ann Blake in January 1878 at Chedgrave, 10 miles southeast of Norwich on the acres and acres of farmland and low marshes known as the ‘Norfolk Broads’, a large, rough triangle with the coast as the base and Norwich the apex. Chedgrave and environs belonged to Sir Reginald Proctor-Beauchamp. By 1879, when he was only 26 and Henry Blake 33, Beauchamp had already fought against the Turks at Shipka Pass, had travelled to China and Japan, and had inherited his father’s, Sir Thomas Proctor-Beauchamp’s, land. The young Beauchamp resided on an 800-acre estate with a large and elegant mansion, Langley Hall, ‘a veritable treasure-house of art . . . filled with busts, paintings, and statues’.<sup>1</sup>

The Blakes’ lives were much more circumscribed. Cottage tenants on the Beauchamp estate, they were religious and ‘most respectable people’<sup>2</sup>—at least so Beauchamp later claimed—but poor, near the