Along The River

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Summary

After an illness in Meryton strikes tragedy into the heart of the Bennets and their extended family, a change of scene and fortune calls them to London, where Society has gown anxious over the mystery of the Darcy fortune. A reworking of Pride Prejudice, set in the world of Charles Dickens' Our Mutual Friend.
Chapter 1

Along The River.

Part 1.

London at night is a perilous, city, to be toured during such nocturnal hours with caution or ventured into not at all. In an age which began with the violence of the French Revolution and ended with the murders in Whitechapel, the populous of England's glorious capital had much to fear from those who stalked the streets, whatever their rank or station in life. One wrong turn could get you killed, your body left to rot in some dank ghetto, prison, or worse, the river.

The Thames had seen better, cleaner days, though the deceiving surface belied such facts. Below the seemingly gentle waves, it was clogged to the depths with the stench of disease and death. For those poor souls unfortunate enough to meet their fate within the river, their remains might be found by the boatmen who toiled that stretch of water, Charons, from London Bridge to Southwark, who after retrieving the funds of obolus or danaka required for passage into Erebus, would report the find to the appropriate authorities.

Jane Bennet watched the gentle waves of water which her oars swept aside and wished for such a tranquillity to exist within her once again, as it had done so a year before. As the wish permeated through her mind, other ones came into being and followed it, causing the contrast between the calm river and the turmoil in her mind to become even greater.

She wished that the terrible tragedy which had befallen her family a year ago had never occurred. She wished that her mother had chosen not to visit Mrs Philips when she became ill with the mysterious fever which struck the inhabitants of Meryton last winter. That her mother had not become ill after returning home, causing for the doctor to be sent. That the illness had not spread to Mary and Lydia. She wished that the village physician had not recommended a doctor from Harley Street to treat them, causing her father's financial state to go from bad to worse, so that by the time the London doctor had admitted there was nothing more to be done for her mother and her sisters, and the estate was close to bankruptcy.

From then on, everything that had happened was inevitable. Lydia grew weaker and weaker until one morning they could not wake her. Mary seemed to rally herself before unexpectedly succumbing to the same fate a week later. Their mother hovered between life and death while the funerals took place and the medical bills arrived, demanding immediate payment. As her father made arrangements to sell Longbourn her mother suddenly recovered, making changes to the lodgings Mr Bennet had struggled to afford in London. Then Mrs Philips died, leaving a young son, a grieving husband and a collapsing legal business.

"Rest the oars a moment, Jane," her boating companion remarked, bringing her abruptly back to the present.

Jane complied to his request and kept her eyes fixed upon him as he searched the pockets and clothing of another departed stranger who had left their fate up to the will of the river. Her uncle Philips. Once a proud attorney of a thriving legal firm in Meryton, now a proud 'Gaffer' of the river, making his living by collecting money from the dead. He had been a clerk in the legal firm, serving her maternal grandfather well enough to succeed him upon his death, as well as marriage to her late Aunt. Since Mr Frank Gardiner's death however, the firm had lost business to more competitive and reliable young lawyers from the next town which, when combined with her late Aunt's tendency to
live beyond her means, spelt the end to her uncle's career. When her Aunt died, her uncle lost the will to continue keeping the now little legal firm alive, choosing to sell to one of the practices which had taken most of her grandfather's clients and move to London to start a fresh occupation.

Her mother, when she had recovered, wrote to her brother in law offering them assistance. While Mr Bennet had refused absolutely to giving them money, he could not refuse the lending of one of his three daughters to help raise the young son their Aunt had left behind. Knowing who her mother would suggest and having no desire to give either Elizabeth or Kitty that pain, Jane had volunteered to help her uncle and cousin. At the time she had consented only out of thought for the latter, with the hopeful belief that the nature of her Uncle's new living would only be temporary. However, nearly a year had passed and not only she was still needed; to raise Charlie and to keep house for him and her Uncle, while the former went to school and Mr Philips earned his living along shore, he also requested her assistance with his Charon duties.

Mr Philips caught her gaze now and took hold of her hand. "I'll row now, Jane."

Jane steeled herself and shook her head, gently sliding her hand out of his grip so she could take control of the oars once again. "No, Uncle," she replied. "I cannot sit so near it," she added softly.

Mr Philips caught her words however and gestured at the body now tethered on the towrope beside him. "What harm can it do you?"

"None," Jane replied, though she knew such the price of such a denial, for the city was plagued by regular bouts of Cholera, dysentery and other deadly diseases that death left behind for new victims to stumble upon. "None. I cannot bear it."

"Its my belief," her Uncle continued, "that you hate the very sight of this river. As if it wasn't your living. As if it wasn't food and drink to you."

"I do not hate the river," Jane answered. "I just wish things were different."

"So do I," her Uncle revealed, and looked to speak further, had not another worker of the river crossed their path.

"In luck again, Gaffer?" The voice queried, in an accent betraying a more local connection than Jane and her Uncle could claim. "I know'd you were in luck again."

"Oh lord, Jenkinson," her Uncle muttered and motioned for Jane to speed up.

"Don't fret yourself partner, I didn't touch him," Jenkinson continued, oblivious. "I must have passed him as I went upriver. I sometimes think you're like a vulture, partner. You can smell them bodies clean out the river. Ain't been eating nothing that's disagreed with you, have you, partner?"

"Yes I have," Mr Philips uttered, finally losing patience, causing Jane to stop the boat. "Swallowing too much of that word 'partner.' I'm no partner of yours, Jenkinson."

"Since when?" The man countered.

"Since you were accused of robbing a man. A live man!"

"What if he'd been a dead man?"

"You can't rob the dead," Mr Philips declared. "What world does a dead man belong to? The other world. What world does money belong to? This world. You did time for putting your hand in the pocket of a sailor, a live sailor! You count yourself lucky for being released instead of being hanged.
But we work together no more. In this world, or the other." He turned to Jane. "Cast off."

His niece obliged and swept the oars through the water once more, quickly passing the rogue that was Jenkinson. From the moment Philips came to London the man attached himself to them, foisting his hapless daughter along with him, until the authorities found enough evidence to convict him of robbery. By that time he had discovered her Uncle's old profession and was angry enough to snub them when Philips refused to lend his legal mind to Jenkinson's defence at the Old Bailey. Evidently the time for such snubbing had passed, unless his words just a moment ago were taunts.

"Stop," her uncle uttered when the silhouette of the rogue's boat was no longer distinguishable from the darkness haunting the city. Through the dim light of the lantern that hung on their vehicle, Jane could descry another corpse floating amongst the dregs of the river. She was grateful for the night concealing the full horror of the grisly sight from herself and her uncle. The longer a victim lay undiscovered in the Thames, the more gruesome their condition became.

With practised hands Philips searched through the pockets before attaching the victim to the tow rope. Any Charon who found corpses wearing clothes which spoke of a moneyed background were usually rewarded well upon discovery. Jane watched her uncle, wondering once more why he had chosen this profession. London was the home of law, with Lincoln's and Grey's Inn, and the Old Bailey.

Despite the countless members of the bar, there was still enough clients for him to earn a living, albeit hardly a comfortable one. Yet her uncle was violently opposed to any form of education, even providing such for his son, a matter Jane was forced to organise herself and secretly. At times she wondered if it was because of her Aunt, if her passing had caused her uncle to hate the profession which brought them together. Other times she found a certain logic in believing it to be a form of redemption. Then there were those times when she did not wonder at all, for as her uncle said, when you live day to day hauling bodies out of the river, you don't find much time for supposing.
Chapter 2

Part 2.

Far away from the river and its environs of nearly poverty stricken inhabitants, stood the houses of London's richer society. Instead of the cares of home's owners focusing on how little they had with which to feed and clothe themselves, these wealthy leaders of frivolity and fashion were, today at least, concerning themselves with a wedding. A union brought about by money, witnessed by money, and now celebrated with money.

Ensnconced upon the outskirts of the crowd that had gathered to congratulate the 'happy couple,' were those who felt obliged to attend events such as these, in order to keep their businesses alive by accumulating connections with these affluent personages.

Richard Fitzwilliam was one of these business men. A son of the Earl of Matlock, he had been provided with enough means of free fortune- money that was not tied to his elder brother's inheritance -to start a practice at law. His personal preference had been for the Army, but his mother had fear of his being killed on some foreign battlefield and so to please her he had chosen the law instead. While it had not advanced his career as much as Richard would have liked, it had brought him a much valued friendship.

Taking two glasses from a passing servant, Richard made his way through the crowds back to that friend now.

He had secured for them the privacy of two large armchairs by a fire in one of the connecting anterooms, which provided some peace from the main wedding breakfast festivities. Richard caught sight of the smoke from his friend's cigar as he neared these armchairs and sank gratefully into the vacant one.

"Did I tell you, Richard," his friend began after he had sat down, "that my respected father has found a wife for his not generally respected son?"

"Really, Charles," Richard remarked. "With some money of course?" He sought to ascertain.

"With some money of course," Charles echoed. "Else he would never have found her."

Richard turned from his view of the fire to glance at the crowd for a moment. "So, who exactly is our host today?" He asked his friend, knowing from past experience that Charles loathed talking about his father's filial expectations for long.

"Lucas," Charles replied. "Over there," he added, pointing the host and hostess out for his friend. "Mr Empire. This is his good deed for the year."

A click of one of the doors leading into the main room called their attention from the Lucases to the new arrival.

"Good lord," Richard said as he recognised the formidable woman. "I'm surprised Aunt Catherine has graced this gorgeous spectacle with her royal presence."

"Old money doesn't mind sniffing around new money for an hour or two," Charles remarked. "Champagne tastes the same whoever's buying."

This was a practise which his friend knew about all too well. Charles' father was once accorded the
same honorific 'Mr Empire,' as Sir William Lucas was now, but enough time had since passed to let
his new money become old. Mr Bingley senior saw the sense of attaching himself to a landed gentry
family by marrying an heiress, and now expected his children to do the same. Charles' preference for
a career was encouraged, but only with the expectation that he should earn an acceptable profit out of
it.

"Oh lord," Richard said suddenly, as he sank himself deep in the confines of the chair, vainly hoping
it was not too late to go unnoticed. "She's coming over."

"Richard Fitzwilliam!" Lady Catherine called out, making her nephew reluctantly rise from his seat.
"You wretch! Why have you not come to see me?"

"Oh my dear Aunt," Richard began, hoping his charms would flatter her ego enough to leave them
in peace; "I cannot bear having to force my way through the crowds of your other admirers. A man
must have hope."

Lady Catherine de Bourgh flicked her nephew's shoulder with her fan in mild admonishment, and
then glanced at the hosts.

"Well, the Lucases have certainly done their young friends proud." she declared. "Dear best friends
of the groom and of course the bride." She raised her voice to attract the attention of other guests.
"Any one know anything about the bride?"

The only response that met her query was the entrance of the couple in question.

"I've never seen him before," Lady Catherine continued, "or her. Does anyone know anything about
them?"

Someone chose to answer her at last, providing Richard with a brief respite and he enjoyed some
peace with his friend while the room gossiped and speculated about how many acres of land, or
investments, and fortunes to be inherited by either one of the happy couple if not both of them.
Though it was clear by the end of this discussion that no one present had made the acquaintance of
the newlyweds before they were wed, it would have been the pinnacle of bad manners to declare
such a distinction publicly. So as the bride and groom made their rounds to talk with the host and
hostess, along with a few of the guests, everyone pretended that their knowledge of each other was
long established on both sides.

"Nephew," Lady Catherine called again when the bride and groom had retired to talk before leaving.
"I insist upon you telling me all about the Darcy fortune."

Richard sighed and pretended he had no knowledge of what his Aunt was talking about. "Darcy?"
He echoed.

"Come now, nephew. My late and dearly lamented brother in law has been dead for weeks and we
don't know what is to become of his fortune."

"Society becomes restless when it smells a great fortune left unclaimed," Charles remarked to friend.

"I find it immensely embarrassing having the eyes of society upon me to this extent," Richard said,
before relenting to tell the story behind his involvement with his late Uncle's Will. "George Darcy as
you know was a younger son and a tremendous old rascal who made his money in dust."

"An absolute scandal!" Sir William Lucas commented. "A fortune to be made in rubbish!"

"And my brother in law actually lived among the dust heaps?" Lady Catherine sought to confirm,
her tone full of disdain at this way of living.

"Yes," Richard confirmed, "like a veritable mountain range about him. My Uncle however had the miserable inclination to make enemies out of all his family. All were turned out of the house. Even the son. Now keep your eyes fixed on the son because this is where I come in. He grew up abroad."

"In the Cape?" Lady Catherine queried.

"In the Cape," Richard confirmed. "Where I discovered he was living, only the other day, having been abroad for some fourteen years. The whole range of dust mountains plus estate is left to young Darcy and he has set sail home to claim it. He is due in England now, even as we speak."

"So my brother in law was not such an unnatural monster after all. Fortune will go to the son, as it should," Lady Catherine opined.

"Ah, but he did leave a sting in the tail of his will," Richard remarked. "The son's inheritance is conditional upon his marrying a girl he has never met. One Elizabeth Bennet."

"Elizabeth Bennet?" Lady Catherine echoed. "Never heard of her. Has anyone any knowledge of any Elizabeth Bennet? Is she out?"

A general silence met these enquiries.

"What if Darcy does not care for the bride his perverse father has chosen for him?" Charles asked.

"Not care for her?" Cried the other.

"Cast off the dust mountains?" Added the brother.

"Not care for a marriageable young woman called Elizabeth?" Lady Catherine cried. "And throw away a fortune? Really, Charles!"

In to this crowd of feckless society a footman entered, carrying a slip of paper. He came to a halt before Richard.

"A note has arrived for you, sir," the footman announced.

The room settled into eager silence as Richard unfolded the slip of paper and read the contents contained therein.

"This note arrives in the most opportune manner," he said a few minutes later. "I fear it is the conclusion of Darcy's story."


"Refuses to marry Elizabeth Bennet?" One of his daughters added. "Surely not?"

"No," Richard replied. "No you're all wrong. The story is completer and rather more exciting than I had supposed." He paused before announcing, "William Darcy is drowned."

Silence overcame the occupants of the room as each member of the crowd quietly dealt with such a disturbing revelation coming upon the conclusion of an inheritance, the nature of which had occupied the gossip columns for almost a twelvemonth.

Richard took the opportunity to slip out of the room, his friend quietly following him downstairs and into the sanctuary of the Lucas Library.
A young man was awaiting them, seated in the armchair by the window. In his hands rested one of the many leather bound volumes which resided in the Library and his face was buried within its pages.

Richard came over to stand in front of him. "Did you write this?" He asked.

The boy looked up. "I did," he answered curtly before looking down at the pages again.

Richard sighed but persisted. "Did you find the body?"

"My father, Jesmond Philips, found the body," the boy replied.

"What's his position?" Richard asked.

The boy's answer was a little uncertain this time. "He... gets his living along shore."

"And why did your father," Charles inquired, "Jesmond Philips, not write the note himself?"

The boy looked up at him disdainfully and made no reply.

"Is the body far?" Richard asked.

"It's a goodish stretch," the youth informed them arrogantly. "I came up in a cab, and the cab's waiting to be paid." He paused, then added, "we could go back in it before you paid it, if you like."

Richard placed his hands on the arms of the chair before venturing another question. "William Darcy was discovered dead?"

Young Philips looked up disdainfully refusing to be intimidated. "Dead as the Pharaoh's multitude drowned under the Red Sea. If Lazarus was as half as far gone that was the greatest of miracles."

"Good lord," Richard remarked as he walked away from the boy. "You seem to be at home in the Red Sea, young man."

"Read of it with a teacher at school," Philips informed them, "But don't you tell my father. It was my cousin's contriving."

"You seemed to have a good cousin," Charles commented.

"She ain't bad," Young Philips agreed. "But if she even knows half her letters its because I learned her."

Charles looked up from his stance by the desk at this and walked over to the boy. He gripped Philips' chin with his hand and turned the arrogant youth's face so he would meet his gaze. A silent duel of strength was quietly initiated by the boy and calmly refused by the man, who returned to the desk. He lifted the lid of Lucas' cigar case and took out two prime specimens. Placing both in his jacket pocket he closed the lid and turned to his friend. "I'll go with you if I may."

Richard nodded his consent and took the book from the boy, returning the volume to its proper shelf. Affecting not to care, the boy rose from his seat and led the two lawyers out into the city.
Chapter 3

Part 3.

Lawyers Fitzwilliam and Bingley, with their young, arrogant companion, were observed quitting the house briefly by the groom from one of the upstairs windows before he returned to quizzing his bride. For some time they had been sequestered away from their guests, presumably to make ready for their departure as a married couple. However, the truth of the matter was that a chance remark from one of the guests caused him to request her company in one of the side rooms from their wedding breakfast, where he was about to receive even more disturbing news.

"Do you mean to tell me?" He began, still affronted and stunned by the nature of what he had learned only moments before.

"Do you mean to tell me?" The bride countered just as indignant, for she had a right to be just as offended by the situation as he was.

The groom ignored her tone in favour of pacing about the room a few moments longer. Silence descended between the two of them, as his bride wrestled with a part of her elaborate bouquet, now laying in fragments across her white gown, waiting for him to explain why he was so horrified by her confession. Unequal marriages were not unusual, but since he had a fortune of his own, there was hardly a pressing need for her to possess independent means also. Unless,... she paused in her thoughts and her floral destruction as something occurred to her.

"Are you a man of fortune?" She at last dared to ask.

The groom paced the length before the sofa upon which she was reclining beside him, then replied, "No," in a sad tone of voice.

"Then you have married me under false pretences," the bride declared, reassuming her earlier indignation.

"So be it," he decidedly said, for his mind was just as quick as her, and he was half prepared for what was coming next. He halted his pacing to stare at her. "Now you. Are you a woman of property?"

The bride tore more of the leaves off the foliage of her bouquet before answering him in that same sadly ashamed tone. "No."

"Then you have married me under false pretences," the groom echoed her words harshly. He began pacing again. "I asked Lucas and he told me you were rich."

"Lucas?" The bride said, equally harsh and arrogant. "What does he know about me?"

"Well congratulations, you obviously made a very good job of deceiving him," the groom commented. He stopped pacing again to add; "And, Mrs Wickham, what made you suppose me to be a man of fortune?"

Mrs Wickham hung her head, ashamed. "I asked, Lucas."

"And he knows of me as much as he knows of you," Mr Wickham informed her cruelly.

Mrs Wickham wrecked her bouquet foliage angrily. "I will never forgive Lucas, for being so...."
"Gullible?" Mr Wickham finished. He tossed his cigar into the remains of the cake, then held out his arm.

The bride took it and they walked to the door, pasting smiles upon their faces as they passed the guests on their way out of the house, for it would not do to inform the upper echelons of Society that they had just borne witness to the greatest con of the age, played out between the couple as well as themselves. As for the couple themselves, an air of polite affection must be displayed, in public at least, if not in private. However this disgraceful union had come about, it was required to be kept, for both the future of the newlyweds and of Society to rejoice in the arrogance of their success, as to admit such a failure would be deeply embarrassing for all concerned.

They would come to terms with the situation in which they found themselves, and how to deal with such circumstances, later.

Night had come once more to the streets of London, establishing residence as the cab in which Richard Fitzwilliam and his friend were travelling rode deeper into its more foulest of neighbourhoods.

Richard took another draught of his cigar, pilfered from the obliging and ignorant Lucas, and leaned back into the recess of the interior. "Let me see, Charles," he said, "I have been on the Honourable roll of Solicitors of the High Court for five years now. And except for taking instructions on average once a fortnight from the will of Lady Catherine de Bourgh- who by the way has nothing to leave -I have had no scrap of business except for this Darcy romance."

"And I've been called to the bar for ages and have had no business at all," Charles said in sympathy. "Which my father uses as an excuse to keep me poor," he added. "Yes, he keeps me bound to him with the merest trickle of income to relieve his disappointment. What's more he continually berates me for my lack of energy. But give me something to be energetic about, and by God, I'll show him energy." Charles paused to take a draught of his cigar. "He's an amusing fellow, my father. I should like to please him, if I could."

"He must know my own father," Richard commented in sympathy. "That sounds like one of his edicts that he delivers to my elder brother on more than one occasion."

The two friends exchanged a shared look about fathers before resuming their examinations that the cab afforded them of the road it was upon. The journey took them past the Monument, the Tower, the Docks, Ratcliffe, then Rotherhide. A sudden smell, rank and cloying, caused them to draw away from the doors and take in another draught of their cigars, before attempting conversation again.

"We must be drawing nearer to the river," Charles realised. "We shall fall over the edge of the world if we don't stop soon," he added softly.

Richard tapped the roof of the cab with his walking stick and called out to the driver. "Hello there. Surely we're nearly there?"

They received no response except silence, forcing them to be obliged with quiet speculation about what they were likely to encounter at the end of this journey, until the cab finally came to a halt.

Young Philips jumped down from the seat by the driver and opened one of the doors for them.

"We must walk the rest," he informed them. "Its not many yards."

Richard and Charles descended from the cab, gathered their coats close about them and followed their arrogant young guide.
Around them London's ghettos closed upon their route, a stark contrast to the salubrious boroughs they had been present in only hours ago. Despite the obvious proximity to the river, dwellings were built almost on top of each other, their doors flanked by dark, dank streets, littered with the filth and muck created by the inhabitants of the nation's capital.

Some of these less reputable individuals now emerged from the shadows to obstruct their path. Boys younger than their guide and more scrawny too, sought out and clung to them, begging for funds, or subtle pick pocketing if their prey were careless. Unfortunately for the ruffians, in this instance, Richard and Charles were wise to such stratagems and with deft touches of their sticks, the boys were dissuaded of their nefarious objectives, and sent back to their previous occupation of skulking in the shadows.

Young Philips led them to a house that was situated close upon the shores of the river. From the outside it appeared to have been an old mill, but its rundown and decaying appearance suggested that such a line of business ended unsuccessfully. Now it looked barely large enough to contain more than one room, but when they stepped inside the lawyers learned that appearances could be deceptive.

"The gentlemen, father," Young Philips announced their presence to the two occupants of the main room.

His father, a middle-aged, stocky man, advanced to greet them. The niece seemed content to remain unnoticed, sitting quietly by the fire, avoiding the gaze of both guests, both the brief one and the other's more curious stare.

"You are Richard Fitzwilliam Esquire, sir?" Mr Philips asked him somewhat astutely. "Are you sir?" He furthered queried after the answer was delayed.

"Richard Fitzwilliam is my name, sir," Richard answered carefully, somewhat discomposed by the many contrasts he was seeing within the room. "What you found last night," he added, "it is not here?"

"Its close by," Philips replied. "I do everything according to the rules. I gave notice of the circumstances to the police and the police have taken possession of it. They have put it into print already. Here."

He gestured to the wall that was to the right of the door. Richard saw that it contained many notices of missing or drowned persons, the papers discoloured by age and condition, hanging on to the shoddily soak sodden wall by sheer force of will.

"Only papers found on the unfortunate man I see," Richard commented when he found the right article, squinting to distinguish the writing in the shallow lighting.

"Only papers," agreed Philips.

"No money," Richard continued reading, "but three pence, in one of the shirt pockets."

"Three penny pieces," Philips echoed.

"The trouser pockets empty and turned inside out?" Richard added, puzzled by such a seemingly odd detail.

"That is a common find," Philips assured him. "Whether its the wash of the tide or no, I can't say. This one," he pointed to another poster, "was found with his pockets turned inside out. And this, and this."
"You did not find all of these yourself?" The other gentleman asked suddenly.

Philips turned to stare at him. "And what would your name be, sir?" He asked.

"This is my friend," Richard answered, "Mr Charles Bingley."

Charles turned his gaze from the niece to the uncle. "Do you suppose there's been much violence and robbery beforehand in these cases?" He asked.

"I am not one of the supposing sort," Philips remarked, disliking him immediately. "If you had to get your living by hauling bodies out of the river everyday of your life, you would not have much time to supposing either."

Mr Philips' hospitality seemed to be at an end, as he headed outside into the night after this remark, causing the gentlemen to join him. Richard walked out first and with a last glance towards the niece, Charles followed.

The trio had not advanced far, when Philips abruptly came to a halt. To the lawyers' surprise, he spoke into the darkness ahead of them.

"Are you looking for a body?" Philips asked. "Or have you found one? Which is it?"

Richard checked his gasp of surprise as a man came out of the shadows and into the light. He was a little younger than himself, with dark hair and slightly tanned skin.

"I'm lost," the man replied. "And I'm a stranger. And I must.... I have to get to the place where I can see the body." He opened out the piece of paper in his hands, enough for them to discern that it was the same notice they had journeyed for, frayed from being torn from where it was first found. "It is possible I may know this."

"Are you seeking a William Darcy?" Richard asked.

"No," replied the man.

"Then I think I can assure you, that you will not find what you fear," Richard returned.

His words made no difference to the man before them. "I must see the body," said the stranger steadily.

"Then follow us," Philips instructed before walking on.

With no further conversation the three gentlemen followed Philips to the Limehouse Mortuary.

Inside the Inspector present showed them the body, allowing no undue length of time to closely examine the remains, such was the condition and smell likely to affect those unused to such sights.

"No clues as to how the body came to be in the river," the inspector remarked, recounting his investigations so far as they headed back down the tunnel from the examination chamber to his less bleak office. "Very often there is no clue, as very often there isn't for ascertaining whether the injuries occurred before or after death. The Steward of the ship identified William Darcy, along with the clothes and papers also sworn as those of William Darcy."

"And as to what exactly happened?" Richard asked.

"Totally disappeared upon leaving ship till found in river. Surgeon said injuries could have been sustained before he went into the river, another surgeon has said they could have been sustained
afterwards. He'd probably been on some little game. Thought it a harmless game no doubt, and it turned out to be a fatal game. Inquest tomorrow, an open verdict no doubt." The Inspector paused as he sat down behind his desk, and noticed the third gentleman in the group, who was, it seemed, very shaken. "It appears to have knocked your friend completely off his legs."

"This gentleman is no friend of mine, sir," Richard replied as they all turned to look at the stranger.

"'Tis a horrible sight," he said, sitting hunched upon a wooden bench against the wall in the room.

"You expected to identify?" The Inspector queried.

"Yes," the stranger replied.

"And?"

"No, no I did not." Abruptly he rose from his seat. "I must go now."

"You were after identifying someone else you wouldn't have come here," the Inspector persisted, leaning to one side in order to get a better view of him. "Can we not ask who?"

If it was possible, the man seemed to retreat even more into the shadows created by the low light and barrelled ceiling room. "You must excuse my not telling you. You must know that sometimes there are disagreements in families, personal tragedies that they would rather not have generally discussed."

"At least you will not object to leaving me your card?" The Inspector asked.

"I would not if I had one, but I do not," the man replied.

"At least, sir, you will not object to writing down your name and address?" The Inspector tried next.

Trapped, the man reluctantly emerged from the depths of the mortuary and came to the desk. Taking the proffered quill, he began writing.

"Mr Frederick Denny," the Inspector read aloud, from the sheet for the benefit of the others in the room. "Exchequer Coffee House, Palace Yard, Westminster. Consequently from out of town?"

"Yes," Denny answered. "Out of town. You could say that." And with that, he left.

The Inspector waited a few minutes, then silently beckoned one of his constables towards him. "Keep him in sight without giving offence. Make sure that he is staying where he says he is, and find out everything you can about him."

Richard watched the subordinate leave, then turned to the Inspector. "I have to ask you, sir, do you think that there is anything untoward in William Darcy's death?"

"If it was murder, anyone might have done it," the Inspector replied thoughtfully. "Burglary or pickpocketing, that needs an apprenticeship. Not so murder. We're all of us up to that. Pity its not true that old superstition about corpses bleeding when being touched by the hand of those responsible for their undoing." He paused as one of the inmates behind him suddenly cried out in agony. "You get row enough out of her," he added, "but you get nothing out of bodies."


It was not until they had said goodbye to Mr Philips that Richard allowed himself to reflect on the short life of the cousins he barely knew. Fitzwilliam Darcy, though two years his junior, had been a
close childhood friend, until the quarrel between him and his father had forced young Darcy to live abroad. Richard still held tender memories of the two of them playing in the grounds of the Darcy's grandfather's estate; Pemberley, watched over by Darcy's mother and Richard's late aunt, his father's sister. George Darcy had been a younger son, never expected to inherit the Derbyshire fortune, until tragedy visited upon the elder, cutting him off in his prime. And now the death of William had ended the keeping of the estate in the family altogether.

The Will mentioned who gained possession of the dust and Pemberley fortunes now, and it was not the Fitzwilliam side, a piece of information which Richard knew, would not please one member of his family.
Chapter 4

Part 4.

"The entire fortune to go to a dustman? It is unbelievable."

"It is true," Richard asserted to his Aunt, over tea the next day. "As George Darcy's only son is dead and there are no other male relatives living on the paternal side, the entire fortune and estates goes to Mr and Mrs Reynolds."

"It is unnatural," Lady Catherine persisted.

"They were good and faithful servants," Richard added, defending the couple, who he remembered well from his youth spent at the Pemberley estate, where they were steward and housekeeper respectively before George Darcy went to seek his fortune.

"But how will a dustman know what to do with such wealth?" His Aunt asked. "And run a country estate?"

Richard refrained from voicing aloud that what little was left of his Aunt's wealth was managed by such servants, replying instead, "that's for Mr and Mrs Reynolds to decide, when I explain to them the full extent of their inheritance."

"Mark my words, nephew, the man will prove to have no idea what to do."

Richard inwardly disagreed with her but wisely chose to keep silent. Where his Aunt was concerned only one opinion was safe and that was hers. Privately he wondered what she would do with her own wealth, or lack there of, inherited by way of marriage, as the match had long given up hope of producing heirs, even before the death of his uncle Sir Lewis de Bourgh. There was the assumption that it would revert back to the Fitzwilliam estate, but Richard had learned that it was unwise to trust assumptions when it came to matters of inheritance.

He dutifully attended upon her and her opinions until the afternoon, whereupon he made his way to the dust yard once belonged to George Darcy, and now belonging to Edmund Reynolds, situated about one and a quarter of a mile up Maiden Lane.

Mountains proved to be the right term for describing the dust-heaps. Each inclined in their own ways towards the sky with men and women shifting through them as though they were great archaeological sites. Smoke and stench rose from those searches, overpowering the air, so much so that Richard had to hold a handkerchief over his mouth as he negotiated his way to the house that stood in a clearing in the middle of it. The building was two storeys but small, its exterior stained by the dust-heaps. The house appeared gloomy and unwelcoming, a sharp contrast to the owners as Richard found when he was ushered inside and offered a delicious respite.

"So the entire Darcy fortune," Richard began, reading from the Will after pleasantries and small talk was over, "that is the complete range of dust heaps, including the little one, is entailed to Mr Edmund Reynolds. The said Mr Reynolds is also recipient of the Pemberley estates if there are no other living male relatives bearing the blood and Darcy name to claim possession."

The Reynolds said nothing at first. They were too grieved by the knowledge that the young child they had raised was no more. It was not until they were heading outside to attend the inquest, that Richard received his first tasks.
"Though I hate to disagree with you on your very first instruction, Mr Reynolds," Richard said in response, "as your lawyer, I must tell you that ten thousand pounds is too much."

"My wife thinks its the right figure and so do I," Mr Reynolds replied. "Ten thousand pound reward, to find the villain who murdered our William."

From a purely emotional perspective, Richard privately agreed with Reynolds. If funds could help his family receive justice for his cousin's death, then he would pledge all he could towards the cause. As a lawyer however, he doubted a reward would accomplish anything except corruption. All those who were eager for the money would come forward with false claims, preying upon the Reynolds's and their newly acquired fortune, possibly for the rest of their lives.

Yet they had insisted, and as their lawyer, Richard had to obey. So he informed the coroner as soon as they entered the court. Then he saw the Reynolds to their seats before finding a space for himself by his Aunt, who beckoned him over to her side as soon as she observed him entering the court room, no doubt wishing to deliver her judgement once the verdict of the inquest was declared.

The coroner called forward the various witnesses and asked them to deliver their reports. Richard was asked to explain the history of his cousin's departure from England, and the reason he had been required to return home. The steward of the ship Darcy had sailed home upon told the account of how the man had passed the voyage and his conduct aboard ship until he disappeared after the vessel had put to port. A medical man was called forward to give his opinion as to cause of death and Philips was called to the stand to report how the body was found.

When all the evidence had been laid before the court, the coroner began his summoning up of judgement.

"We can only imagine William Darcy's feelings as he travelled homeward after so many years aboard, towards his future and the bride his father had chosen for him. And we can only imagine how the poor girl feels, her hopes so cruelly dashed. We have heard the circumstances of Mr Darcy's return to this country. And we have heard compelling evidence that the deceased carried a large sum of money from the forced sale of his foreign property. No doubt to facilitate the early marriage to the woman who waited for him patiently and silently."

Where was the girl, Richard Fitzwilliam wondered silently, glancing around the court. She had a right to attend, even in mourning, although why she should even enter that state was a mystery to him, for she had never met her intended, nor betrothed herself publicly to him in any way, bar the conditions of the Will. Mere curiosity was requirement enough, yet there was no sign of her.

"This case is made further interesting by the remarkable experience of Jesmond known as Gaffer Philips," the coroner continued, "having rescued from the Thames so many dead bodies. The jury has found that Mr William Darcy was found floating in the Thames in some state of decay and much injured. And that the said William Darcy came by his death under highly suspicious circumstances. Though by whose act, and in what precise manner, there is no evidence before this jury to show. I will therefore this day make a recommendation that there should be a police investigation into this mysterious death. And I have noticed that interested parties have come forward with a substantial reward. Mr Reynolds has provided an excessively generous amount, of ten thousand pounds."

"Ten thousand pounds?" Lady Catherine echoed in whispered shock to Richard. "I told you the man would be a fool with money, nephew."

Richard said nothing, sitting silently as the coroner delivered his open verdict. His mind instead was focused upon the girl who had been promised to his cousin; Elizabeth Bennet. Wondering where she was and what her thoughts were, at having whatever hopes she may have harboured for her marriage
dashed by his cousin's death.
Before a sash window on the basement floor of a house in Holloway sat a woman in mourning. She had been forced into this state, both by the dictates of society and the tragic misfortunes of her family. Her philosophy was once to think of the past as its remembrance gives one pleasure, but now even the latter memories were painful to recollect. Beneath this layer of grief were also feelings of guilt. Many sacrifices had been made to save her family from the dangers of bankruptcy and now mortal circumstances had prevented her from making one herself. True, whichever outcome came about, matters would have been out of her control, but at this present time her conscience could not accept that excuse.

"Elizabeth?" A voice gently interrupted her, making her lift the black veil and turn.

Her father had risen from his seat beside the fire. "Dinner is ready, my dear."

It was a trio instead of sextet that she joined at the table. The 'Meryton fever' of 1865 had caused more losses to the Bennet family than two sisters. House and wealth--for two thousand pounds per annum seemed rich compared to nothing now--may be considered materialistic concerns but they had guaranteed the Bennets' security and the ability to advance their children in the world. Now they were the tenants instead of the landlord and their wealth consisted of what little they could earn by renting out the upper floors of their house and the income Mr Bennet earned as a clerk at King, Lucas and Foster. That had been her father's sacrifice; liberty and privacy. Jane had made hers by going to live with their Uncle Philips and cousin Charlie. And hers had been dependent upon a chance meeting years ago and now that had faded away into nothing.

It had sunk into the sea.

"You will change your clothes tomorrow, Miss Lizzy?" Her mother asked her as she drew the napkin across her lap.

"I am in mourning, Mama," Elizabeth replied.

"Your banns were never published, so I see no need for you to be wearing that insufferable dress," Mrs Bennet continued.

"It is not my fault he died, Mama," Elizabeth said, as much as to herself as her mother.

"I'm sure I'm the poorer," Kitty remarked. "If I have to wait until Lizzy finds herself another husband."

"Think what an embarrassed first meeting it would have been, Kitty," Elizabeth said to her sister. "We never could have pretended to harbour any true affection. I was hardly likely to even like this William Darcy, how could I?" Although, she added silently, this embarrassment might have been smoothed away by the money. She had not fully realised how hateful it was to be poor until they were. Degradingly poor. Offensively poor. "Left to him in a will!" She added aloud. "Like a dozen spoons! And all this for a man I never saw."

"Enter!" Mrs Bennet called out as someone knocked on the door, while Elizabeth rose from her seat to greet the visitor.

"And should have hated if I had," she added, before turning to glance at the visitor.
The man was a stranger to her. Dark hair, brown eyes, and tall, clothed in dark attire, as though he wished to be unnoticed. His manner appeared diffident, reserved, almost nervous, as he met her appraising glance shyly before moving on. Yet the look that was conveyed within that brief moment, was so intense, so vulnerable, so knowing. Instinctively she backed away, allowing her parents to see the visitor.

"Ah AB," Mrs Bennet began. Ever since they had been forced to take in lodgers she had taken to calling her husband thus. "This is the gentleman who has taken our first floor. He was so good as to make an appointment for this morning when you be at home. This is my husband, Andrew Bennet, the undisputed master of the house."

"Seeing that I'm quite satisfied, Mr Bennet," the visitor began, "with the rooms that is and their price, I hope that a memorandum between us; some two or three lines perhaps, might bind the bargain."

Andrew Bennet nodded in acceptance and moved to the desk, where he was joined by his wife and the visitor. Elizabeth returned to the dinner table, but her interest remained fixed on their new lodger, intrigued by his seeming desire to remain unremarkable.

"The gentlemen proposes to take your apartments by the quarter," Mrs Bennet dictated.

"If I might mention a referee?" Mr Bennet asked.

"No," the gentleman answered. "I think that a referee is not necessary. Neither is it convenient. I'm a stranger in London. You see I require no reference from you, I shall pay whatever you please in advance, and I will leave my furniture here, whereas if you, sir, were in embarrassed circumstances," he paused, suddenly realising that they were, "this is a supposition of course but as you see..." he trailed off.

"We see perfectly," Mrs Bennet answered, offended.

"Well money and goods are of course certainly the best references," Mr Bennet said hurriedly, anxious to keep the peace and their tenant.

"Do you really think they are, Papa?" Elizabeth asked him.

"Among the best my dear," Mr Bennet allowed.

"I should have thought myself it would be so easy to provide the usual kind," Elizabeth added, making then gentleman's gaze turn upon her.

"My dear, will you be the witness?" Mr Bennet asked, bringing the agreement over to the dinner table and placing it before her.

Elizabeth took the pen from her father and wrote in the space he indicated.

"I'm very much obliged to you, Miss Bennet," the gentleman said as he took the pen from her and signed his name.

"Obliged?" Elizabeth echoed. "And why should..." she paused to read out the name, "Mr William Hurst, be obliged to me?"

"I've given you so much trouble," Hurst answered.

"By signing my name?" Elizabeth shrugged. "I am your landlord's daughter after all."
Hurst turned to her father and drew out some coins from his pocket, placing them in Mr Bennet's hand. "I'll send my furniture tomorrow, I'll follow shortly behind." Then with a slight inclination of his head in farewell, he left.

Elizabeth went to lock the door, peering out through the veiled panes to see the man quietly disappear into the depths of Holloway. "Papa," she began as she returned to the table. "We have ourselves a murderer for a tenant!"

"Or a robber at least. And living upstairs," added Kitty.

"On the first floor," added Mrs Bennet. "Have you no compassion for my nerves?"

"You mistake me, my dear," Mr Bennet replied. "I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least."

"Ah, you do not know what I suffer," his wife moaned.

"I've never seen such an exhibition," Elizabeth, used to such complaints from her mother, knowing that continued discussion of them only worsened the suffering, continued. "Unable to look a person in the eye? Mark my words between Mr Hurst and myself there is a natural antipathy and a deep distrust. I don't know what will come of it."

"Well my dear, between Mr Hurst and myself there is the matter of eight gold sovereigns and supper shall certainly come of it!" Mr Bennet declared, placing the coins upon the table.

Later, when the money had been spent upon supper, Elizabeth thumbed through the change which had been left before handing the money to her father.

"Just in time for the landlord my dear," Mr Bennet commented softly and sadly.

"I hate all this money going to the landlord when we all want for everything," Elizabeth sighed. "Why do you suppose old Mr Darcy took it into his head to make such a fool out of me?" She asked in despaired wonder.

"I've told you often, my dear, I hardly spoke a hundred words to the gentleman," Mr Bennet replied. Elizabeth looked at him, and descrying the meaning held within her fine dark eyes, he began to recant the tale once more. "We were visiting your Aunt and Uncle Gardiner one summer. You were sitting on my lap, on a bench in the park, rather as we are now, when you suddenly took it into your head to..."

"To make a scene, Papa?" Elizabeth prompted.

"Never let it be said that I was the parent who condoned infant misbehaviour, AB!" Mrs Bennet remarked as she strolled across the room.

"And then I screamed, and hit you about the head, didn't I Papa?" Elizabeth sought to confirm, ignoring her mother's harsh comment.

"And the old gentleman said, 'that's a nice girl. That's a promising girl,'" Mr Bennet continued.

"Never let it be said I condoned the talking to of strangers in the park!" Mrs Bennet again interrupted with.

Andrew ignored her. "And then he asked for our name and address, and kept saying, 'that's a promising girl. A most promising girl.'"
"And so I was," Elizabeth uttered wistfully.

"And so you were my dear," Mr Bennet added. "So you were."
Chapter 6

Part 6.

An old squaddie walked and hopped to the sixty-fifth store in this particular back alley of London, otherwise known as Clerkenwell. The sign above the store; Younge; Articulator of Bones, only began to describe the building’s contents. Taxidermy animals of all shapes and sizes, posed in human positions and professions, from fencing to more natural states littered the room, gathered between displays of skeletons and other exotic objects.

The proprietor of the establishment emerged from the back room not a moment after the old soldier entered this curious place. "How do you do?"

Squaddie proffered forward his wooden leg. "Wickham, you know?"

"To be sure," Younge replied, his eyes studying leg from cloth covered flesh to wood. "Hospital amputation wasn't it? I remember you now."

"Just so," Wickham confirmed.

"Come and sit by the fire and warm your other one. My tea is drawing, Mr Wickham. Will you partake?"

Companionably the two men settled by the fire and sipped the hot tea. After the first cup, Younge fetched the bone and placed it before the owner.

"So how have I been going on this long time, Mr Younge?" Wickham asked.

"I don't know," Younge replied. "Do what I will with an old leg, it won't fit anywhere."

"Hang it, Younge, it can't be personal and peculiar to me," Wickham cried. "It must often happen with your miscellaneous ones."

"With ribs I grant you," Younge conceded. "Always. Every man has his own ribs and no others will go with them, but legs..... I can't find another one to match."

"Now look 'ere," Wickham began. "I want to buy my leg back. How much do you want for it?"

Younge shrugged. "Well you were one of a various lot."

"Come, on your account, I'm not worth much," Wickham pointed out.

"Not for miscellaneous working, Mr Wickham," Younge replied. "It may yet turn out to be valuable as a monstrosity, if you'll excuse me."

"I've a prospect of getting on in life," Wickham revealed. "And I tell you I should not liked to be dispersed. Part of me here, part of me there. But should wish to collect myself together, like a genteel person."

Younge sighed and nodded in empathy, the words striking a chord within him.

"You seen very low, Mr Younge," Wickham remarked astutely. "Is business bad?"

"Never was so good, Mr Wickham," Younge answered, surprising him. "I'm not only first in the
trade. I am the trade. You may buy a skeleton in the West End, pay West End prices for it, but it'd be
my work and putting together. Mr Wickham, if you were brought here lose in a bag, to be
articulated, I could name your smallest bones blindfolded, and sort them all in a manner which
surprise and charm you."

"Now that ain't a state to be brought low about," Wickham assured him.

"It's the heart that's brought me low," Younge confided wistfully. "I'm a bachelor, I'm thirty-two, but
I love her, Mr Wickham."

"But the lady objects to the business?" Wickham guessed, and Younge nodded. "Does she know the
profits of it?"

"She knows the profits of it," Younge confirmed, adding sadly, "she doesn't appreciate the art of it.
So, a man climbs to the top of a tree, Mr Wickham, only to see there's no lookout when he got there.
I sit here, of a night, surrounded by the finest trophies of my art and what have they done for me?
Ruined me."

Wickham finished his tea and glanced at the timepiece on the mantle of the hearth beside them. "It's
time I was at Darcy's."

"Darcy's up the Battle Bridge way?" Younge sought to confirm. "You ought to be in for a good
thing. A Lot of money going there. Old Darcy wanted to know the worth of everything. Many's the
bone and feather he brought me."

"Really now?" Wickham remarked, intrigued, for when met Reynolds this morning, there seemed to
be little in the way profit to be made.

Younge nodded. "The old gentleman was well known. There used to be stories about him hiding all
sorts of property in them dust mounds. I suppose there's something in them. Probably you know that,
Mr Wickham."

Wickham made a slight nod, and exited the building. As he walked out of the alley, he felt his senses
tingling at the opportunity he had wandered into, by accepting Mr Reynolds' proposal to take care of
the dust mounds in his and his wife's absence. An opportunity for money and revenge, against the
fortune of the landlord family that had once cast out tenants like himself and his son so many years
ago. His son may have grown tired of his father's quest for vengeance, and cast him off to get himself
a living by other, perhaps less nefarious means, but the father certainly had not.

Sunday brought change to the Holloway house, in the form of unexpected visitors for the Bennet
family after they returned to their house from church. Their arrival was heralded by one of the
neighbourhood's domesticated hounds, and an encounter between Elizabeth and Mr Reynolds' at first
rather creepy face at the front window.

Rules of polite society were rapidly engaged; Mrs Bennet welcoming the couple into the living area
of the one floor that- due to their lack of funds -they were limited to occupying, and broke out the tea
service, one of the few items salvaged from the selling of the Longbourn estate.

"And now," she began once they were all seated and tea was served, "to what am I indebted to this
honour? A Sunday visit from Mr and Mrs Reynolds who must be so busy in their social activities, I
can hardly imagine why they should honour us with a visit to our humble abode."

"Perhaps, Mrs Bennet, you are acquainted with the names of me and Mr Reynolds as having come
into a certain prosperity," Mrs Reynolds began uncertainly, unprepared for Mrs Bennet's style of
"I have heard a little madam, of your good fortune," Mrs Bennet replied unaffectedly. Or at least in an attempt to seem so.

"And I dare say ma'am you would not be inclined to think kindly of us," Mrs Reynolds astutely remarked.

"Ma'am," Mr Reynolds broke in with at this point, "Mrs Reynolds and me, we are plain people. We don't pretend to anything. We don't go round and round at anything. Consequently we made this call to say how glad we shall be to have the honour and pleasure of your daughter's acquaintance," he revealed, with a glance to Elizabeth. "We should be rejoiced if your daughter should come to consider our house,- our new house that is - her house. We are considering in the light of our changed circumstances...."

"To go in for fashion!" Mrs Reynolds cut in. "And society. We are to give up the dusty bower, though we do love it, for a nice new house in a nice new neighbourhood. And I'm thinking of a pale yellow chariot with a fine pair of horses and silver boxes to the wheels! For we've been thinking of your poor girl and how cruelly disappointed she was of her husband and his riches."

"In short we want to cheer your daughter," Mr Reynolds added. "And give her an opportunity to share such pleasures as we're going to take of ourselves."

"Yes, we want to brisk her up and brisk her about!" Mrs Reynolds declared.

Elizabeth felt she should say something now. The idea of going into society, as though she were some ward to be auctioned off, was almost as loathsome as the conditions the Darcy Will placed her under. "I'm much obliged to you both," she began, "I'm sure, but I doubt if I have the inclination to go out at all."

"Lizzy!" Her mother cried, afraid of her second and least favourite offending their wealthy guests, and thus denying the opportunity to see her well married, which was still her first goal in life. "Lizzy, my child, you must try to conquer these delicate feelings."

The Reynolds however, were not at all offended. "Well, have a little think about it," Mr Reynolds suggested, rising from his chair, a clear signal to all that this was a good time for them to take their leave. "And take my advice, and do what your Ma says and conquer it my dear. We're going to go everywhere and see everything."

"Of course if your sister would like to come, make you more comfortable, we'll welcome her gladly!" Mrs Reynolds added.

Kitty shook her head decidedly. "I'm sure I know my duty, and will stay at home with Ma and Pa," she said affectedly.

Elizabeth, realising from her sister's tone what comments would follow the Reynolds's departure, rose from her chair to follow her father in seeing their visitors to the door. Mrs Reynolds took the opportunity to add aside to her softly, "you mustn't feel a dislike for us you know, my dear, for we couldn't help the inheritance and did nothing to further it."

Elizabeth nodded silently in reply, and took Mrs Reynolds hand in a friendly shake.

"Come old lady," Mr Reynolds remarked affectionately, "we'll outstay our welcome."

They stepped outside and halted on the street for a moment to shake hands in farewell. Kitty, not
caring for manners, had gone to the window to watch them go, and her comments were clearly audible through the thin panes of glass in the sash.

"Well, Lizzy's got what she wants from her Reynolds's. She'll be rich enough at her Reynolds's! She'll have as many lobsters as she likes for her supper at her Reynolds's! Well you won't take me to your Reynolds's!"

Elizabeth flinched, only to meet the sympathetic and understanding smile of the Reynolds's, before they were obliged to take a step back from the entrance, to allow their tenant access to his lodgings. As was his usual custom, their lodger seemed to appear as if from nowhere to intrude on this farewell, before disappearing in to his rooms of the first floor, where they would hear nothing from him. To her surprise Mr Hurst touched a hand to his bowler in silent salutation to Mr Reynolds before making his way up the flight of stairs to the entrance for the ground floor.

"We seem to have a mutual friend," Mr Reynolds commented.

"You are acquainted with our new lodger, Mr Reynolds?" Elizabeth sought to confirm, still surprised by the whole encounter.

"Bit of a mystery man, my dear," Mr Reynolds observed before they finished their farewells and he and his wife walked away.

Elizabeth watched them disappear down the street, before following her father down the stairs to their basement living. Her thoughts however were more concerned with their lodger than their Sunday visitors. Since their brief meeting to draw up the agreement to take the rooms, she and her family had only encountered Mr Hurst when they happened to be exiting the house at the same time. He kept himself to himself, and received no visitors.

Indeed, the floorboards above the ceiling of their rooms seemed so quiet that she presumed he was absent from his lodgings frequently. Mystery was definitely the right word to describe him. From their few words to each other that night she witnessed the agreement, there was little to assume of his character. His manner, if a little reserved, seemed pleasant enough. His looks, like his attitude, were carried without the confidence that his physical attractions would stand him in any good stead, yet, at times, she imagined that she had seen something hidden in those dark eyes of his.

A vulnerability, or perhaps a concealed strength, hinted by the intense stare he conveyed to her when their eyes first met over the threshold of a door. Something she felt, that if one were privileged to see it, would make him a friend indeed.

A part of her yearned to discover it.
Chapter 7

Part 7.

Further down the river, in the parish which encompassed Limehouse mortuary, stood the Six Jolly Porters, a local watering hole, for those who worked on the river. The exterior resembled the rest of the buildings in the neighbourhood; bricks all but choked by the dirt and smoke of the industrial age, glass stained by remnants of the same, the grimy layer a shield from the depressing vision of the outside neighbourhood. Clutching to these crumbling bricks, the glue hanging on for grim death, come rain or shine, were countless notices concerning the dead or the living, from 'Wanted' posters to 'Found.'

One particular notice had caught the interest of one of the pub's once regular customers. It beheld a sketch of a man, wanted in connection with one of the latest mortal discoveries the river had deigned to wash up, below which was a short notice, asking witnesses to come forward. Above the description, resided the figure of a impressively large sum of money, enough to feed the members of this parish for life. The unkempt exile paid the notice a long glance before entering the watering hole.

"You think, wouldn't you, Ms Hill," a voice could heard to be saying, addressing the entire establishment and its proprietor at large, "with the general interest the Darcy case has aroused, not least the erm.... substantial reward offered, that some clue to the murderer might have arisen? There's been a notice in the Times everyday in search of the stranger, Denny, our mysterious friend from the mortuary. Though maybe none of your regulars, those who can read, peruse that journal."

Ms Hill laid down the paper in question with deliberate noise on the bar. "I can read," she declared to the Inspector. "And I think that most know the meaning of the figures £10,000, whether they can sign their names or not. This house is a respecter of the river, and a especial respecter of its dead. And I think you also know that this house is a respecter of the law." She gestured to the miserable weather outside. "The Darcy poster is peeling on my walls. Not one of my regulars who can be trusted has remarked on it." Her eyes were sweeping the room as she spoke, and her next sentence was uttered in a louder tone. "Get away from here, Jenkinson, I told you, you're not welcome in this house!"

"But I haven't done nothing," the exile protested. "You can't refuse to serve me."

"I can do what I like in my own house!" Ms Hill retorted. "Now get away with yer! You will not drink in here again!"

The Inspector watched to make sure Jenkinson did leave, then shot another question at her. "And what of Jessie Philips? Jenkinson's partner, is he allowed to drink alongside you at the counter, Ms Hill?"

"No," Ms Hill revealed, "but I came you twenty or so others hereabouts who are also denied that pleasure. Do you think they all had a hand in the Darcy crime?"

The Inspector was inclined to speculate on the likelihood of such an eventuality, but catching Ms Hill's gaze, he realised that discretion was the better part of valour. Desirous of not becoming one of those who was banned from this establishment, he contented himself with finishing the rest of his drink before returning to work.

Last orders over, and with the pub deserted, Ms Hill took a seat at one of the tables to count up the day's takings. Catching sight of her hardworking barmaid clearing another table nearby, she called
"Bring us over a drink, Jane, and come and sit with me."

Jane put down the cloth she had been using and obliged. Hill put before her a small pile of coins, more than four times the amount of her salary for her work at the Porters. Silently, she ignored the fortune offered.

"Now Jane, I'm very put out," Ms Hill remarked, even though she had endured the same battle every week since Jane Bennet had come to work for her.

"I'm sorry to hear it, Ms Hill," Jane replied.

"Then why do you do it?" Countered her boss forcefully.

"I do what, Ms?" Jane answered, looking at her.

Ms Hill met the steadfast expression and sighed. It would not do to lose her temper with her best worker. "I'm sorry. But Jane, why won't you take up my offer to get clear of your Uncle?"

"I'm very grateful for it," Jane tried to assure her. "Truly I am."

"Obstinate more like," Ms Hill decided. "Do you know the worst of your Uncle, child? The suspicions that are laid against him?" She took a fortifying sip of drink before continuing. "This is not easy to say but I must do it. It is thought by some that your Uncle helps to their death some of those he finds dead."

"You do not know my Uncle," Jane replied, shocked to hear confirmation of the gossip which haunted the Philips's. "Indeed you don't."

"Leave your Uncle," Ms Hill appealed. "Jane, let me help you. You must leave him."

Jane rose from the table. "Thank you, Ms Hill, but I can't. The more my Uncle is accused, the more he needs me to lean on. And there's Charlie to consider. I promised my late Aunt I would look after them both. And I mean to keep that promise."

"Even at the cost to your own reputation?" Ms Hill asked.

But Jane was firm. "Even that," she uttered.

"Well, if you won't take it for yourself, then take it for Charlie," Ms Hill decided. "I know you pay for his schooling. Use it to give him the chance to use that education."

"Very well," Jane conceded, slipping the coins into a lining in her dress where pickpockets wouldn't get to them.

And perhaps his absence might give you the means and the push you need to finally leave your Uncle, Ms Hill thought.

Some miles up river, in what was once a bachelor's residence in Sackville Street, Piccadilly, lived a couple whom few thought would have debased themselves to reside in such a neighbourhood. Particularly after attending the wedding breakfast held at their dearest friends the Lucas's, one of the foremost members of the noveau riche.

Caroline Wickham, nee Bingley, finished rereading the thick letter in her hands with a quiet sigh, before concealing the folded pieces of paper in a drawer once more. She directed a glance to her
husband, who was searching through the other drawers and papers that were littered about their ridiculously small parlour.

She never once imagined that she would be reduced to this. Born to a family of comfortable means, she had foreseen her path to resemble her dear departed mother's; education at a select school, a coming out ball held in the best circles, followed by a marriage to a suitably wealthy husband. And, until that horrible scene during her wedding breakfast, she believed it had, more or less. True, her father had abandoned her and left her to establish herself in society as best she could on her own, but she had imagined that she had landed herself a husband who far surpassed his limited expectations. Imagined being the operative word. Never had she been more cruelly disillusioned. Presented with the hope of a fortune for eternity, only for it to be crushed before her eyes. Needless to say, she had not enjoyed the rest of her wedding day.

She had thought her father would at least come to the ceremony. After all, he owed her mother that much. She had seen her brother, skulking about in the corner with his constant companion of a fellow lawyer, but her father's absence had been the final nail in the barrier which stood between them. Erected on both sides by mutual loathing during school, his avaricious nature needed only that excuse to disinherit her the moment after her mother was buried in the family crypt. No warning, no final, tearful scene, only a letter making it clear that that mournful event would be the last time she ever saw her father or his wealth again, along with a parting wish that he would see her end her life on the streets in Whitechapel.

But Caroline had not surrendered to that prediction. Instead, like any consummate actress, she had established herself in the best, wealthiest, and- or so she thought at time -intelligent circles, and set about finding herself another establishment. This time, it would be one of her choosing, and she was determined to prove her selfish father wrong.

As it turned out however, his assumption was partly correct. She was married to a pauper, and living on borrowed displays of wealth. The fashion for refusing to settle bills would only give them immunity from the debtor's prison for so long. Caroline feared for the day when that fate might await her.

The door opened to admit the maid, bringing Caroline out of her regretful thoughts. Her husband advanced to collect the large indoor plant which the servant carried.

"The florist begs leave to remind Mr Wickham of the bill of payment, sir," the maid said respectfully, presenting him with yet another bill.

George Wickham took the proffered slip of paper away with disdain, and silently beckoned at the girl to leave.

"I would have thought it imprudent, even for you, to continue to buy goods that you cannot afford," Caroline remarked.

"More fool you, for not noticing this deficiency in my financial affairs before we came jointly responsible for them," George replied harshly.

Caroline turned from the bureau. "I was deceived!" She protested. Abruptly her exclamation turned to one of pain as he grabbed her wrist, his hard, arrogant features staring directly into her self-pitying gaze.

"I cannot get rid of you and you cannot get rid of me," he reminded her. "I suggest we reach a mutual understanding which might carry us through."
Cautiously Caroline recovered her equilibrium. "An understanding?"

His grip ended, leaving a red mark as the only evidence. "With a little encouragement from our friends, we mutually deceived each other into wedlock. I suggest we shall keep these mortifying facts to ourselves. Agreed?" He waited for her to silently nod before walking away.

"That is not an expense," he continued, pointing to the plant, "it is an investment." He picked up the newspaper. "I have been looking to the future and you can be sure that I'm not alone. When a great fortune suddenly appears as if from nowhere it is the duty of all beggars, especially the deserving gentry, to beat a path to its door. We must be amongst them, but we shall be in disguise." He dropped the newspaper back to its previous resting place, and walked to desk she was seated at, whereupon he placed pen, ink and writing sheets before her.

"'Mr and Mrs George Wickham to Mr and Mrs Edmund Reynolds Esquire,'" he dictated. "'Offering their most hearty felicitations on their good fortune, hoping they may accept this small gift, begging leave to call on them at home, at any hour which may be convenient.'"

Caroline finished penning the letter, and placed the blotter upon it in something approaching satisfaction. Perhaps, with her husband's help, this marriage might not prove to be such a bad mistake after all.

The above letter and accompanying present duly made their way to the intended recipients, who tried in vain to give latter space in their increasingly small parlour. Since the announcement of their good fortune, gifts from well-meaning well-wishers had flooded into their little home, causing none of the pleasure their givers expected, only consternation as to where to store them until their new townhouse was ready to receive them.

"All right, old lady?" Mr Reynolds asked his wife as she placed the plant on one of the few remaining bits of floor space left.

"Where are we going to put them all?" She asked him.

Mr Reynolds attempted to clear his desk, but gave up when faced with the piles of calling cards and letters upon it. "Papers buzzing about me ears!" He exclaimed, walking towards the window.

Suddenly, a solution to the chaos appeared before his eyes, in the form of the arrival of the man he had encountered in a book shop in town, some days before. Arms full of purchases of volumes he had previously only dreamt of affording, Edmund had turned to pay, only to almost collide with the man whom- as he later discovered -lodged at the Bennets of Holloway. After a brief verbal exchange of greetings, the young gentleman had presented him with his card, offering his services as a secretary, before leaving the store, giving Edmund no chance to reply, only to stare after him in wonderment.

Before the gifts started pouring in, Edmund had been inclined to refuse the lad's kind offer, assured that he wouldn't need him. As the steward of Pemberley, he was used to dealing with realms of managing a great fortune and all the trappings that came with. Except he had never dealt with the social niceties society thrust upon the owner of said fortune. Now, Mr Hurst seemed like a wise investment.

Reynolds walked into the hallway and opened the door. "Come in, lad, come in. Kate, this is Mr Hurst, the man I told you about."

"Pleasure to meet you, Mrs Reynolds," Mr Hurst remarked, offering his hand to her after he had removed his hat.
Mrs Reynolds smiled at his diffident manner, and together with her husband, ushered him into the parlour.

"There, Hurst," Mr Reynolds began, gesturing to the desk. "See if you can do something with that."

Mr Hurst nodded and walked over to the desk. In less time than both the Reynolds's thought possible, he transformed the chaos into an understandable clarity.

Edmund surveyed the bundles of organised and tied papers with astonished satisfaction. "Apple pie order."

"Sir," Mr Hurst began, "if you would try me as your secretary, for a trial period only, naturally I would keep exact accounts of all the expenditure that you have sanctioned, and write letters... under your strict direction of course. And I would transact business with the people under your employment."

"I ought to have said I already have in my employment, a housekeeper man with a wooden leg," Mr Reynolds replied, speaking of an old squaddie he came across, enroute to the bookshop. The old soldier had been singing, managing a stall of music sheets, reminding him of the other Darcy child he once knew, a sister of the dearly departed and lamented lad, who loved music. When their father sent them to the coast, he heard no more of her, and when Richard Fitzwilliam discovered only the lad, he assumed that the girl had gone the way of the rest. He hired the man to mind the bower for them when they moved into the grand house, for he had no desire to rid himself of the mounds which bestowed this fortune and same grand house upon them, though the price of such inheritance was harsh to bear. "And this rounding up of papers?"

"Would be continuous of course," Hurst replied.

Mr Reynolds nodded. "Now," he remarked after a moment of careful thought, "lets try a letter next."

Hurst drew his small, wire-rimmed spectacles out from his jacket pocket, and set himself before the desk, pen, ink and paper at the ready. "To whom shall it be addressed?"

"Well, anyone," Mr Reynolds answered. "Try yourself."

Hurst wrote for a moment on the paper, then rose from the desk and read aloud. "'Mr Reynolds presents his compliments to Mr William Hurst, and begs to say that he has decided on giving Mr William Hurst a trial in the capacity that he desires to fill.'"

Surprised, Mr Reynolds began to search for something to say, but Hurst continued. "'It is quite understood that Mr Reynolds is in no way committed to a salary, which will be postponed, for some indefinite period. And Mr Reynolds relies on Mr William Hurst's assurance that he will be both faithful and serviceable and enter upon his duties immediately.'"

It took some time before the astonishment died away. Then Edmund caught his wife's silent but meaningful expression, and replied. "That's the fairest set down letter I have ever heard," he declared, rising from his seat to stand before his new secretary. "Lets shake on it."

Hurst smiled, his true reserved self revealed in the motion, and he gladly accepted Mr Reynolds' proffered hand. But before their palms began to touch, he withdrew the motion to speak once more.

"Mr Reynolds, before we absolutely settle upon my position, I must ask one favour of you. That you and you alone deal directly with your solicitor, Mr Fitzwilliam."

Both Edmund and Kate frowned at that, for it seemed to them an unusual request that a personal
secretary have no contact with their solicitor, and indeed it was.

"Have you any personal objection to Mr Fitzwilliam?" Mr Reynolds asked.

"None. I do not know him enough to warrant such objection," Hurst replied.

"Have you suffered from lawsuits?" Mrs Reynolds inquired.

"No more than other men," Hurst answered.

"Are you prejudiced against the race of lawyers?" Mr Reynolds tried.

"No. But while I am in your employment, sir, I would rather be excused from going between the lawyer and the client. Of course if you press it, sir, I am ready to comply. But I would take it as a great favour if you would not press it without urgent occasion."

Edmund fell into silence as he considered the request. Though he considered himself not much of a scholar in such matters of business, he was capable of dealing with lawyer Fitzwilliam, for Mr Fitzwilliam had such a way of explaining matters as to make them immediately understandable. It was a small, almost trifling condition, and not one to trouble much over. "Does your objection extend to writing to Fitzwilliam?"

"Not in the least, sir."

"Then I think it is a favour I can agree to."

Hurst smiled again, and this time he did accept Mr Reynolds' proffered hand.

"Now," Edmund began afresh, "I may not have mentioned to you that it is Mrs Reynolds' inclination to go in the way of fashion."

Hurst smiled before he responded. "I rather inferred that from the scale in which your new establishment is to be maintained."

"Yes, it's going to be a spanker!" Mr Reynolds grinned and rose from the seat, whereupon he showed their visitor about their current dwelling. "Old Darcy was not much loved. He was a harsh man. Been fair to me, but his child....." he let the sentence drift, the end of it clear enough. "When the son was a little boy, he came up and down these stairs to see his father. He often cried on these stairs poor little thing. Starved of love, that's what he was. And my old lady here did her best to give it to him."

Mrs Reynolds pointed to the small notches that were dotted about the doorway nearby. "Here is where the boy wrote his name several times and measured himself here on this sunny patch."

Her husband took her hand. "We must take care of these names, Kate. They must never be rubbed out in our lifetime. Nor ever, if we can help it."

They stepped outside the house and into the range of dust mountains.

"Do you mean to sell the house, Mr Reynolds?" Hurst asked him as they walked through the small clearing before the mounds. Above them people were shifting through the rubbish, casting clouds of dust about the air.

"Certainly not," Mr Reynolds replied. "In memory of our dear master and the child we mean to keep it. I've got a plan, I'll tell you about it soon enough." He gestured to the mounds surrounding them.
"They're a different matter. That was my first mound. It would have been enough for us if it had pleased god to spare the little one. I ain't a scholar in much, Mr Hurst. But I'm a pretty fair scholar in dust. I can price these mountains to a fraction." He took a deeper look at the young man beside him. Since they had stepped outside, even before, Hurst was the first visitor to their house who had not found the air troublesome to his nose or his throat. "You don't find the air a little overpowering, Mr Hurst?"

Hurst seemed surprised by the inquiry. "Excuse me?"

"Its just that strangers can often find the smell of a dust yard fairly pungent on first encounter," Reynolds revealed.

Their visitor recovered from his temporary astonishment. "No, I do not find it in the least offensive." He turned from observing the workers and smiled at them. "It is the smell of good honest work, I am sure."

"Indeed," Mrs Reynolds agreed. "And my Edmund has everything accounted for. Down to the last farthing, proper and right."

"A man such as I was had no use for lettering, except for pleasure, a pleasure rarely found, due to the demands of work," Mr Reynolds remarked. "But numbers, you'll find I'm a master of those."

"Where do you come from Mr Hurst?" Mrs Reynolds asked in an attempt to turn the conversation towards the young man who had been in their company, who seemed content to hear more of them than talk about himself.

"I've been in many places," Hurst answered, in a similar manner as he had when he asked to be excused from conducting business with lawyer Fitzwilliam.

"And what do you do for a living?" Mrs Reynolds persisted.

"I've had some aspirations, but I've been disappointed," Hurst replied. "I have to begin my life once more." He turned towards them and held out his hand. "Goodbye, I'll see you at the agreed time."

They shook his hands, and watched him as he departed from their view, as quietly as he had first entered it.
Chapter 8

Part 8.

When she returned home, Jane spent a few moments preparing an evening meal for her Uncle, while silently thinking of how best to inform her cousin that he was to become a boarder at his school. Hill had been right to offer her the money, though Jane felt insulted at the mere idea of accepting charity. But she had to consider what little her Uncle's life had to offer Charlie now.

Before the illnesses and selling of the business, as an only child, so late to arrive that his mother and father almost despaired of ever having children, and then over compensated in showering their only offspring with affection, he had the prospect of following in his father footsteps into law and then into control of the firm. Now all that lay before him was the ceaseless searching for rich bodies on the river, providing he did not catch a mortal disease off one of them first. Her heart had ached to see her Uncle being reduced to such a career, and she refused to let her cousin go down the same route. Her decision for him to stay at his school was an act of kindness.

Whether he would see it that way was another matter. Though she was ashamed to admit to thinking it, the over compensation had led to her cousin acquiring a certain amount of character in his youth more for the deprivation of his reputation, than the benefit. Adored and spoilt by his grateful parents, her cousin had grown used to such affection, resenting the loss of it when his mother died, as well as the staunch refusal of his father to display the intellect that came so naturally to him, leading to a wilful rebellion in her Uncle's absence.

Suddenly a clattering on the wooden platforms outside alerted Jane to his return. Charlie Philips entered the small house with all the enthusiasm of a boy on the brink of manhood.


"Sit and eat Charlie," Jane ordered, before laying out the coins she had gathered on the table in front of him. "You must be gone before your father gets home."

"Gone?" He echoed, then catching sight of the coins. "What's all this, Jane?"

"I've made up my mind that it is the right time for you to be going away from us. You'll do much better and you'll be much happier."

"How do you know that?" Charlie countered.

"I do know," Jane answered firmly. "I do. You leave the river and your father to me, but you must go."

Charlie glared at her, tossing his hands across the table in an expansive gesture. "No I think you decided that's there's three of us," he yelled. "There's not enough for all of us so you want to get rid of me."

Jane took a breath to hold back her tears. Her young cousin possessed a fine temper, quickened and strengthened by the series of tragedies which had piled on his life in fast succession. "Yes. Yes, that's right. I'm a selfish cousin, I think there's not enough room for the three of us and I want to get rid of you."

Fortunately there was still some good in her young cousin to descry the hidden tears. Instantly he calmed himself and appealed to her. "Don't cry, Janie. Don't cry. I will go if you say. I know you
"Oh Charlie, heaven knows I do," Jane replied with sudden emotion. Giving a moment to calm herself, she continued. "Now listen. You get straight to school at once. Your father will never bother you. But he won't have you back either. You're a credit to your school. They'll help you find a living."

She retrieved the coins from the table, and gave them to him. "Now, you show them your money, tell them I'll send you more. I don't know where from, but I'll send it. Now, you must hurry. Remember Charlie; Always speak well of your father. Even if you hear the worst that can be said about him, it will not be true. Now, you be good. Get learning. And only remember your life here, as if you dreamt of it in your sleep."

"I'll see you again, Janie," Charlie promised her as he hugged her in parting. "I'll try and repay all you have done for me."

Jane hugged him back, then watched him go, for though she loved him dearly, not wishing him back again. This was his chance, and he must seize it while he could.

While she waited for her own to come.

The dregs of a dreary afternoon at the London docks dragged themselves into the darkness of the approaching night, as Jane watched and waited for her Uncle to come home. Despite the gloom which had descended around her, she could see him clearly as he drifted away from the other workers and headed towards her.

As usual his face was inscrutable, leaving her at loss to determine his mood. Ever since his fall from the realms of respectability his temper had degenerated into foulness, making her fearful of risking his wrath. Involuntarily, she shuddered, and not from the coldness of the air. No wonder there were rumours flying around about her Uncle, with the negative emotions he frequently displayed. Indeed, it was only thanks to her infinite faith of the goodness in people that she refrained from believing him capable of such black deeds.

He came to be in a few steps of her, and instantly she fell back on her quiet steadiness. "You must be frozen, Uncle dear," she uttered, before leading him inside to the relative warmth of their house.

"I ain't aglow that's for certain," Philips agreed. "Where's that boy?"

"If the river were to freeze there'd be a great deal of distress," Jane remarked, ignoring his inquiry. "There's always enough of that. Distress is forever going about, like soot in the air. Where is that boy?"

"Sit and eat Uncle, and we'll talk." Jane said softly, but with a quiet firmness that made her Uncle obey immediately.

Jessie Philips placed himself before his cheese, bread and brew, and gave his eldest niece an evaluating stare. "Now, Jane, where's that boy at?"

"Well Uncle, it would, seem that Charlie has a gift for learning."

Philips grunted into his mead. "Unnatural boy!" He declared, ignoring his own capacity for the same upbringing.

"And so not wanting to be a burden to you, he made up his mind to seek his fortune from learning."
He went away, Uncle. He cried very much and he hopes that you can forgive him."

Philips gripped his dinner knife angrily. "My forgiveness.... I'll never set eyes on that boy again. He's disowned his own father. Unnatural boy. Now I know why those men turned away from me just now. 'Cause here's a man who ain't good enough for his own son!" He banged the table with his arm, the sharp point of the knife thrusting into the table, and Jane, unable to more her gaze from the gleaming weapon, fearfully backed away.

"Please, Uncle," she implored. "Put the knife down."

Gaffer turned to her with surprise. "What's the matter, Jane?" She did not answer, but the emotions were clearly written across her features, and he felt ashamed of himself for awakening such feelings within her. "You'd never think I'd hurt you, Jane?" He put the knife down to take her in his arms. "Come on Jane, my girl. My love." He caressed her shaking shoulders, as she released her tearful fears. When he felt her calm, he drew back and with sudden, uncharacteristic gentleness, wiped the drops upon her cheeks away with his thumbs.

"You know how much you remind me of your Aunt?" He uttered softly, making her look at him in puzzlement. Mrs Philips had been as much a bundle of highly stung nerves as her mother once was. "When she wasn't with your mother, she was a lot quieter, you know? A willing foil for my bad moods. That's why I was so glad when you agreed to come and live with me and Charlie, because I knew you had the one quality that your sisters did not. The same quality that your Aunt had." He drew in a deep breath, sounding rather choked himself. "Oh, Janie, I still miss her so."

Faced with this sorrow, Jane could do nothing more than take her Uncle into her arms, comforting him as he comforted her. A final thought crossed her mind as she did so. How, when presented with such a scene, could anyone think him capable of murder?
Chapter 9

Part 9.

Another day, in the same city but in far more pleasant surroundings, a young man chanced upon Jane's younger sister in the park near their home. Actually, it was more than chance, he had been requested to find her by his new employers. There was an irony in that somewhere but he was too mindful of other things to contemplate it right now. So he settled for gazing at her as she sat on the park bench, studying the book she cradled in her hands.

Who could not fail to settle for anything save gazing at her? With her dark brown eyes and equally dark brown hair that was coiled exquisitely in an elegantly complicated pattern of plaits and curls, she was by far the most beautiful woman in London, and as the ward of the Reynolds's, one of the most eligible in society. What man could fail to be drawn into her world, into the pupils of those fine dark eyes? What man could fail to be entranced, to fall in love with her? He had been lost in such a state from the moment he set eyes on her, that evening in her father's rooms, over the threshold of a door.

And soon he would be working in the same house as her. His office only a few rooms away from her apartments. Having dinner in her company, for Mr Reynolds had insisted that he would dine with them every evening, he had refused to even hear of him going home to eat alone in his lodgings. How long would he be able to endure seeing her every day, watching her enjoy all the advantages they planned to bestow on her, before he fell to his knees before her, and told her everything.

In this myriad of thoughts he had neglected to notice that his feet had carried him beyond the gate bearing entrance to the park, to stand before her in such a way that even with a book before her, her dark eyes caught sight of his intruding presence, casting a shadow over the passages within.

She looked up, regarding him with a critical gaze. "Were you watching me, Mr Hurst?"

"No. Indeed, Miss Bennet," Mr Hurst began. "I am charged with a message for you."

She raised an eyebrow when she heard his response. "I find that most unlikely."

"From Mrs Reynolds," he answered. "She will have the pleasure of receiving you soon at the new house. I find that I am to become Mr Reynolds's secretary."

"And will you always be there, Mr Hurst?" Elizabeth asked. "At the new house?"

"Always, no," he uttered. "Very much there, yes. Have no fear, you need pay me little attention. I will transact the business and you the pleasure. You will have nothing to do but enjoy and attract."

"Attract?" She echoed, and he found it hard suddenly to meet her fine eyes.

"The loss of your fiancee, William Darcy, may one day be repaired," he continued. "Of course I speak merely of wealth. The loss of a prefect stranger, whose wealth you could not have possibly estimate beyond on the inconvenience of their death is another matter," he remarked, noting the turn of her face, as now her eyes found it difficult to meet his. Hurriedly he sought to change the subject. "Its growing dark around us. You must have been absorbed by your book. Is it a love story?"

Elizabeth shut the book with a determination to rid herself of his presence. "Certainly not. Its more about money than anything."

"And does it say that money is better than anything?" Hurst asked. He found himself rather anxious
to learn her answer.

But she was tired of his company, offended by the insinuations which she felt lay behind his questions and explanations. She rose from the bench in an effort to leave him behind. "I really cannot tell you. Find out for yourself for all I care!"

She walked off, leaving him to watch her go, not in the least dismayed by her answer. For there was a powerful feeling within his chest which would steadily conquer anything he might previously have disliked of her.

Night slowly descended upon Victoria's capital; adding a certain eerie quality to the fog stemming from the glories of industry and Empire. The only source of light was emanating from the gas lamps on the streets, their bulbs casting the same glow that came from the coastal outposts, designed to warn ships of inclement weather, or certain destruction if they strayed too close to shore.

Around the houses in Lincoln's Inn and Temple street, the waves of wind were solemn and portentous, in anticipation of the morning which would follow the night, as though the weather held the gift to foresee the future. Such weather was often required for those who suffered lodgings in this part of town, for their lives needed nature's forewarning to prepare and sustain them while they trod their way through the dense legality of their legal world.

In one such house, there were numerous members who claimed membership in this eminent profession. Rare was the occasion that they spoke to each other on any other matter than work, rarer still were the occasions that they met outside the court room. Only those who happened to require their services, would notice that on the third floor lived a Mr E.N Read, on the second floor lived a Mr H.C Attenborough, a Mr Daniel Safford, a Mr Randolph Bond, a Mr Lambert Scott, a Mr T.R.P Coales, Mr S.P. Davey, and a Mr Hadleigh Carvil, on the first floor live a Mr Horrige, a Mr D.P. Crompton, a Mr Richard Fitzwilliam, a Mr Leslie Scott and a Mr Alexander Part, on the ground floor lived a Lord Alverstone, a Mr A.H. Webster, and a Mr G.R. Askwith. What they would not know, was that a Mr Charles Bingley had recently taken to occupying the guest room of Mr Richard Fitzwilliam, his financial affairs enforcing on him the need for sharing the burden of living.

In the living room of this first floor lodging shared by the two lawyers, Charles Bingley walked from his place by the mantelpiece to the window, the smoke from his cigar creating a slight mist upon the pane. "How the wind sounds up here," he murmured. "As if we were keeping a lighthouse. I wish we were."

"Don't you think it would bore us?" Richard Fitzwilliam asked from his comfortable armchair by the fire.

"No more than any other place," Bingley continued. "And we would be blessedly free, both of society in general, and in particular of my father."

"Speaking of which, shall we touch upon the eligible lady your respected father has found for you?" Fitzwilliam proposed.

"I assure you my intentions are opposed to touching the lady," Bingley answered. He began to pace the room, displaying a mild degree of energy. "How could I possibly undertake matrimony? I so easily bored. So constantly," he added, sitting down.

"So totally," Fitzwilliam finished, making his friend chuckle. The room fell into silence once more, before being abruptly broken by the opening of the door to their rooms.
"Who the devil are you?" Fitzwilliam asked, startled at the sight of their intruder, both of them rising from their chairs. "Where the devil have you come from?"

"I beg your pardon, governors, but might either of you be Lawyer Fitzwilliam?" A man of ill kept clothes and equal accent inquired.

"I am Fitzwilliam," he asserted. "Who are you, fellow?"

"I'm a man who gets m'living by the sweat of m'brow, governors," the man replied, advancing further into the room. "Not wanting to risk the being done out of the sweat of m'brow, I should wish before going further to be sworn in."

"You're out of luck, for I'm not a swearer in of people," Fitzwilliam informed him.

"Alfred David," the man continued, his accent disguising his meaning.

"Alfred David," Fitzwilliam echoed, puzzled. "Is that your name?"

"No, I wanna set down, an Alfred David," the man replied.

"I think you mean an affidavit," Bingley broke in here, enunciating the Latin phrase. "I'm afraid you're out of luck there, for my friend doesn't do affidavits either."

"I must be took down," the intruder insisted.

"Why don't you tell us what your business is?" Fitzwilliam asked.

"It is about money. Its about a ten thousand pound reward, that's what it is about. It is about murder."

The Darcy case. No longer was this visit treated as a joke or an oddity, or an unwelcome interruption to their peaceful solitude. Fitzwilliam fetched the man a drink, then joined Bingley as he sat at the desk, ready to take notes.

"Now, what is your full name?" Fitzwilliam asked.

"Roger Jenkinson," their witness answered. "Some call me Rogue, but that is a friendly name, used by those that don't know me."

"Dwelling Place?" Fitzwilliam inquired.

"Limehouse Hole," he replied.

"Calling? Or occupation?" Fitzwilliam sought.

"Waterside character." Jenkinson answered ambiguously.

"Anything against you?" Bingley asked. When no reply but cautious silence was received, he added another query to that. "Ever in trouble?"

"Once," Jenkinson admitted grudgingly. "Picking a seaman's pocket, though in reality I was an innocent man."

"Naturally!" Bingley scoffed.

Jenkinson ignored the disbelief. "I give information that the man who done the Darcy murder is one Jessie, known as Gaffer Philips. The very same that found the body. His hand and his alone did the
bloody deed."

"And on what grounds do you base these suspicions?" Fitzwilliam asked, whilst his friend's hand began to hover over the paper, pen freezing in mid sentence. "He cannot be convicted on your suspicions alone."

"He told me with his own lips that he done the deed," Jenkinson asserted.

"When did he tell you?" Fitzwilliam asked.

"The very night he picked up the body. We had words on the river that night, his niece will not deny that."

"Did you ask him how he did it?" Queried Fitzwilliam sternly. "Where he did it? Why he did it? When he did it?"

"He told me, Gaffer does, he tells me, 'I done it for his money. Don't betray me.' And long have I been troubled in my mind ever since."

"You've been troubled in your mind for a long time," Fitzwilliam noted.

"Mr Jenkinson might have thought some other witness would have come forward," Bingley speculated. "Maybe he wasn't keen on anyone asking what he was doing that night."

"I'm telling you I'm giving Jessie Philips up tonight and I want him took. I want him took this night!" Jenkinson demanded.

Realising that they would get no rest nor peace until this matter was resolved, the lawyers rose from their chairs and herded the man out of the room. They caught a cab, and made their way to the docks.

The weather by now had turned for the worse, the rain pouring down upon the fabric of the Hansom, clinging to their cloaks when the lawyers exited the carriage to meet with the inspector and Jenkinson went to see if his former partner was home or still working on the river. While Bingley was in the dress of a disconsolate bachelor, rarely possessing the energy to submit to the dress code of society, Fitzwilliam wore his usual evening legal uniform of a white tie and black dinner suit, with a dress cloak to match. Despite the unusual contrast, both sets of attire were incongruous to the weather, health, evening and the circumstances, yet neither of them wanted to test Jenkinson's patience by asking him to wait while they changed into sturdier gear.

Jenkinson rejoined them from his scout at the waterside. "Gaffer's out," he announced. "His boat's out. His niece's home. Supper's ready, so he was expected home last high water," he worked out. "He must have missed it for some reason."

"Then we must watch and wait," The Inspector decided. They moved to what little shelter could be found outside of the ramshackle dwellings which littered the docks, a verge of ground situated in the underside of a bridge.

Bingley hung back from them, his thoughts elsewhere, namely the evening when he and Fitzwilliam had first met Gaffer Philips and how his gaze had been reluctant to move from the niece, as she quietly sewed by the fire. The image of her long blond hair, glowing from the light of that heat source, the warmth adding a rosy colour to her pale skin, together with the eyes that regarded him nervously, whenever they sought to regard him at all, had remained a vivid recollection in his thoughts from that evening.
Slowly he walked over to the mill that served as the Philips's house. Bending at the window, he observed the niece anxiously waiting for her Uncle, her face a picture of concern. She was seated in a similar pose to when he saw her last, on a stool by the fire, with a piece of sewing in her hand. But the garment she was mending lay neglected on her lap, and her gaze was more often than not turned to the windows than the flames or the needlework. He had no knowledge of the tides, but from the state of the cold supper which lay upon the table near her and the rain that continued to pour down incessantly outside, he could discern that something was wrong with her Uncle, something which might prevent him from coming home, more than the presence of Jenkinson, himself, Fitzwilliam and the Inspector.

"If we take the uncle, she will be left alone," he murmured softly. He knew she had her cousin, but he could see no evidence of his living there. He recalled from the conversation he and Richard had with the boy during their first encounter with him that he received schooling. Perhaps she had arranged for him to become a boarder, he concluded. Which meant, if her uncle did return home, she would be left alone. As he continued to watch her, he could not help but pray that her uncle was innocent of the murder Jenkinson accused him of, or else did not return home this night. He longed to go and comfort her, but it was not his place, nor was it appropriate.

Unable to watch her and ignore this desire, he turned to go, but his boots creaked upon the rotting wood beneath him, causing her to advance to the door, open it, and step outside, casting a glance into the dreadful night. "Uncle? Uncle, is that you?"

Bingley waited for her to close the door and resume her place by the fire, then made his way back to his companions by the river. As he crouched down, he retrieved and handed a cigar to his friend, before proffering his hip flask to the Inspector.

"Don't you feel like a dark combination of a traitor and a pickpocket when you think about that poor girl, Fitzwilliam?" He remarked a low voice. His friend gave no reply but a shrug, which was eloquent enough.

Jenkinson sat apart from them, unmindful of the rain, in a crouching perch upon one of the many wooden docks that littered the river. In the sparse moonlight his figure bore a resemblance to a gargoyle, protecting the building from rain and what ever dark matter decided to haunt the premises. However, the rogue had no concept of this resemblance, nor thought for the weather, for his mind was occupied by another matter, one far dearer to his heart than his health or appearance.

"He's gonna cheat me," Jenkinson murmured to himself as he stared out through the rain. "He's looking to cheat an honest man. Where are you hiding, Gaffer?"

Bingley slowly smoked his cigar, the nicotine within doing little to calm or warm his body. Through the still continuous deluge he could see Rogue Jenkinson perched on the dock, and the dim glow of light from the window of the Philips's dwelling. His thoughts remained fixed upon the girl, unwilling to contemplate the consequences of the various events which occur tonight. If he cared ought for the time, he would have been tempted to retrieve his pocket watch and descry the hour before the rain stained the glass. With the state of the rain and the neighbourhood, it was difficult to tell how much time had passed.

"He could not have slipped past us," the Inspector reasoned eventually. "It'll be morning soon and we'll be seen."

Like a unnatural monster, a gargoyle come to life, Jenkinson suddenly appeared before them from the foggy gloom of the slowly approaching morning. "Suppose I put out in my boat?" He suggested. "Take a look in his favourite haunts?"
The Inspector silently assented. Fitzwilliam and Bingley gathered their cloaks around themselves and tried to get some sleep.

Morning came, its gloomy dawn a suitable sequel to the night before. The rain ceased some time ago, but neither the lawyers nor the policeman could testify as to when that change in weather occurred. One by one the three men awoke from the semi-stupor which each had eventually succumbed to. A sound disturbed them, the one Bingley dreaded the most; the gentle knocking of oars as they strove through the shallow water near the shore, touching the bank of the river, returning a boat to its port.

"I've found it!" Jenkinson's gravely voice cried to them as he pulled his vehicle from the river. "Gaffer's boat. He's in luck. I knew it, he's in luck."

Sure enough, a second rig emerged from the fog, towed by the first. Despite the murky conditions of the dawn, the lawyers and the policeman could see that both were empty, the tow rope of the second hanging in the water

"He's found Philips's boat," the Inspector murmured, more in an attempt to clear his mind than to inform his companions. "But where's Philips?"

"I'm telling you, he got lucky," Jenkinson repeated smugly. "He's been fishing," he added, with grim excitement.

Fitzwilliam perhaps realised what was hidden beneath waves, wrapped in the towrope, before everyone else. "Oh god," he murmured as the Inspector and Jenkinson pulled the boats aground, the latter going for the towrope which held a gruesome sight within its noose.

"Let it go, let it go," Bingley willed, but it was no use. The corpse emerged into the full light of the dismal morning. Worse fears had been realised. The men stared at the mud clothed body of Jesmond Philips.

"Drowned by his own towrope," the Inspector judged. "He went out in search of the dead. But death found him first."

"He's escaped me," Jenkinson said. "He's dead before I can profit. He's done me again."

Bingley ignored the remarks, his mind on the girl, wondering would she do now.
With nothing but a lifeless corpse to respond to the testimony of Jenkinson, the courts accepted that Philips was the man who had murdered William Darcy. Fitzwilliam and Bingley fought against the verdict for as long as they could, until the judge ruled that all official investigation was at an end. Not content with such a verdict, the lawyers resolved to use their own resources to continue to discover the truth behind William Darcy's drowning.

It was Bingley who informed Philips's niece of the sad tidings, and it was Bingley who arranged to fetch her cousin so he could learn the news also. When Charlie recovered enough from his mourning to return to school, Jane promised he could visit her as soon as she found herself a place to live, and the funds to do so.

Today, a note arrived at Charlie's school, informing him that she had found such a place, and he could come and see her as soon as he wished. So Charlie gave notice to the school, and the school informed his tutor, who mulled over whether to grant such a request while he delivered another lesson to the lad.

From the moment Charlie Philips began to display such a natural ability to acquire learning, this tutor had taken a strong interest in ensuring that such ability was put to good use, namely in the furtherance of his career. It was rare that he met with such a gifted pupil as Charlie Philips, and he was determined to ensure that the lad's abilities were not wasted, as so many pupils' talents often were in these schools.

"People came from many different towns to meet the procession," he remarked now, reading from a book in his hands. He paused, waiting for Philips to respond.

"Etiam quorum diursa opida," Charlie Philips translated the sentence into Latin. His pronunciation was correct, but if an outsider listened in, they would note that the tone lacked any emotion or artistry to accompany the words. The pupil was imitating the master, reading as if he were reciting a list.

"Offering sacrifices, raising altars to the souls of the deceased, and weeping and wailing in displays of grief," his teacher said.


"Very good Philips," the schoolmaster praised, his grim voice making the compliment seem commonplace, even perhaps undeserved. He reached out and took the book from his pupil, placing it on the desk between them. "So you have asked for permission to see your cousin," he remarked. "I've half a mind to go with you."

"I'd rather you didn't see her before she was settled, sir," Charlie replied rather too quickly for the teacher's liking.

"Look here, Philips, I hope your cousin may be good company for you," the school master commented, as though to remind the lad of his better judgement.

"Do you doubt it, sir?" Charlie countered, his arrogance, and the nature of his advancement within the school before this master, granting him such impudence to reply.
"I do not know," the school master replied, his respect for the boy too much to reprimand him for his insolence. I put it to you to consider."

"My cousin keeps me here through her hard work," Charlie reminded him.

"And your cousin has wisely reconciled herself to your separation so as to not impede your progress," his master reminded him. "And you do, make good progress. In time you'll pass an examination and become a teacher yourself. But it will take many hours of hard work," he added sternly. "Hour upon hour. As it did me."

"If you were to see my cousin, sir, I know that you would judge her wise," Charlie offered, attempting to defuse the now tense conversation.

The school master inwardly sighed, before retrieving the book from the table to continue with the lesson. He knew it was bad form to let the pupil win this debate, but neither he, nor the school board for that matter, saw any harm in Philips visiting his sister. In fact, the school board had been very enthused by the idea, which caused his concern as to whether such a visit was in Philips's best interest in the first place.

However, he could think of no reason to dissuade his pupil from going, so he inwardly decided that they would, in a few days.

Before Rogue Jenkinson went to visit Lawyers Bingley and Fitzwilliam, the Reynolds's gave up the dusty bower that was their home, in favour of the nice new house, in the nice new neighbourhood, otherwise once known as the Darcy townhouse. This nice new house was very large, redbrick, and filled with enough windows to set up half a dozen tax men for life. Built in the reign of Queen Anne, it was surrounded by extensive grounds, at least by town standards, and contained enough grand, lofty rooms to make Society jealous when it came to welcome the latest moneyed products of Empire, into its elite and salubrious world.

Outside the nice new house walls' these esteemed guests were mingling, anxious to see the Reynolds's, the dust kings, the new Mr and Mrs Empire, make their twelve thousand pound per annum entry into society. If one of these notable personages had concerned themselves with spying into the windows of the house instead of the quality of appetisers and quantity of liquor, they would have seen their host through one, arguing with his new private secretary, trying in vain to persuade him to join them at the soiree.

Eventually Mr Reynolds gave up the attempt and rejoined his wife and ward in the next room. "He's an invaluable man, Hurst," he mused. "He works at my affairs like fifty men, but he won't ever meet any of our visitors."

"Perhaps he considers himself above it," Elizabeth suggested as she helped his wife with her afternoon dress shawl.

"No m'dear it isn't that," Mr Reynolds disagreed.

"He has a very kept down air for a man of his age," Mrs Reynolds remarked. "I wish you could persuade him to come out into society with us, Lizzy dear."

"Perhaps he considers himself beneath it," Elizabeth declared, before walking out into the alfresco party for their guests. Mrs Reynolds turned to her husband, adjusted his cravat, then placed her arm upon his, and they exited the room.

From the study, Hurst watched the Reynolds's ward move about the guests, greeting lawyer
Fitzwilliam, then offering her hand to another, more aristocratic gentleman who seemed determined to occupy her time.

'She is so trivial,' Hurst mused, starring unobserved through the window at her. 'So capricious, so mercenary. And yet she is so beautiful.'

He had found himself haunted by her, ever since their first encounter at her father's house. In her mourning weeds she had looked so beautiful, and now, with the new finery of wealth, that beauty was only enhanced. If only he had known, he mused to himself. But it was too late now. He had thrown the fly and cast his lot with this line. He had no choice now but to follow it through.

Beauty aside, he was wise to continue his original course. She was trivial, and capricious, and mercenary. At least, that was what she seemed, as from his often inaudible position, he could rarely hear her speak, forced to observe only the movement of her mouth, or her gestures, or the colour of her eyes. Even after all this time he didn't really know her. He almost felt as though he had discovered nothing more than what he knew when he began.

Perhaps it was cynicism. He wasn't naive, he knew the ways of the world he lived upon the cusp of. Seeing marital unions planned and embarked as though they were as important as imperial expansions. Few had the happiness he was striving for, or the luxury of choice, which he didn't have either. Put within its context then, he understood. He could accept that.

But the doubts still formed in his mind. Doubts which caused him to pause, to hesitate, before revealing what he concealed. Disguise of every sort had once been his abhorrence, yet now such scruples were a necessity.

Her eyes fixed on the windows, catching sight of him. He bowed and returned to his private study upstairs.

Next morning, Elizabeth Bennet gazed at the ceiling above her, until her neck ached with the strain, and her mind felt dizzy. Blinking she lowered her face, only to be confronted by another disconcerting presence. Hurst, silently staring, as he slightly bowed to her before walking past where she stood and down the stairs. Her gaze remained on him, as did her thoughts, even when he wandered out of sight. There was something strange about Mr Hurst. He shadowed her day and night.

His intentions were fitting, amusing even in Holloway. But here, they were hardly appropriate. Since her entry into the cream of Victorian society, she had learned much about what was considered appropriate and what was quite the opposite. During her arrival into the circle of ‘empire builders’ she had learned that there were some of the wealthy who viewed such self-made families with all the prejudice of inherited money, disdainfully disregarding their ancestor’s acquisition of their own wealth in the same methods centuries ago.

There was snobbery in all circles of society, even the ones which she had once lived her life in, when her father still owned Longbourn. In Meryton the Bennets had been regarded as rich compared with those families who lived in the village, not on equal terms to the great estates nearby, but something close. Yet there were those in that circle who had considered themselves above them, due to a knighthood or a marriage connection. Ultimately, society was the same everywhere.

In Meryton she would have tolerated Hurst's attentions towards her. But here, in the cream of society, such an indulgence would have to be treated with disdain if anyone find out. He had the sense to avoid that at least, rarely showing himself when they socialised, attending on them only at the request of Mr Reynolds, and even then at a discreet distance. When there was nought but herself
and the Reynolds's in the house however, Elizabeth felt Hurst's eyes to be always upon her.

If she had been her old self, she would have challenged him immediately. But the illness which had caused the death of so much of her family had affected her too, even though she did not endure any of its painful symptoms. The illness had taught her how quickly things could be lost; from one's position in society, to the deeper losses of siblings, Aunts and other family. No longer was she secure in her living; she had to rely on the charity of others. Before her and her sisters had stood a reasonable chance of marrying, and marrying well, by coming from a landed gentleman pedigree, an estate without an entail. Now she would not even inherit the fifty pounds a year promised to her through her mother.

She had no dowry, and no inheritance but the debts her siblings and mother's illnesses ensued. She could not afford to anger the Reynolds's by challenging their secretary's watchfulness of her, for they were now the guarantors of her future wealth and place in society. As their ward she would attract fortune hunters and gentlemen alike, in the hopes that an alliance with her would gain them a substantial investment in the money of the future. If she displeased them, she would lose any hope of marrying well, and freeing her family from the disgraced conditions which circumstances had reduced them to.

Hurst could continue to watch her. For now.

Hurst indeed continued to watch her, from that moment he passed her on the stairs, to when she and the Reynolds's went to the society soiree they had been invited to that evening. As he observed her climbing into the carriage through the window within his room, his thoughts mused on the position he had put himself into.

And so this was his dilemma. He had worked his way into a position of power in this house so he may watch her every move. Follow her every step. And yet she barely notices him. Often he would deliberately intrude upon her solitude or privacy, forcing her to acknowledge his presence. Sometimes she would speak to him, other times she would merely cease her activities and walk away to another part of the house.

If he was lucky, she would initiate the encounter or conversation, her sweet voice challenging him with her words of opinions or inquiries into his origins. He was sure she meant to disturb his reticent nature, his natural reserve around others, as well as herself, by professing opinions which were not her own. But whether it was to hear his own views was another matter. Often she seemed extremely interested, as though his opinion mattered a great deal to her. Other times he seemed to only infuriate her by anything he happened to say or have said. He knew not what to make of her, or what judgement to form about her character. And he knew that she experienced as much of a mystery in return.

Aside from his secretarial work, he only had these thoughts to occupy his mind, even when his kind employers called him from his occupation to join them on their outings, their excursions of pleasure. There was very little to do in the first circles of Society, aside from attending balls, dining out, shopping or other outdoor amusements.

Such as today, when they roused him to join them outside, for a wander by the river. He had been reluctant to go, and if it were not for Elizabeth's enthusiasm for the excursion, he would have happily stayed at the house. But he was unable to deny her anything when he saw the delight in her eyes at the prospect, even if it was somewhat dimmed by his quiet acceptance of Mr Reynolds' offer to accompany them.

He walked behind them respectfully, as they looked about them upon the avenue by the river.
Elizabeth carried a parasol, twirling the ivory handle within her laced gloved hands, adjusting the position of it as she turned her head this way and that to observe her surroundings. Hurst's eyes remained upon her pleasing form, reluctant to even glance in the direction of the river. That preference carried into the rest of him, as he heard that Mr and Mrs Reynolds wished to go on the handsome steamboat up ahead. His footsteps faltered, even as he heard Miss Bennet's willingness to join them, causing him to halt before a small parish graveyard to the right of him. A sense of belonging in such a place rose within him, a chilling thought, revealing if he had spoken aloud. But as usual he confided in no one but himself.

What a strange sensation, he mused silently. I do not belong among the living any more than these poor souls. For I lie buried somewhere else.

A memory caught in the web of his mind; the following of two gentlemen down a dark, dank tunnel. The sudden appearance of a grotesque sight; a body drawn out of the river, its fixed and disfigured expression calling out to him. He felt the pounding of his heart, and the rising of the river within his own body, begging to be released through his mouth. Such dregs were released long ago, a natural course for survival, but the memory was enough to force the movement. His hand closed over his lips, in a rigid and desperate search for control, as a voice disturbed him from his tormented imaginings.

"I was saying. I think it very bad manners for a man to pretend to be what he is not. Don't you think?"

Hurst had to draw several deep breaths before he could reply with reasonable composure to Miss Bennet's somewhat astute observation. "I hope I do not pretend to be what I am not," he uttered.

Miss Bennet looked at him. "Come, Mr Hurst, surely you can cast off your mysterious disguise and join us?" She asked, indicating with her parasol at the steamboat docked ahead of them, to which Mr and Mrs Reynolds were walking to.

He valiantly shook his head. "No, I don't like the river. It makes me sick." He shuddered involuntarily as his mind called his consciousness to another remembrance; the sickening experience of drowning.

"So you have never been to sea then, Mr Hurst?" Miss Bennet inquired.

Roused from his painful recollection, he looked upon her gentle expression. "Why do you ask?" He inquired, concerned that his features gave him away. But the frank gaze of her fine eyes scared him, and hurriedly he sought to distance himself by what means were open to him. "You will miss the boat, Miss Bennet."

She seemed reluctant to go just then, but her dark eyes caught the insistence in his, the desire to be alone, and obeyed his silent request. Turning from him she ran to the gangplank and darted up the steps to board the steamboat.

"I cannot keep silent." He murmured as he watched the steamboat depart. "I cannot stay stranded in this limbo between life and death for long, else I fear it may consume me."

Yet how to tell them? How did one begin such a tale? And would they take kindly to the life changing consequences which would doubtless ensue? Mr and Mrs Reynolds were good people, he could be assured of them doing right by him, but at this moment he was not sure if he wanted them to. And what of her, what would her reaction be? Would she be glad of such a circumstance? Or would she despair at the loss of liberty endured?
Hurst did not know. There was no way to predict, without telling them the whole of it. But he feared to do so. Even now, the water surrounded him, the limbo between hope and despair. His unlimbered mind struggled to be free of its drowning influence, to resist the seducing temptation of being lost to it forever.

He waited for their return, then followed them back to the townhouse, silent and withdrawn. Their happy recollections of the excursion could not rouse him, nor could her teasing enquiries or pert opinions.

Upon their arrival at the townhouse he sought the solitude of his room as he wrestled with his conscience, heart and mind until he had formed a resolution.

He had to tell them. He could not stand this uncertainty any longer. He must know now whether his continued existence was in vain or no.

Hurst made his way downstairs. He knocked on the door to the drawing room, and opened it a fraction, to see within.

A warm fire encountered his gaze, and the quiet, composed and restive reclines of Mr and Mrs Reynolds, with Miss Bennet between them.

"Come in my dear," Mrs Reynolds said, eagerly welcoming him, though in truth Hurst felt more akin to an intruder now.

"Here, come in, join us," Reynolds added to his wife's words.

Suddenly, despite his previous ruminations and resolution, Hurst felt himself lose the nerve as his dark eyes found Miss Bennet's own. "I'm sorry. I had something to tell you. But it can wait. It can wait until tomorrow."

Fortunately for him Mr Reynolds was in too much of a restive mood to inquire further. "Well if you're sure. Come and join us anyway."

"No, I'll say goodnight." Hurst inclined his head to all of them, then closed the door, before seeking out the night air.

A few moments later found him wandering outside on the formal grounds, contemplating his dilemma once more, as he tried to discover why when deciding to come to the point at last, one look from her forestalled the confession altogether.

*She has me under her spell,* he realised silently. *She has made me powerless. I am nobody. If I tell her my secret now, I may lose everything. I will continue to watch her for a little while longer.*
Further down the river, in the area of the Thames where Kent and Surrey meet, between the ghettos of the poor and the haven of society, the schools of the borough were situated, each with varying degrees of wealth, ability and intelligence.

Charlie Philips attended one of the poorer institutions. Not a ragged school, where he had begun his education, but the one from which a schoolmaster had visited said ragged school, taken him out of, and transferred into his better school. The kind where the only avenue for advancement, was apprenticeship, or becoming a schoolmaster oneself. He was destined for the latter profession, having possessed a little more wit than the rest, a determination to better himself, and a attitude which endorsed respect, whether he truly earned it or not. His cousin's money had helped send him there, and he was glad of it, for the last thing he wanted to do was follow in his father's footsteps. He had seen the journey's end of them, a horrible entanglement in the towrope of boats. He would raise himself above such a dreadful end. He was quite determined about it.

He was nearing the end of his education, and in time, would take his exams, before becoming a schoolmaster. And he wished to thank his cousin, for her willingness to pay for his education, by whatever means he could. He was aware of his Uncle Bennet's situation, the family's now reduced circumstances, and knew that Jane, rather than place a further burden upon her father's meagre resources by moving back home, had chosen to find herself work and livings elsewhere instead.

She had sent him the address of her new situation in reply to his kind inquiry, and now he wished to pay call on her, along with his schoolmaster and mentor, Mr Collins, a man of six and twenty, who had the constant appearance of always seeming troubled about something, as though he had toiled hard all his life to attain the knowledge and position he possessed, and now having reached them, feared to lose both such gifts, thus was always checking to see if he still had firm hold of them.

Carrying the letter in his hand, Charlie guided his schoolmaster through the maze of alleyways, across Westminster Bridge and the Middlesex shore, following the directions written in his cousin's elegant hand until he reached the equally elegant house of his younger cousin, Elizabeth Bennet, otherwise known as the Reynolds's ward.

He stepped inside, followed by Mr Collins, and found himself in an elegant white marbled tiled hall, where an elegant footman awaited to receive their card. Since they had none, he received a verbal communication of introduction instead, whereupon the elegant footman left them in that elegant hall while he went to convey the communication to Charlie's cousins of his and his schoolmaster's presence and request to wait on them. Said request was elegantly accepted a few moments later, as the elegant footman returned to conduct the visitors into a fine and elegant drawing room, much richer than any rooms either pupil or schoolmaster had been accustomed to, and better than what pupil's father had ever managed to provide for him.

"Charlie!" Jane cried, followed by Elizabeth, and the two ladies, looking more elegant and refined than Charlie had ever seen them, even in the days of Mr Bennet's more prosperous youth, rose from their seats to embrace their cousin.

"There, there, Janie, there there, Liz," Charlie replied to their joyful greeting, stepping back and gesturing to the man behind him. "See, here is Mr Collins to see you. How well you look, Jane, and you, Liz."
"Oh, yes, Jane always looks so well. Everyone thinks so, don't they, Jane, m'dear?" Elizabeth replied, making her sister blush from the praise.

"Does Charlie do well, Mr Collins?" Jane asked.

Mr Collins felt awkward in the presence of so much beauty. He was stiff in his style of teaching, stern to his colleagues and pupils alike, but beneath the stern style there ebbed and flowed a deeply passionate nature, which threatened to overwhelm him when he was confronted with beauty such as this. She was like the Greek Goddesses described by ancient philosophers. Her sister was just as beautiful, but a contrast; dark where Jane was blond, striking where Jane was Grecian, a dark enchantress to her sister's angelic qualities. "Yes, he could not do better," he struggled to reply.

Jane still held her cousin close by her, while Elizabeth returned to the elegant furnishings of the elegant sofa. "Well done, Charlie," the former praised. "Well, I hope we'll not take too much time from your studies. It is better for us not to become between him and prospects, don't you think so, Mr Collins?"

And such intelligence too. It was more than he expected. More than he could have hoped for. "Yes, your cousin has to work hard. But once he has established himself, that will be another thing."

"Shall we walk, Janie?" Charlie asked her, anxious to talk without the presence of Elizabeth, whose impertinent manner he had always found disturbing.

"Of course," Jane replied and fetched her cloak.

They made an odd party as they walked into the formal and elegant gardens of the Reynoldses' grand and elegant townhouse; one elegantly attired, refined lady accompanied by a boy barely into manhood, and a man aged by the circumstances of his paltry wealth and hard life, both dressed sombrely, in clothes which when placed beside those of the lady, displayed the sharp divide between the rich and the poor of London's vast society. Mr Collins walked ahead of them, giving them some semblance of privacy amongst the mass of elegant box hedges and elegant flower arrangements, attended to by discreet gardeners, whose close stewardship sometimes required daily grooming upon such splendid grounds.

"When are you going to settle yourself in some Christian place, Janie?" Charlie asked her as they walked. "I'm ashamed to have brought Mr Collins with me. How can you keep company here? Do you not realise how precarious your current situation is?"

Jane was calm in the face of his distaste for her surroundings. "I could hardly return to my father's, Charlie. Forcing him to support two daughters again when he has only just adjusted to supporting one. Mr and Mrs Reynolds wrote to me after Uncle's death, asking me to become my sister's companion here. And Lizzy had missed me so much since our removal to London that I could not refuse. Where else would you have me stay? With one of the persons related to the police notices on our Wall?"

"I want to forget the police notices," Charlie said firmly, annoyed that she was asking him to renege on her wish to recall his time by the waterside as only something out of a dream. "And so should you."

"I don't think that I ever could," Jane replied. "And I was wrong to ask you to forget them aswell. Mr and Mrs Reynolds do not forget their humble beginnings. They help as many people as they can who live in worse situations than they ever did themselves."

"I don't see what it's got to do with you," Charlie remarked.
"Do you not? Don't you think we owe some compensation for the life we led? For the profit that your father, my Uncle, made?"

"Don't talk such nonsense!" Charlie cried. "I've left the river far behind and so will you. I will not have you draw me back, Jane."

"But I don't draw you back, Charlie. If you choose to become a teacher, like Mr Collins, you will be educating the children of the river."

"I mean it, Jane!" Charlie repeated, ignoring the fact that she was correct. "Now let's not fight. I mean to be a good cousin to you."

Mr Collins rejoined them, causing Jane to draw her cousin into a farewell hug. She felt a little glad of the short duration of his visit. She felt as if in their time apart they had lost the connection of blood and kin which had once drawn them together. Where once he would accede to her judgement, now he took his way in everything, and forced her to obey him as well. They had become like strangers to each other.

Unlike his pupil, Mr Collins was all politeness. "But surely, we can go your cousin's way back into the house?" He inquired, offering his arm to her.

But Jane did not want to be with her cousin in his current temperament. "I'll not return to my sister just yet. And you have a long walk ahead of you both. You'll go much faster without me."

She smiled at them both, and disappeared into the elegant wilderness which surrounded the east side of the townhouse. Her cousin's words had disturbed her, both in their ungratefulness, and their harsh opinion of her living. They were nothing to her views, for Jane was not unhappy with her new situation. After her Uncle's death, she could hardly go back to her parents' house, with their distressed circumstances. There were still Charlie's school fees to pay for. She could not ask her father to divide the earnings that were barely enough to feed himself, her mother and her younger sister, and pay the rent, for a further expense. Elizabeth had offered to fund their cousin out of her own handsome allowance, but Jane could not bear that either. And since they had not seen each other since her removal from Longbourn to their uncle's, a compromise was reached; and she came to live with her at the Reynolds's nice new house in a nice new neighbourhood. The situation may be precarious, but she was as equal a ward as Elizabeth was, and were not all situations in life precarious, when one took into account the uncertainty of life? Change could come at any time, something which both she and Elizabeth had learned, to their tragic cost.

A series of chimes suddenly disturbed her from her thoughts, and she counted the hour Big Ben bell's marked. Realising the time, she turned and made her way back to the elegant townhouse. She was expecting another visitor today, one who could be counted on being far kinder than her young cousin. Mr Charles Bingley had been very kind, very gentlemanlike since her Uncle's death. He had offered to investigate the matter for her, to see if there was any means to clear their Uncle's name from the rumours of his involvement with the Darcy murder. But not only that, he had been kind to her, and to Elizabeth too, even if she discomposed him, as Elizabeth was frequently wont to do whenever Mr Bingley paid a call.

No, Jane mused as she made her way to the elegant drawing room, she found no cause to follow her cousin's advice and give up her current situation just yet.

Further down the river, in surroundings where the Philipses and their cousin had once lived, another woman was in the same situation which Jane had once been. She stood on the shores of the river, bidding her father- not her Uncle -farewell for the day, as he went out on the river to earn their keep.
Her name was Pleasant Jenkinson.

"Please be careful on the east bank at Blackfriars at tide turn, father." She said.

"What would you know?" Her father remarked curtly. His eyes caught what accompanied his food for the day. "What's this?" He asked, referring to the liquor. "You wanna see me off? Over the side and into the mud?"

Pleasant looked away from him, saddened by his jibe. She caught something out of the corner of her eye, and looked to see a man had paused to observe them. A fine looking man, a man of fashion and society.

Jenkinson treated him with the same contempt with which he treated everybody he could not get money out of. "And what are you looking for?"

"I believe it was you that first sought out a lawyer," the man replied.

"Gaffer's dead now," Jenkinson reminded him.

"But my investigation is not," the man informed them, before walking away.

His route back into the finer parts of the city took him over Vauxhall Bridge, the same bridge which Charlie Philips and Mr Collins chose to use as their return route across the Thames to their school.

Charlie could not fail to recognise him, though it was some months since they first and last made each other's acquaintance, and immediately halted his walk, to watch him pass them and beyond till the end of the bridge.

"Who is that you stare after?" Mr Collins asked his pupil.

His pupil seemed not to hear him. "Yes it is him. It is that Bingley. I don't like him."

"Does he know your cousin, this Bingley?" Mr Collins asked.

"Yes, sir. He's met her," Charlie replied. "He came with a friend of his on business, that is the friend had business and he came with him. The other time was when my father died. He was one of the ones who found his body, and he came with Ms Hill, a neighbour, to break the news to Jane. He came there early morning and was still there when I was finally fetched home, as soon as my cousin was recovered enough to say where I could be found."

"Going to see her then, I dare say," Mr Collins concluded.

"He doesn't know her well enough," Charlie replied, annoyed at the presumption, just as he was annoyed at the man who had not seemed in the least to like or respect him in the Library when they first encountered each other. "I'd like to see him try."

Pupil and schoolmaster continued their walk, the route taking up the rest of the daylight hours so it was dusk by the time they returned to the school gates.

"I suppose your cousin has received little teaching, Philips," Mr Collins remarked. "And yet she hardly seems like an ignorant person."

"Jane was left to look after her own education at her father's house, sir. But he was an landed gentleman, and she was provided with the best materials." Charlie paused, considering the contrast which existed even then, between himself and his cousin's circumstances. "She has as much thought
as the best of them, Mr Collins. Too much perhaps. She used to look at the river and have strange fancies."

"I don't like that," Mr Collins remarked, and Charlie realised that he had to change tack, if he wanted to repay all his cousin's kindness to him.

"It's a painful thought, but if I do as well as you hope, I shall be- I won't say disgraced as such -but rather put to the blush by a cousin who really has been very good to me."

"There is another possibility. Some man might come to admire your cousin. It would be a sad drawback for him this inequality of education."

"That's my drift, sir," Charlie replied.

"Yes, well you speak as a relation. For... an admirer.... a cousin you see cannot help the connection. Whereas a husband would...." he trailed off, but Charlie could guess the direction of his thoughts.

"Jane could learn quickly. Enough to pass muster. Certainly if given a little education," Charlie informed. He had a lower opinion of his cousin's intelligence than was the true state of affairs, a product of his arrogant character rather than experience.

Nevertheless, he had said enough to gain his schoolmaster's interest. "Yes well I'll think about it, Philips. I'll think about it maturely."

"Mr Charles Bingley, is it?" Elizabeth remarked as the man in question entered the elegant drawing room some minutes later.

Charles pretended to glance around as if he were checking that they were in danger of being overheard. "So I am told."

"You may come in if you're good," Elizabeth declared, her fine eyes twitching in amusement.

"I am not good, but I will come in," Charles replied, encountering Miss Bennet's gaze as he closed the elegant drawing room door. "Forgive the unexpected intrusion but I happened to be nearby."

"Lost, I dare say," Elizabeth remarked, before moving to the piano forte to give her sister and their caller a little privacy.

"I'm afraid I have nothing to report, Miss Bennet, concerning Mr Jenkinson," Charles began to Jane, "but you may always be assured of my best help, and that of my friend Fitzwilliam's in our efforts to clear your Uncle."

Jane nodded at him, touched beyond words by his manner with her and gentle address. Such a contrast to her cousin. She been away from gentle society far too long.

"And how is Mr Fitzwilliam, Mr Bingley?" Elizabeth inquired.

"He is quite well, Miss Bennet, and sends his compliments." Charles turned to Jane. "Have you considered my suggestion, Miss Bennet?"

Jane nodded. "I have thought of it, but I cannot make up my mind to accept it."

"False pride?" He asked her.

She shook her head. "Oh no, Mr Bingley. Well, I hope not."
"What else can it be? I propose to be of use to someone which I never was in this world, nor ever will be again, by offering to be an intermediary between yourself and those personages mentioned on your Uncle's wall, to provide them with the means to furnish their impoverished circumstances with an income, which you would not require, had you not been a self-denying niece and cousin by choosing to live and raise said cousin. This false pride does wrong both to you and your dead Uncle."

"How to our Uncle, Mr Bingley?" Elizabeth asked him.

"By perpetuating his blind obstinacy; by resolving not to set right the wrong he has done yourself and those personages in the notices upon his wall." He paused, recollecting himself, as his passionate response had seemed to have startled her and her sister. "Please don't be distressed. I am afraid I am a little disappointed. It shall not break my heart but I am genuinely disappointed. I'd rather set my heart on doing this little thing for you and Miss Elizabeth, but so be it. I meant well, both honestly and simply."

Jane felt a little guilty she had refused him. "Well, I've never doubted that."

Charles innocently continued to increase that feeling of guilt, carrying on as if what she said had not registered. "And I intend to go back to my old ways immediately, never to put myself of use to anyone or anything, for it will always be a doomed endeavour. And always mistaken for my own selfishness."

"Well! I think I have hesitated long enough, Mr Bingley," Jane said, unable to think of disappointing him a moment longer, "and I hope you won't think the worst of me for having hesitated at all. But for myself and for Elizabeth, I thankfully accept your offer."

Charles smiled, and Jane was immediately pleased, for she wanted him to be happy, for there was such a pleasing handsomeness acquired by his countenance when he smiled. He appeared to be a man who was unaccustomed to happiness, for his expression always seemed to savour it whenever the emotion came his way. A part of her wished to always make him happy.

"Agreed! Dismissed! Well, let's hope we never make so much of so little ever again," he took her proffered hand and raise it to his lips gallantly.

Elizabeth smiled, seeing her sister blush as the gentleman unconsciously lingered in this gesture to her. Jane had been only months in her company, and already it seemed she was to lose her again. But this time she would not begrudge the person who took her away, as she did when they were first made aware of their Uncle Philips' now dreadful circumstances. For he was not her selfish cousin Charlie, but a pleasant and gentlemanlike Charles, to whom her sister could do nothing but good, and who would welcome whatever alterations her sister might bring into his character and his life, unlike their selfish cousin who resented everything everyone has ever tried to do for him. She could not admit such an opinion to Jane of course, who never thought ill of anyone. Her sister was everything that was noble and good in their family, and she deserved a man who would do right by her, who could provide for her, and make her happy.

But ultimately, she deserved a man who loved her as she deserved to be loved, and that Elizabeth was determined to see Mr Bingley provide.
Chapter 12

Part 12.

Elizabeth Bennet knocked on a door in the Reynolds's townhouse. Receiving no reply, she clasped the golden doorknob in her hands and turned. Opening it revealed that the room which belonged to the mysterious secretary to be empty. This was not unusual, for Mr Reynolds frequently requested that Mr Hurst make use of his study downstairs. But Elizabeth was glad to find the room empty, for her curiosity was roused by this opportunity to find out about a man who seemed to know so much about her, for she imagined that was his reason why he followed her wherever she happened to go. After all, he had access to the Will that gave her away to the heir of the Darcy estates, along with the ledgers recording her expenditure as ward of the Reynolds's, and the house of her father in which he lodged. She thought it was only right that she was able to know as much about him as he knew about her.

A desk, chair and inbuilt shelves occupied the room, all cluttered and stacked with books, papers, timepieces, ink, pen and various other necessities that were typically found in such studies. But there was nothing personal to the secretary himself, nothing that revealed anything about his family or his life before he lodged at her father's house. She went to the desk and opened drawers at random, searching for anything, but finding nothing, until a folded document caught her eye. She lifted out, bringing it before her gaze.

It was the Darcy Will. For a moment Elizabeth held the folded piece of large parchment, the broken seal before her gaze, hesitant to find out what she had always wanted to know; the terms of language used which traded her hand in marriage to the now drowned heir to the dust fortune and estates. A part of her had always regarded this document with bitterness, for it had prevented her from achieving one of her once dearly held aims in life; to marry for love. It had bound her to a complete stranger, for whom she must refuse all the attentions of others, lest she deny him his inheritance forever. She had often wondered in what light he might regard the document, torn between the belief that he felt as bitterly about the matter as she, or did not care about her or the inheritance at all, having spent so many years aboard, estranged from his family. Then curiosity got the better of her and her slender fingers went to work on the folds.

Unhappily she was only able to glance at the handwriting contain therein before she was disturbed by the sound of footsteps approaching the study. Hurriedly she hid it amongst the papers upon the desk, and walked away to another part of the room.

Hurst was pleased to see her waiting for him, though to an outsider his expression appeared critical and dismissive. His features were not designed for concealment of his feelings, the mask he assumed to protect himself from the unwanted attentions of others often appeared more foreboding than he desired because it was such a struggle to assume in the first place. He longed to present his real self to the world around him, but he feared to do so as well, because that world had not been kind to him in the past.

It was a hope of his that she would be the one who could see past his protective disguise, but as yet she had always retreated whenever he attempted to develop a friendship between them. It was not often that she sought him out and never had she visited his private study before. "Excuse me, Miss Bennet, I didn't mean to surprise you." He paused as he walked to the desk, his sharp eyes discovering the Will hidden under the papers which covered the veneered surface. "There's no reason to hide it, you are entitled to read it," he informed her. Indeed he was surprised that she had not asked to see it before now.
"As you do time and time again I am sure," Elizabeth countered, annoyed at being caught out and desiring to challenge him for his own entitlement and curiosity.

Ascertaining the defensiveness in her tone, Hurst sought to change the subject. "You wanted to see me? Ah yes, your weekly allowance. We can't forget that, can we?"

Elizabeth took offence from what was meant to be teasing and in turn sought to discompose him. "You even play the mysterious stranger in private, Mr Hurst. No family likenesses or personal possessions. It is a very good pretence."

Hurst flinched at her words and the tone which she used to utter them, but refrained from defending himself, instead handing her the required amount of money. "Speaking of family, Miss Bennet, you do not charge me with any commissions for home. I should be happy to execute any demands you may have in that direction."

"What do you mean, Mr Hurst?" She asked him.

"By home? I mean your father's house in Holloway," Hurst replied.

The state of her family's finances in comparison to her own recently improved situation, was instantly brought before her mind, causing her heart to hurt, as though it had received a painful blow. Whether the secretary meant the comment innocently or not, she was annoyed with herself that she had forgotten the poverty of her family so easily and so quickly. "No, what commissions did you mean, sir?" she asked, trying to ascertain where he was as aware of this transgression as she was.

"Only by some words of greeting which I assume you already send, somehow or other. I should be happy to be the bearer of them. As you know I come and go between the two houses everyday," Hurst explained, sensing that he had unwittingly annoyed her again.

Elizabeth knew not whether to be relieved that he had not found her out, annoyed at his presumption, or curious as to why she was so concerned with his opinion of her. But his reply had reminded her that she had yet to hear from her family since her departure from Holloway. Her father was an infrequent corresponder as it was, but as she had the privilege of being his favourite daughter, she had hoped he would have exerted himself to writing at least a note by now. "They don't send many commissions to me," she admitted, ashamed at revealing such familial neglect to their lodger.

Thankfully Hurst did not comment on the neglect, either from her side or her family's. "Well they frequently ask me about you," he revealed, "and I give them such slight intelligence as I can."

Now she understood him, she felt another uncertainty, as to the nature of the intelligence he gave to her family. She knew not why she cared about his opinion, yet she did, even as she distrusted his. "And I hope it is truly given."

Her words made him turn away from her, in manner that was not mysterious, for she caught the expression in his face before he did, and realised how she had offended him by accusing him of being as unjust as she was to his character, incurring her remorse. "No I do not doubt it. I beg your pardon, Mr Hurst, that was unfair of me. I'm going to visit my family soon, as it happens. Though what business it may be of yours I really cannot imagine."

She turned away from him, and headed out of the room. Hurst lingered long enough to return the Will to its original resting place, then followed her downstairs, in time to encounter someone arriving in the hall.

It was one of their tenants, carrying news of a child which Mr and Mrs Reynolds had entertained the
idea of adopting at one time. The child was ill, dying in short, and the man begged them to come to
the child's grandmother's house, for the lady had requested to see them and inform them of the sad
news in all its detail.

All disharmony between the secretary and Miss Bennet was forgot. Exchanging a silent glance with
the former, Elizabeth went to inform her sister and the Reynolds's, whereupon they immediately
travelled to the place, situated on the outskirts of London.

A physician was summoned, and his diagnosis was grim. Consumption. Such a disease was not
discriminating where it touched, the mortal perils preyed on victims from all walks of life, without
warning or relief, save death. Medicine had not yet advanced far enough to procure the cause and
find a cure, so there was nothing he could do for the boy.

Hurst returned from seeing the man to his horse to find Elizabeth attempting to comfort the
grandmother, who cradled the last product of her blood. He was struck by the scene, deeply moved,
beyond words or care for what his features might betray of his thoughts. If the Reynolds's, Miss
Bennet, or the young woman herself cared to glance at him then, all would be undone and the truth
revealed. Yet, at this moment he was past caring, for he had descried another truth that was far more
important to him just now; the truth of her.

Gentleness, compassion, kindness, beauty and intelligence. Stripped away from Society and the
demands its practices and codes heaped upon debutantes, she was her own woman, everything that a
mistress of an estate could and should be. He had heard from the Reynolds's that her father had once
owned an estate in Hertfordshire, which, but for the tragedy of disease which visited that part of the
country, had been a small yet comfortable one. He had also heard from the same source that she was
a favourite of her father, and that she, along with her elder sister, had been raised for such roles, as
their mother schemed to have them married well and their father was glad to delegate such tasks to
them, allowing him to spend more time in his study, at his books.

Despite his abhorrence to the plots of such matchmaking Mamas, he was by no means incapable of
understanding her motives to see her daughters well settled, wanting for nothing. And it was only
sensible that if she intended for her girls to make an advantageous marriage, they should be prepared
for the role they would have to assume afterwards.

And who was he to deny her it? What qualms had he still that yet to be dismissed from his heart if
not from his mind? He had admitted that he was under her spell days ago, accepted that he was
powerless. With further proof presented to him day after day, why did he continue to delay? He
knew why, because he could not help but feel that she would be disheartened if she learned the truth.
The only way to change this was to improve her opinion of him, and this he had tried to do today,
without success. Perhaps he was doomed to find no happiness within this life.
Chapter 13

Part 13.

Dear Mr Younge,

I am sorry to inform you, one more time, that although acquainted with the profits of your business, I must once more decline your offer of marriage. And I report I do not wished to regard myself nor yet to be regarded in that bony light.

Yours with sincerity,

Pleasant Jenkinson.

After receiving such disappointing news, the last thing Younge wanted to do was sit in the very business which had earned this rejection for the rest of the day. Recollecting a certain request from one of his clients, he collected one of the bones which Miss Jenkinson had objected to, wrapped it in brown paper and string, and exited the shop, closing the establishment until the morrow.

He arrived at the Reynolds's dust yard just as dusk was arriving upon the city, clouding the deserted heaps and house in a dim foggy light, lending an added eerieness to an already seemingly supernatural scene.

Mr Wickham was there to greet him, with a large bright lantern with which to guide his way into the simple, ramshackle dwelling, and paid him the amount agreed for the leg, before inviting him to stay for a drink. With the mood that Mr Younge was in, one drink was not enough, and nor was his companion used to such a limit being employed.

In hindsight, Mr Younge is fully aware that such a mood when mixed with a liberal quantity of liquor, is apt to prove dangerous to one's moral compass.

"So, Mr Wickham, you mentioned some further business?" Mr Younge sought to confirm, recalling their last conversation during which a time and place for this meeting to sell and buy the bone had been agreed upon.

"When I first visited your establishment, we were talking of Old Mr Darcy as being a friend of yours," Mr Wickham began.

"Not friend exactly," Younge corrected with a slight chuckle. He gestured to the bottle in his hand with another similar exhale. "He was a very inquisitive spirit."

"And would you say secretive?" Wickham inquired eagerly. "About what was found in the dust for instance?"

"Why? What do you mean?" Younge asked, leaning forward in his seat, curious.

Wickham said nothing in reply, but instead made an effort to stand up, before half hobbling, half stumbling outside, beckoning his guest to follow with one of his crutches, into the valley of the dust heaps.

"Did Old Darcy ever mention how he found things?" Wickham added as they tramped their way up and over the mounds, taking care not to lose neither their footing nor a drop from the bottles of gin in their hands. "Whether he started at the top of the mounds or at the bottom? Whether he prodded or scooped?"
"And might you have prodded or scooped a little by yourself and found your physical deficiency too difficult to overcome?" Younge gathered astutely.

Wickham let the reference to his physical deficiency pass by in order to continue stating his business proposition. "Now Younge, here is my friendly proposal. If there is anything to be found on these premises, be it money, or jewels or papers, let us find it together. We agree to share the profits, we agree to further the cause of right."

Had Younge been sober, he might have listened to the doubts that his moral compass served to create in his mind. As it was, soured by drink and in matters of love, his curiosity overwhelmed his conscience, causing him to inquire further. "You've found nothing yet?"

"I've only skimmed it," Wickham informed him. "Skimmed," he repeated, gesturing at the vast expanse of mounds with his hands and the objects they clasped, a walking stick and beer bottle, taking great care not to lose his grip of either, nor his footing.

Younge took a drink from his bottle as he considered the proposition. "I scarcely know what to say to your proposal, Mr Wickham," he murmured after the liquid was swallowed, silencing some of the doubts from his moral compass.

"Say yes," Wickham suggested.

"If I wasn't so soured in the matters of romance..." Younge sighed as just the mention of that word brought back the full misery he felt when first reading Pleasant Jenkinson's rejection letter. "I've told you of the lady?" he added, waiting for a nod before he continued, as he was too drunk on both rum and misery to recall whether or not he had. "But being soured, and driven to reckless madness and desperation, I suppose its yes."

The two conspirators, now comrades in arms, clanked the bottles in toast of their new business proposition, before returning to the Bower, where their celebration continued to drain the owner's supply of gin.

It was several days after the death of the child that Elizabeth felt unable to neglect seeing her family any longer. Or more to the point, Jane would pay call on their mother and sister, for she had the patience to humour their ways, while she would visit their father. Making use of the carriage, she took her allowance and set off in the direction of his work, at the offices of King, Lucas and Foster, situated in Mincing Lane.

The clerks of said drug-house were very surprised to see a fine and elegant carriage draw up outside their window, and for a moment believed it to contain one of the illustrious owners come to pay inspection, or secure a new deal. But no, it was Mr Bennet's daughter, much to their amazement. Their surprise was such, that, when it was applied for, they happily granted him the rest of the day off to spend with her, without the lost of pay, charmed as they were by the beauty, grace and manners of the young lady.

"Well, Papa!" Lizzy cried as she embraced him outside the drug-house, once they had exited the offices to begin their amusement.

"My dear!" Mr Bennet replied, as he returned the embrace, pleased to see her. "I am glad to see you." He bowed his head for a moment. "I'm sorry I have not written. How are you and Jane?" He glanced around. "Come to think of it, where is Jane?"

"We are both well, Papa," Elizabeth replied. "Jane is visiting Mama and Kitty."
"Are we bound for Holloway then?" Her father asked.

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, I have something I want to give you, but its not in Holloway." She gestured for him to climb into the carriage.

"Its a surprise," she added, then ordered the coachman to be off to the nearest elegant tailor's.

Behind them, unseen by their eyes, and indistinguishable from the other vehicles of its kind who traversed the streets of Victoria's capital, another black Hansom cab followed at a more sedate pace, as though the occupier of that vehicle was curious as to where this handsome chariot was bound.

Mr Bennet stepped out of the tailors looking a great deal smarter than when he went in.

"Thank you, my dear," he remarked to his waiting daughter. "To have a new jacket and hat at the same time, is wonderful." He handed her the change out of the money she had given him.

Elizabeth closed his hands around the amount. "No, now you're going to treat your lovely young woman to dinner."

"And where shall we go, my dear?" Mr Bennet asked her, meeting her laughing eyes and smile with the same emotions within his own.

"Greenwich," Elizabeth informed him. "And make sure you treat me to everything of the very best."

They stepped back inside the carriage, and again the vehicle and horses off into the city, this time for the salubrious destination of Greenwich, where Society's finest and noblest whiled away their idle hours touring the extensive gardens and house, or dining at the many restaurants happy to capitalise on such pleasing countryside.

Hurst, who had been travelling in the Hansom cab which had followed them all this while, stood at the threshold of a side alley which led to the elegant tailor's, long enough to catch Miss and Mr Bennet's next destination, before returning to vehicle and directing the driver to follow the yellow chariot once again.

Mr Bennet was content to indulge his favourite daughter in all her whims for the rest of the day, so happy he was to see her and so pleased to see her happy. He recited speeches from their favourite play, which they used to read for hours in Longbourn's library, at the staircase to the entrance of Queen's House. Afterwards, as they walked past the river to the restaurant, he let her bang his walking stick along the black railings which protected the fine houses from those who could not afford them, as well as those who could. Before they turned into the street where the restaurant was situated, he taught her to skim stones along the water, with middling success. When they had entered the fine restaurant and ordered the food, Mr Bennet inwardly marvelling at the prices, and Elizabeth not caring a jot for the extravagance, he asked her amuse her imagination and his by telling him stories about all the boats they could see before him in the river. Elizabeth had always been a great storyteller, and this occasion was no exception.

"What about that one, my dear?" He asked, gesturing to a large trading ship which was temporarily stationed at one of the docks opposite, as the crew unloaded the goods it had carried from all corners of the empire for the imperial cardinal city.

Elizabeth smiled as she let her imagination run wild. "That one belongs to a merchant of immense wealth, who has married a very lovely young woman," here she gestured to indicate that the woman was herself, "and who is so wealthy that he actually owns all the boats you see on the river before you."
The food arrived, causing a break in conversation. Words between course were confined to what her sibling and parents had been occupying themselves with during hers and Jane's absence. It was not until the desert course that her father touched upon a more serious subject, such as what Jane and she planned for the future. "I suppose we may come to conclusion at home, my dear, that we've lost you and Jane for good."

"No, you can not conclude that, Papa," Elizabeth assured him. "But the Reynolds's have supplied your lovely young women with everything they need in the most handsome way. And they are such very good people, Papa." She paused to take another mouthful of the sorbet before her, wondering how best to broach the next subject, for it was one which her father would not like. Eventually she decided to just be honest. "Papa, I have a confession to make. I am the most mercenary little wretch that ever lived."

Mr Bennet was much surprised such a confession, for she had never given credence to such a characteristic, even when they had enough to afford to indulge in such a sin. "I should hardly have thought that of you, my dear."

"It's not that I care for money to keep as money, but I do care so very much for what it will buy," Elizabeth explained.

"I think most of us do, Lizzy dear," Mr Bennet pointed out to her. "About when did you feel this coming on?"

"That's the terrible part of it," Elizabeth replied. "See when I was at home and only knew what it was to be poor, and only knew the memory of Longbourn and its comforts, I'd grumble, but I wouldn't mind so much. But when I was disappointed of my splendid, albeit married, fortune and now see it daily in others hands and see what it can really do, I am now always avariciously scheming. I have made up my mind that I must have money. And as I can't beg, borrow or steal it, I must marry it."

Her father knew not what to say at this. Elizabeth had been his confidant for so long, that he knew not how to treat this piece of news. "This is most alarming at your age, my dear," he eventually settled for.

"Isn't it shocking?" Elizabeth mused, in a tone which belied her belief that such was indeed the case of her opinion of this course of action.

"Well, it would be if you fully meant it," Mr Bennet replied, still incapable of accepting that she did. "I thought you swore to marry for nothing but the deepest love?"

His daughter leaned forward in earnest. "Oh but I do, Papa. Talk to me of love and...." She sighed, her heart heavy within her. "All I see is Jane's happiness. But talk to me of poverty and wealth, and there we touch upon the realities of life."

"But, Elizabeth, what of your happiness?" Her father asked. "I know you could never marry a man unless you truly esteem him. Unless he looked upon you as an equal. If you choose to follow through with this, your other half may not be so charitably inclined to let you reap the benefits of an advantageous match."

"Tell me, Papa, did you marry money?" Elizabeth asked him gently.

Her father sighed, knowing now that she was serious in her present course. "You know I didn't, my dear."

"And are you happy?" She asked him, and upon him paling in pallor, immediately wished she had
not. "Oh, Forgive me."

The visit ended on this rather sad note. Mr Bennet was not inclined for conversation and Elizabeth felt she had gravely disappointed her father by voicing such a frank indictment concerning her view of her father and mother's martial bliss, or lack there of. The both of them silent, perhaps each a little sad, she saw him back to the house, and did not follow him in to see her sister and mother, choosing to wait in the carriage until Jane was ready to leave as well. Tears slipped down her face as the pale yellow chariot carried them away, back to the Reynolds's townhouse.

She had gone to Holloway intending to do a good deed, and to see her father and family whom she dearly missed. She sent them what of her allowance she could spare, but the only notes she received were from Jane, who had always been a diligent corresponder, and now that her eldest sister was living with her, she had none. She knew her father hated letter writing, but she had hoped he would at least send something to her. Instead she had decided to visit and this was the result. After this she feared she had disappointed him beyond all of hope of a letter from Holloway.

Her tears were still in evidence when she entered the marbled hall of the Reynolds's house. Jane had inquired in vain for an reason as why she was so withdrawn and sad, and her father, when he entered the house, equally so. Anxious for none at the house to see her in such a sad state which would only provoke further inquiry, she darted to the stairs.

But it was too late. Mr Hurst was stationed with Mr Reynolds in the study below the staircase, the door opened enough for him and the master of the house to hear her return and subsequent hurried walk to the stairs. Turning round, he confirmed the information to his employer, before excusing himself to come to her side.

"I trust you had a satisfactory morning shopping, Miss Bennet?" He asked of her, not observing the state of her manner or tear stained features until he was immediately before her. Receiving nothing in reply but a sniff, he changed his tone. "Are you not well, Miss Bennet?" He asked her, handing her his handkerchief.

"I'm quite well, thank you," Elizabeth replied, though her tears were in plain evidence, disputing such an assertion, even as she wiped her eyes with the handkerchief that he offered to her from his coat.

"Well, perhaps you better stay indoors tonight," he suggested, thinking that given the time it was unlikely that she would be recovered sufficiently to enjoy the evening's soiree to which they had been invited. Catching her frown at him, he hastily added, "I simply meant that perhaps an evening of dancing and socialising would not be wise if you are out of sorts."

Offended, Elizabeth finished attending to her face and folded the handkerchief. "I'm not a child!" She cried, a petulant protest. "I think an evening's marauding and attracting is just the thing to raise my spirits."

She returned the proffered material comfort to his hand and he was left to watch her ascend the stairs, knowing he had angered her once more, on a day when her emotions were already greatly disturbed by other events much closer to home.

Jane had entered the hall by this point, in time to witness her sister's departure, and hear what Mr Hurst had said to her, and Elizabeth's response. Gently she sought to ease one person's suffering, knowing that he inquired with the best of intentions. "Do not be too alarmed, Mr Hurst. I was just as unsuccessful as you in my endeavour to make her confide in me. Though I have an idea of the reason behind her sorrow."
"Do you, Miss Bennet?" Mr Hurst remarked, turning finally from the now empty staircase to face her. "Might I be allowed to learn the reason?"

"She misses our father," Jane informed him, causing him to incline his head in empathy, perhaps even understanding. "Since her removal here he had refrained from writing to her, even though there exists no difficulties in the conveyance of such correspondence."

"Indeed, I would be glad to deliver them from him to her and vice versa," Mr Hurst assured her. "And any from yourself as well."

Jane nodded. "I have no doubt that you would. Our father loathes letter writing, but Lizzy and I had hoped he would write something to us at least. Yet he has not. And that makes her uncertain when she goes to see him, causing her to profess certain opinions which may not be her own."

"Even though he does not write, I do try to keep him and your mother and sister informed of your wellbeing while you are here, Miss Bennet," Hurst explained. "I told your sister that I do as much only a few days ago."

"I have no doubt that you do, Mr Hurst." Jane smiled at him. "But my sister and my father have always been particularly close. And now they are apart, and she feels lost to him. And unsure that she could ever be close to him again."
Chapter 14

Part 14.

Days passed, and life returned to normal at the Reynolds's house. Soirees were attended, with much marauding and attracting, admirers encouraged or rebuffed. Young and old of society amused themselves by such entertainment, either observing or involving themselves in these frivolities. Elizabeth recovered her equanimity over time, heartened when her father wrote to her, the letter followed by one for her and Jane from Kitty and then their mother. During the evenings when invitations or society was scarce, they received and entertained callers, gentleman and female, though the former rarely stayed as long as the latter, who were anxious to make themselves available for callers of the same sex.

When Charles Bingley departed the Reynolds's townhouse one evening after paying just such a call, he had no idea his departure was being observed, not just by the Miss Bennets, one with fond affection, the other with something deeper and more profound, but also by another seemingly gentle man who had called upon the ladies just after Jane had joined her sister as a fellow ward.

Mr Collins had retraced his steps to the cousins of his pupil Philips' elegant household, arriving just in time to see Mr Bingley departing. Suspicious as to the nature of his visit, Mr Collins had glanced into the elegant windows of the elegant drawing room, to find the elegant cousins receiving music tuition from a smart and elegantly dressed music master. The ladies' pleasure and enjoyment achieved from the lessons could easily be descried through the glass of those sash panelled panes, along with the tutor's contentment at their progress, taste, musicality and intelligence.

Collins returned to his school ashamed for his thought and Charlie's scheme that he could endeavour to fill the gaps in the cousins education which were clearly already being filled by Mr and Mrs Reynolds's resources. He was angry by their presumption, and Mr Bingley's presumption, for who else could have arranged it? Deep within him his passionate nature threatened to flood into his anger, causing him to seek Charlie Philips out when he returned to the school, and inquire if he knew the location of Mr Bingley's lodgings. His temper was such that his pupil received the details of what he had seen through the sash windows when he asked for it, a confidence which, if he had been in a more rational state of mind at the time, Mr Collins would probably have refrained from bestowing, for fear that the pupil would imitate the master.

Pupil and schoolmaster both however agreed upon one thing. Mr Bingley would be made aware of his presumption, the reasons why it was to be called thus and he would be impressed upon to correct that presumption at once.

Elizabeth stared into the elegant mirror of her boudoir trying to compose her thoughts as well as her composure, and appearance for another evening of frivolity which lay ahead of herself, her sister and Mr and Mrs Reynolds. But the events of the hours spent with her father continued to haunt her, despite the passage of time, and the letter she had since received from that quarter, along with the ones from Kitty and her mother, addressed to herself and Jane. She could not forget the sight of his face as he heard her words with regards to her future, and the unkind question she had asked him in order to justify her belief that she was right in her decision. She had been unjust, unkind and unfair, selfish even in her manner to him, which was particularly cruel, as she had not seen him in such a long time. Remorse and guilt set in the moment the question was spoken, and the kindness of her sister's and Mr Hurst's inquiries into her sorrow were more than she felt her due, as well as that letter from her father, which had been long and full of such details as he used to write to her, as though...
nothing had occurred between to upset or disturb him.

A quiet knock on the door delivered at this moment sounded unnaturally loud in the unnaturally still room. Hurriedly she pinched her cheeks and wiped away the stain of her tears, before calling aloud, "come in!" in as joyful a tone as she could presently muster.

Her sister opened the door, attired in a gown of the finest pale green silk. "I thought you would not be ready yet," she remarked, stepping inside. "My poor Lizzy," she uttered, descrying the evidence of grief upon her face and knowing immediately the nature behind it, for she knew her sister was still haunted by the visit, though it was over days ago. "What did father say to upset you so much?"

"It's not what he said, it is what I said to him," Elizabeth at last confided to her. "I was too frank with him, Jane. I told him what I planned to do with my life, and asked him many impertinent, nay cruel, questions to prove the rightness of my scheme."

"You mean your plan to marry well?" Jane sought to confirm. Her sister nodded silently before rising from her chair to choose her gown for the evening. "Lizzy, father knows you mean well. That you mean to endeavour to provide for our family, now that the Will which covered such a scheme is rendered null and void. But I am sure Mr and Mrs Reynolds would not begrudge us money if the men that we loved were, I shall not say poor, but unequal to Mr Reynolds's wealth."

"We cannot be certain of that, Jane," Elizabeth protested. "Already I have noticed alterations within their characters, which has not been to their benefit, or to others. Who is to say what six months, or even a year, of comfort and security will do to them?"

"It may change their manner, but I dare say it will not change them in essentials," argued Jane. "And whose to say that your opinion or plans will not change in just such a passage of time?"

"Perhaps you are right," Elizabeth conceded, though not as fully with her plans as her sister wished. "Who is to say or predict what the future may hold?" she sighed as she stepped into her gown of the finest cream silk, before turning to let her sister tie the fastenings. "Oh, Jane, I wish I could think as well of people as you do."

Jane was not completely satisfied, but accepted her sister's compliment all the same. Having helped her make ready, they exited the bedroom and joined Mr and Mrs Reynolds in the hall. The four exited the townhouse and stepped into the pale yellow chariot which awaited to take them to the home of the Lucas's, whose fine and elegant soiree they had been invited to attend this evening.

As Elizabeth mounted the carriage steps, a light from one of the upper windows caught her fine eyes. She turned, just in time to see the curtains fall to meet each other behind the glass of the window belonging to Mr Hurst's study. Her expression turned thoughtful as she entered the vehicle. She had endured the mysterious secretary's surveillance of her long enough. The situation needed resolving and she was determined to resolve it tonight.

In the Temple, at the lodgings occupied by many scholars and practitioners of law, the gentlemen attorneys Fitzwilliam and Bingley were also dressing themselves in formal white ties and black evening jackets with dress waistcoats and long, dinner trousers for the evening soiree at the home of the Lucas's.

"Charles, if I could find you in a serious mood for once, I'd like an earnest word with you," Richard began as his friend assisted with his white tie, grateful to catch his friend alone for a time. It had been a while since Bingley was so long in his presence, as he had been frequently absent from the apartment of late, far more than his legal affairs usually tended to warrant. His friend was so rarely
inclined to anything requiring such energy, and normally, took the habit of telling him when something arose which called for that resource.

"An earnest word?" Charles echoed the phrase with some amusement. "The moral influences are beginning to work. Say on."

"For some time now you've been withholding something from me," Richard continued, now brushing lint from his friend's jacket. "I don't ask what it is, you have not chosen to confide in me." Indeed, there had not been an opportunity until for such a confidence to be voiced. "But there is something, isn't there?"

Charles raised his hands to return the favour, adjusting Fitzwilliam's tie, then brushing the dust away from the jacket. "I give you my word of honour, Richard, I don't know."

"You have some design maybe?" Richard tried, knowing full well that contrary to his oath, his friend did know. "Or some new interest?"

"Richard, you know how susceptible I am to boredom," Charles replied. Seeing he was not going to get his friend to admit whatever it was he was hiding from him, Richard settled for offering his opinion on the mysterious business as neutrally as he could. "Well, I hope it may not get you into any trouble."

"Trouble?" Charles echoed. "That sounds interesting."

"Or anyone else," Richard remarked as there sounded a knock on the door, causing them both to turn in the direction of that panelled barrier.

Fitzwilliam forestalled his friend from answering the sound. "I'm on duty tonight," he said, before going to open it. He returned with two visitors, whom he presented to his friend. "You recollect this young fellow, Charles?" He asked regarding the younger.

"Let me look at him," Charles replied as he took in the stern expressions of Charlie Philips and the stranger. "Yes, I recollect the young fellow."

"He says he has something to say to you," Richard informed his friend.

Bingley frowned, confused. "Surely it must be to you, Richard," he protested.

"So I thought," Fitzwilliam agreed, "but he says no. He says it is to you."

"Yes I do say so," Charlie arrogantly asserted. "And I mean to say what I want too, Mr Charles Bingley!"

Bingley moved his eyes from the boy and with consummate indolence turned his gaze on the stranger. "And who may this other fellow be?"

"I am Charles Philips' schoolmaster," Mr Collins replied.

"You should teach your pupils better manners," Charles advised. "Mr....?"

"My name does not concern you sir," Collins responded sternly.

Charles Bingley was unmoved. "True. It does not concern me at all. I shall call you schoolmaster, which is a respectable title."
"And in some high respects, Mr Charles Bingley," the schoolmaster remarked, "the natural feelings of my pupils are stronger than my teaching."

"In most respects I dare say," Bingley returned, as he carelessly lit a cigar and proceeded to lean upon the mantelpiece above the fire, "though whether high or low is of no importance."

"Mr Charles Bingley, I want a word with you!" Charlie Philips interposed with cry. "And I am glad to speak in the presence of Mr Fitzwilliam, because it was through him that you ever saw my cousin. And since then, Charles Bingley, you have seen my cousin often. You've seen her oftener and oftener."

Richard glanced at Bingley in surprise for such a revelation was the last thing he expected his friend to conceal. As for Charles, the moment Philips uttered the word cousin, he looked to Fitzwilliam to see how he took the discovery, before returning his gaze to Mr Collins with almost taunting perfect placidity, that Mr Collins soon found himself well-nigh mad from the received contempt and disdain.

"Was this worthwhile, school master?" Bingley asked Mr Collins in a tone of such complete indifference as to do nothing else but deepen the madness within the schoolmaster. "So much trouble for nothing."

"I don't know why you address me," Collins uttered, perturbed by the apparent insinuation against his intelligence.

"Don't you?" Charles queried, almost bemused. "Then I won't," he decided, the languid fashion of his voice causing yet more anger.

"Mr Collins and I had a plan for my cousin's education," Charlie Philips continued. "He's a far more competent authority than you. And what do we find? Why we find that she's already being taught! And without our knowledge. And we find, Mr Fitzwilliam, that your friend, this Charles Bingley, pays." Charlie was wrong in that account, for it was Mr and Mrs Reynolds who paid the masters to furnish the gaps in his cousins' education, but his master was right in supposing him to be handling it for Mr and Mrs Reynolds. Yet, although it was a perfectly legitimate form of business, the way Philips spoke suggested that the motive was something far darker, possibly even scandalous.

"I ask him what right he has to do this and how he comes to be taking such a liberty without my consent. I will not have any darkness cast upon my prospects, or any slur upon my respectability through my cousins." Philips' voice rose even further as he concluded his weak defence and went on to relay his demands. "Now I'm telling Mr Charles Bingley, that I object to his acquaintance with my cousin, and I request him to drop it altogether. As I raise myself, I intend to raise her. My cousin is an excellent girl, but she has some fanciful romantic notions about my father's death and other matters. Mr Charles Bingley encourages these actions to make himself important, so she feels she must be grateful towards him. I don't chose her to be grateful to anyone but me and Mr Collins! And if Mr Charles Bingley doesn't heed what I say, then it will be the worse for her!"

Bingley did all he could to appear unmoved by this threat, as indeed he was by the boy's immature and arrogant manner throughout his delivery of it. "May I suggest, schoolmaster, that you take your pupil away."

Collins ignored him, as did Philips. "Mr Fitzwilliam, you've witnessed what I have said, and I think your friend has heard me," he uttered in a more composed tone, but still full of arrogance and contempt. "Now, Mr Collins, as I have said all I wanted to say, and we have done all we wanted to do, we may go."

Collins kept his eyes on the lawyers. His pupil may have said his peace, but he had something further
to add. "Go downstairs and leave us a moment," he ordered Philips.

Waiting until the boy had left, Collins addressed Bingley contemplatively. "You think no more of me than the dirt under your feet."

"I assure you, schoolmaster, I don't think about you," Charles replied easily.

"That lad could put you to shame in a dozen branches of knowledge and yet you cast him aside like an inferior," Collins declared devoutly, more at home in classroom where such displays were exulted than in the ways of gentleman scholars, who dealt with their knowledge more maturely. "But I am more than a boy and I will be heard."

Bingley tapped what remained of his cigar against the mantle of the hearth. "Judging from what I see, you seem to be rather too passionate for a schoolmaster," he observed.

"Sir, my name is Bradley Collins," Collins began again.

Charles returned the cigar to his mouth for another ingestion. "Your name does not concern me." He saw the man become disconcerted, and hesitant, causing him to prompt the teacher into conversation. "Come come, schoolmaster, speak up."

"I say what you are doing injures the boy and his cousin," Collins stated, though his words contained passion rather than conviction.

"Are you her schoolmaster as well as her cousin's?" Charles asked. "Or perhaps, you would like to be?" He sought to confirm, seeing the barely withheld untamed fervour in Collins' expression.

"What do you mean?" Collins asked, having no idea that the nature of his intentions towards Miss Bennet were so visibly apparent upon his face.

"A natural ambition enough," Charles remarked. "Far be it from me to say otherwise. Miss Bennet - who is something too much upon your lips, perhaps - is so very different from all the associations to which she has been used, and from all the low and obscure people about her, that is a very natural ambition."

"Don't you cast my background at me now!" Cried Collins.

"That can hardly be, for I know and care for nothing about you, schoolmaster, nor seek to know nothing," Charles replied.

"You may cast scorn upon me, but I have worked my way upwards and have a right to be considered a better man than you!" Collins cried.

"I have no knowledge of, nor interest in, your background," Charles returned. "I have only just learned your name. Now is that all?"

Collins felt the moral high ground slipping from his grasp and attempted to take hold of it once more. "No sir, if you imagine that boy..."

"Who really will be tired of waiting," interposed Charles.

Collins persisted in carrying his point. "If you imagine that boy to be friendless you are mistaken. And I promise you, you will find me bitterly in earnest against you."

"Is that a threat, schoolmaster?" Charles queried mildly. "In the presence of two gentlemen at law?"
"I make no threat," Collins replied. "I only wish to warn. Goodnight, sirs." He bowed slightly and withdrew from the lodgings.

It was not until they were within walking distance of the Lucas's residence that Richard had a chance of speaking to his friend privately; not only did he need to prepare his inquiries, Charles was quick to call a carriage and take them away from their lodgings after that rather strange and revealing interview, and just as quick to exit the vehicle when it came to halt at the end of the queue for entry to the soiree.

"Charles? Charles, Charles, to think I have been so blind," Richard began as they walked up to the house, now he realised the truth behind Bingley's recent unusual behaviour. He remembered well what Charles had said to him that night of Philips' death; that he felt like a dark combination of a thief and a pickpocket with regards to Jane Bennet. Now to have heard him dismiss the presumptuous concern of the cousin and his schoolmaster so carelessly indicated a far deeper concern that hitherto was never mentioned.

Bingley briefly ceased walking to turn round and look at him, as though he were insensible to revelations discovered in their lodgings only a carriage drive ago. "Blind? How, my dear fellow?"

"Charles, will you please be serious for one moment," Richard implored. "Now, the boy's cousin, what do you think of her?"

"There is no better woman in London than Jane Bennet," Charles declared. "No better among my people at home, among your people."

"Granted," Richard Fitzwilliam allowed. "So what now?" He asked. "Charles, are you in communication with this girl? Is what these people say true?"

"Yes and yes to both counts, my learned friend," Charles answered in much the same way as he had the schoolmaster's questions, only with much more warmth and sincerity.

"Then what is come of it?" Richard asked. "Charles, are you planning to seduce and then desert this girl?"

Charles turned round and halted outside Lucas's house, shocked and perturbed by his friend's almost casual assumption of his future actions, a little saddened that his mysterious nature this past season caused him to speculate thus. "No, Richard, no."

"Do you plan to marry her?" Richard asked.

"Of course not!" Charles protested.

"Do you plan?" Richard persisted.

"I don't plan anything!" Charles replied, before resuming to climb the steps to the grand entrance of the house, where the door stood open, and a footman ready to take their coats. "I am incapable of anything so energetic."

Richard rolled his eyes in exasperation before moving to catch up with his wayward friend. "Charles, Charles...."

"Stop this mournful catechism, it really will not do," Charles beseeched.

"What is to come of this, Charles?" Richard asked. "Where is all this going?"
"My dear, Richard," Charles remarked, "I haven't the faintest idea."

Inside Lucas's, the wards of Mr and Mrs Reynolds reclined elegantly on a sofa together, talking quietly, entirely unaware of the conversation which had just taken place between two gentlemen of their acquaintance. Their attention was occupied with observing the other guests of the Lucas's, and the select circle which these Sir and Lady 'Empire' had gathered about them, or rather those who had flocked to pay court to these new illustrious personages of patronage and wealth.

The circle included Mr Reynolds, who was eagerly expounding the particulars of his previous profession, to less eagerly listening personages.

"First, there is the fine dust from which the bricks are made," Mr Reynolds was saying, to Sir William, and Lady Lucas, Lady Metcalfe, and Mr Harrington. "Secondly, there are the cinders which are used to burn the bricks into shape."

"What a complicated business," Lady Metcalfe remarked in a dismissive, imperious tone, anxious for that to be an end of the subject.

Mr Reynolds was oblivious to her superior disdain. "Then we have the rags and bones which are sold to marine store dealers," he continued.

"So much money to be made from rubbish!" Lady Metcalfe commented in the same tone once more, with the same anxious wish.

"Old boots, sold to Prussian shoe manufacturers. And lastly, though not leastly, any jewellery which may be found nestling in the ashes," Mr Reynolds finished, causing his young companion to clutch fearfully at the diamonds which surrounded her neck, lest the handsome jewels were suddenly snatched from their setting and buried in the dust mounds for others to find and make a fortune with.

In another group, Lady Catherine de Bourgh held court with a number of equally imperious and superior ladies and gentlemen, her nephew upon reluctant attendance, his arrival having been noticed by her from the moment the footman escorted him and Bingley into the room.

"So, there is your Reynolds, nephew," she observed to Fitzwilliam, in a manner suggestive of having a personal hand in setting up the establishment of the Reynolds's entry into the cream of Society. "Your golden dustman."

"Really! The Lucas's would invite anyone," a Miss Morris-Pope, one of the young debutantes of the Season, commented scornfully.

"Anyone with over twelve thousand a year," Richard reminded the young woman, who flicked her fan huffily. "The Reynolds's are very good people. They aim to make much good use of their money and enjoy themselves at the same time. I hope I would have the good-hearted grace to do likewise."

Lady Catherine tutted. "Really, nephew, I think you're in love with these Reynolds's. What does Charles think?" She asked, only to turn and find her nephew's friend nowhere within her view.

"Where is Charles?" She asked, shaking her head. "He'll be skulking in some corner somewhere," she judged.

Richard refrained from replying, even though from his position by his Aunt he could see his friend, a cigar in his hand, talking with Miss Jane Bennet by one of the open doors as the Lucas's had invited too many people for them all to occupy more than one room comfortably.

Miss Bennet was smiling and listening to his friend, and Charles in turn was smiling and listening to
her. Their conversation was full of things of interest to none other than themselves, and their position in the room was as such as to permit none to join or overhear their conversation. Richard's eyes remained upon them for but a moment, as his attention was soon caught by the movement of Mr and Mrs Wickham, as Sir William Lucas introduced them to the Reynolds's. The son of his late Uncle's steward had obviously invested wisely the four thousand pounds left to him by his godfather's will, and his late cousin's generosity before he departed for the Cape.

Charles too had his attention captured by the sight of these newlyweds, as he observed his sister and her husband bow and curtsey to Mr and Mrs Reynolds.

"Who are those people, Mr Bingley?" Jane asked him as she turned to see what had caught his eyes. "Do you know them?"

"The lady is my sister, Miss Bennet. Caroline Wickham. The gentleman is her husband, George Wickham," Charles answered.

"Why do they not acknowledge you?" Jane inquired curiously.

"We are estranged," Charles replied, and she turned to him with a sympathetic gaze. "My father resented my sister for being my late mother's favourite," he explained. "Upon her coming of age, he cast Caroline out of the house and forbade me from ever having contact with her. I do not wish to cause him hurt, even unknowingly, so I obey."

"How terrible, for both you and your sister," Jane remarked. "Were you close?"

"As close as a brother can be to a sister, in youth. But as we grew, Miss Bennet, we altered, in both disposition and vocation. My father expected both of us to earn the money he would endow us with; I by employment in some worthy profession, she by a wealthy marriage to a gentleman of noble pedigree. Simple enough, if she chose the man he intended for her. But she did not, and in the ensuing argument, my father cast her out of the house and his life, leaving her penniless, and impressed upon me that the same would happen if I tried to contact or assist her. Caroline refused all my help, proclaiming that she was quite capable of making an advantageous marriage by herself, and we have not spoken since." He paused, musing on the memory for a moment. "I was my father's favourite, she, her mothers' and my father resented her for it. I suppose the distance was inevitable."

"I am sorry for you," Jane uttered sympathetically. "I would hate anything to come between Lizzy and me."

"I am sure nothing could, Miss Bennet," Charles remarked earnestly. "You are both so alike in your dispositions, so devoted to protecting each other's feelings and passions, that nothing could ever come between you."

"Miss Bennet," a voice said now, causing Jane and Charles to notice the sudden appearance of one of the liveried Lucas footmen. "If you will excuse me, Miss, but a gentleman wished to talk with you for a moment. He is waiting outside."

"Tell him I will come directly," Jane replied. "Excuse me, Mr Bingley."

Jane was very surprised to discover that the gentleman waiting outside for her, was Mr Bradley Collins, and her heart and mind began to worry about her cousin whom she had left in his care.

"Don't be frightened of me, Miss Bennet," he began as she came towards him.

"Mr Collins. Is Charlie well?" Jane asked.
"Your cousin has confronted Mr Charles Bingley," Mr Collins revealed. "This very evening quite ineffectually. So I came here to ask you to think again. Do not take help from a mere stranger, but rather from your cousin and your cousin's friend."

Jane replied kindly to him. "The help Charlie objects to, was considerately and delicately offered, Mr Collins. Mr and Mrs Reynolds welcomed myself and my sister into their home, and offered to fill any gaps in our education which we may feel were lacking. Mr Bingley was intrusted to arrange the masters we asked for."

Collins sighed, overwhelmed by her beauty once more. "I wish that I had... Have I said these words?" He asked more himself than her. "I wish that I had the opportunity of devoting my poor experience to your service. But I fear I would not have found much favour with you." He paused, trying to control himself. "I am a man of strong feelings, Miss Bennet. I don't show what I feel. Some of us are obliged to keep things down. I only have one thing to say, but it is the most important. There is a personal concern in this matter which might make you feel differently," he began, but something in his countenance or manner made Jane draw away a little, causing his courage to fail from revealing anything further. "But I see that to proceed under the present circumstances is out of the question. Will you please accept that there will be another interview on the subject?" He asked her.

Jane knew not what to say. There was something in his countenance and manner at the moment that truly frightened her. "Mr Collins, I don't...."

"There will be another interview!" He cried, in such a way that she had no choice but to accept the information for warning in the future. "Good God there is a spell on me," he murmured. "Goodbye," he added, before walking away.

Jane watched him go, a shadowy figure, dissolving into the night, his outline sometimes dimly breached by the street lamps. It was a while before she could tear herself away from the sight, fearing that if she did so, the foreboding she felt would only worsen. Even so, as she turned to go back inside, she felt his features and his words continue to haunt her for the rest of the evening.
Chapter 15

Part 15.

Inside Lucas's House, Elizabeth had no idea that her sister had just attended the most disturbing interview of her life. She was more pleasantly occupied, as pleasantly as one can be that is when one is sitting alone upon a sofa, eyed eagerly by every personage in attendance, hosts included.

"You seem to attract the attention of all the young men, my dear," Mrs Wickham remarked to her as she joined her. "You will have many suitors, I dare say, and some of them must be agreeable to you. Surely, someone like Mr Fitzwilliam?" She inquired.

Elizabeth shook her head. "Dear me, Mr Fitzwilliam is pleasant enough, but...." she trailed off, allowing Caroline to guess the end of the sentence.

"His fortune is not sufficient?"

"You misunderstand me," Elizabeth protested. "I only meant I shall choose my husband carefully. I'm prepared to wait, as you have, find an equal match."

Caroline smiled falsely. "Oh yes, you can be sure George loves me as every bit as much as I do him." She rose, having learnt all she could at this juncture. "You need another glass of wine, my dear, please, let me."

Mrs Wickham walked away to the serving tables, where her husband was awaiting her company and the nature of her discoveries.

"So the beautiful Miss Bennet, the dustman's ward, what did you find out?" George Wickham asked his wife quietly.

"She will be more than a match for their fortune," Caroline replied, disappointed by her investigations. "For a stupid young girl she has uncommon...."

"Good sense?" Wickham finished. Caroline almost sneered at him, for there seemed to be in his comments a plan to remind her of her past folly regarding such schemes to acquire fortune, but she restrained herself, returning to the beautiful Miss Bennet instead. After all, everyone possessed a weakness of some sort that was susceptible to various methods, they just needed more time before they were revealed, however unwitting or intentional.

It was nearly midnight when Mr and Mrs Reynolds and their wards returned to their elegant townhouse from the Lucas's later, full of wine and sugared delicacies, which had been proffered to them all by those illustrious and superior personages anxious to court their favour and patronage.

"No need to ask if you had a successful evening," Mr Hurst observed to Miss Elizabeth, who took her time to ascend, or perhaps more accurately, stumble up the entry steps, while he waited for their return by the open front door.

"Very successful, thank you," Elizabeth answered, emboldened by the fine champagne which the Lucas's had served enthusiastically to their guests. "I'm engaged five times over," she teased as he took her cloak. "Hurst, I would speak to you inside," she added, before walking towards the drawing room, leaving him no choice but to follow.
She was standing before the fireplace when he entered, staring at the flames which a servant had lit to warm them upon their return. She turned as he closed the door and advanced to stand before her.

"Mr Hurst, you provoke me to speak to you," Elizabeth began. "I've been meaning to speak to you for some time. You must stop watching me. Stop judging me."

Hurst was not entirely surprised, having descried she would say something for a while now. "I admit, I do watch you, Miss Bennet. You must forgive me," he apologised, though not in shame of his actions. Neither her expression nor her stance changed, which he considered encouragement enough to admit something more. "Miss Bennet, I think I must tell you, that I think I am becoming...." he paused before rephrasing his confession. "That is I fear that I'm becoming profoundly interested in you."

Elizabeth looked at him, not sure whether to be offended or touched. She settled on the former emotion. "You know how I am situated here, sir. It is not generous or honourable of you to conduct yourself towards me as you do."

"It is dishonourable to be interested in you? Or even fascinated by you?" Hurst inquired, incredulous at the idea of disguising himself even further when in her company.

"Mr Hurst!" Elizabeth cried, annoyed by his presumption.

"I hope, Miss Bennet, that it is pardonable, even for a mere secretary, to declare an honestly felt opinion of you. A truly felt devotion." Hurst raised his eyes to her fine dark gaze. "Forgive me, but I cannot, I will not retract my feelings."

"I reject them sir," Elizabeth declared.

Hurst breathed deeply as he received the response which he had long suspected would be forthcoming if he ever admitted to her how he felt. "I should be blind and death were I not prepared for the reply."

"I beg you may understand Mr Hurst, you must put an end to this now and forever," Elizabeth entreated.

"Now and forever," Hurst echoed, almost desolate in both feeling and tone. "Have no fear for the future, it is over."

"I am relieved to hear it," Elizabeth replied. "I have plans for my life," she added. "Why should you waste yours?"

"Waste my life?" Hurst echoed, surprised. "Miss Bennet you have used some harsh words. I have been ungenerous, dishonourable, in what?"

"You know every line of the Darcy Will," Elizabeth replied. "Was it not enough that I should be willed away like a horse, or a dog, or a package?" she asked him. "Now knowing every penny of my worth, you feel yourself bold enough to speculate on me? Am I to be forever the property of strangers?"

"You are wonderfully mistaken," Hurst replied, yet refraining from revealing to her why she was, for he knew the attempt would make her more resistant to his feelings. He watched her turn to the fire, and took it as his signal to leave. "Good night, Miss Bennet. Of course I shall conceal all traces of this interview from Mr and Mrs Reynolds and your sister. Trust me, it is at an end forever."

Elizabeth turned as he reached the door. "Mr Hurst, I am glad I have spoken. You may not believe
me but it has been painful and difficult and if I have hurt you, I hope you will forgive me. I'm really not as bad as I dare say I appear. Or you think me."

Hurst did not reply to her, silently exiting the room.

Elizabeth did not linger by the fire after his departure. The effects of the Lucas's fine champagne were fading away, making her feel a little sorry for her manner when she spoke with him just now. But she was not sorry for the words. He had to stop, or it could lead to his ruin, and she did not wish that. She did not love him, but she did not wish to hurt him, or endanger him, either by direct or indirect action. But really did he think that he had ever stood a chance of her returning his interest? He was just a secretary. She was a ward of the Reynolds's, and she planned to use that connection to what advantage she may, for herself and for the betterment of her family. None of which would be achieved by such a match.

She left the drawing room and sought her sister upstairs, finding her within the privacy of her bedroom.

"Jane, are you well?" She asked her, upon observing her sister seated at her dressing table, seemingly emotionally exhausted by the events of the evening. "Mr Bingley told me that a gentleman had asked for you to meet him outside, and that afterwards you were not your usual self. Is anything the matter?"

"Oh, Lizzy, I've had a trial of an encounter," Jane confided. "And I see that you have also had such similar end to this evening. What did Mr Hurst say?"

"He confessed to possessing a 'truly felt devotion' to me," Elizabeth replied, sitting down on the bed. "To being 'interested' and 'fascinated' by me."

Jane joined her, chuckling at her sister's expression. "Oh, I think I could have told you that, Lizzy. Ever since I came to live here, I have observed him watching you."

"I am not surprised," Elizabeth replied. "Rather I am astonished that he should presume to think of me, and to follow me."

"But, Lizzy, he is a good man. A gentleman," Jane protested.

"I will not deny that he may be good, but a gentleman?" Elizabeth queried. "Jane, he is but a secretary. How would Mr and Mrs Reynolds react to such a confession? They would have him cast out of the house, I am sure."

"They would not," Jane protested.

"Still, the attention would not be welcomed," Elizabeth asserted. "Anyway, it is at an end now. I have spoken to him, and he has promised that he will no longer watch me, or profess such an interest in me. And this is not what I came to talk about with you."

"I know, Lizzy," Jane relented, letting go of her attempts at misdirection. "It will seem like nothing in the telling, but Mr Collins was waiting, to say something to me. He wanted to offer his services as to my education."

"As to your education?" Elizabeth echoed. "Why the nerve of the man!"

"He seemed in earnest, unselfish, disinterestedness," Jane murmured.

"But?" Elizabeth prompted.
Jane sighed, uncertain as to how phrase the feelings she felt whenever her cousin's schoolmaster was near. "He is a very strange man," she finished.

Her sister nodded, understanding the feelings behind the word, as any close sister would. "Well, I wish for your sake that he were such a strange man as to be a total stranger. Now, let us talk about a much happier subject. Let us talk about Mr Bingley."

"Mr Bingley?" Jane echoed. "Why do you wish to talk about Mr Bingley?"

"Because I am of a humour to talk about him," Elizabeth replied. "He is a gentleman. Do you suppose he is rich?"

"He said to me that his father wished for him to earn the fortune he would inherit," Jane replied.

"An unusual attitude," Elizabeth observed. "But perhaps a prudent one in such uncertain times as these. Do you think he is interested in you?"

"In me? Why would he be interested in a poor girl who used to row her Uncle Philips on the river?" Jane asked her sister. "I was so shy that first night I saw him I wished I could disappear," she confessed.

"That does not answer my question," Elizabeth commented.

Jane thought for a moment before replying. "Well, he has his failings. But I think its for a want of something to trust in. And if I were a lady, which I'll never be, I would hope that maybe I could help him become more..." she sighed, unable to think of the word, as she recalled his searching, tender expression whenever he looked at her. "Even though I am so far beneath him as to be at all worth the thinking of beside him," she added softly.

"I will not allow that," Elizabeth protested. "You are his equal, if not his superior."

"And I will say, that I do not think such a devotion as Mr Hurst has for you will be so easily quitted." Jane insisted.

"Then we shall part tonight in agreement to differ as to our opinions concerning these three gentleman," Elizabeth proposed, before kissing her sister goodnight and retiring to her own room.

Indeed, if Jane and Lizzy could see Mr Hurst now, they would both think that opinion. For the man was as laid low as anyone could be by the outcome of the evening's interview. The sanctuary of his study had been sought after his withdrawal from the drawing room, but the room, once comfortable and soothing to his often tormented thoughts, now seemed a prison as deep as the river which he was sickened at the mere sight of.

"Ah well, William," he murmured to himself as he placed his hands upon the desk, letting them support his weight, "you would find out. And now you know it absolutely. She has consigned you to the grave once more. And now you'll stay buried forever. For you have no chance of happiness in this life."

Any onlooker might consider his words strange, if they happened to hear them, and indeed, Mrs Reynolds was no exception. She chanced upon him as she came up the stairs, his room being in full view of said stepped elevator. She happened to glance at him as she walked by towards her rooms, hearing his words and watching him sink slowly into the confines of his chair, laying his head upon the palm of his hand upon the desk. There was something so mournful, so desolate, so lost in his expression, that the countenance was suddenly and instantly familiar to her, causing her to halt before
the threshold to his study. At that moment the entire key to the mystery surrounding their secretary was laid open to her.

"William," she cried out, causing him to look up.

And then he had to dash out of the room, in time to catch her as she fainted away.
Chapter 16

Part 16.

When Mrs Reynolds came to, she found herself in her husband's arms, her head resting on his lap, and the mysterious secretary standing before them. Only he was the mysterious secretary no longer, as she recalled from what she had seen and what she had heard before she swooned. Still surprised by what she had learned, she spoke in order to clear the last vestiges of doubt from her mind.

"William, is it really you?" She asked him.

Hurst nodded. "I am sorry I deceived you," he apologised sadly. "But I did not know what else to do."

"I hardly know what to say," Mrs Reynolds remarked, as her husband slowly helped her rise to sit upon the sofa. "How did this come to be?"

"It is a long tale," William replied. "And an ugly one at that."

"But you no longer seem unable to bear it alone," Mrs Reynolds observed. "It is time to tell us, everything, William."

He sighed and relented, then took a chair across from them and began his tale. "I came back to England shrinking from my father's memory, from my father's money and my father's choice of bride. Mistrustful of everyone and everything.

"I'd become aware over the course of the voyage that a third mate bore a similarity to myself that occasioned me to be mistaken for him. We gradually formed an acquaintance, it being known by general rumour that I was making the voyage to England to claim my inheritance. He, by degrees, came to know of my sad history, and my uneasiness of mind as to my future, and in particular, my future wife. So we hatched a plot that on landing we would change identities to buy me a little more time before reporting to Mr Fitwilliam. We would watch Miss Elizabeth Bennet, as she accuses me of watching her now.

"As part of our plan, I left the ship alone. When we stopped at Jenkinson's I was still not suspicious, although I remember him taking a twist of paper from one pocket to another before we set out for our lodging. We cannot have gone a mile from that shop before we came to the house. It was a terrible, windy night. I'll never forget that roaring, it echoes in my head everytime I so much as glance at the river.

"'Why don't we exchange our disguises now?' my sailor companion was so full of helpful suggestions. We celebrated the start of our plan with a drink. The drug must have been powerful, for it took effect immediately. The next thing I knew, I was looking at myself as if I was a spirit hovering outside of my own body.

"The third mate stole my identity and the sum of money he had betrayed me for. And then suddenly there was the sound of an axe; a woodcutter felling trees, a crashing of wood. Intruders burst into our lodgings. They were attacking my attacker. My double-crosser, was being double-crossed. The irony was, their blows did not rain so hard upon me. The next thing I was aware of, was being thrown into the river.

"I do not know how long I was in the water. I do not know which side the river spat me out of. I do
not know how long I lay there. I do know that I was choked to the heart.

"With the little money I had somehow concealed from the murderers, I wandered the city until I found the notice wall of a nearby public house. The police poster described myself, William Darcy, being found dead and mutilated in the river. Described my dress and the papers in my pocket and stated where I was lying, waiting to be identified.

"A brush with death has a profound effect. The heart is terrified and the mind has cold reason. I decided to stay in this half-death limbo. Why shouldn't I try my plan after all? Having mysteriously disappeared, I could still test Elizabeth. It seemed to my frozen mind, an excellent plan.

"The inquest pronounced me dead. William Darcy died. Frederick Denny, the name I used to see the body formally identified, disappeared. And William Hurst was born."

Silence- a nervous yet comfortable silence, one which comes from a person having confessed a matter which was a heavy burden to him, to another, the action giving him relief that he was no longer the only one who knew it -reigned the room when he finished speaking, as Mr and Mrs Reynolds took in the tale they had learned. Across from them the now non-mysterious secretary anxiously awaited their reaction, his eyes moving from gazing at them to the flickering flames of the fire in the hearth and the candles adorning walls and tables around the room.

Eventually a sound penetrated the nervous yet comfortable silence. A soft sound, an unexpected sound. The sound of joy combined with tears.

"Lord be thankful," Mrs Reynolds cried. "Here is our dear Fitzwilliam Darcy come back to us!"

William looked at her puzzled, not by her words, for they were true, but by her reaction. He had not expected them to cry for joy at this discovery. He felt ashamed for the thought, for he knew they were good, unselfish people, who would welcome him back to their home and their lives without a second thought for the legal and monetary consequences which would inevitably follow, but he had been so used to depending on no one but himself, being confronted with scoundrels, that this act of kindness seemed alien by comparison.

"Now my son," Mr Reynolds remarked, bringing a smile to William's still anxious face, as he used the title he had often addressed him by when he was a child in their house at the dust mounds, "what ever can have occurred for you to be in such a state as my dear wife found you in tonight?"

"Miss Bennet confronted me," William replied, looking away into the flames of the fire, which still warmed the room where only hours ago the event he was now summarising took place. "She rejected my affections for her, and told me to stop watching her, to stop judging her." He paused to blink away the grief which came upon him at the memory.

"You did not tell her the truth?" Mrs Reynolds asked.

"How could I? It would force her into a marriage with a man she has no affection for. A man who does not deserve her, even if she did."

"Now, William, that is not true," Mrs Reynolds protested. "You are a good, honourable man, who clearly loves her."

"I do not attempt to deny that I ardently admire and love her," he replied. "But I have been watching her, judging her character, judging her worthiness. She was right to confront me on it, just as it would be right now for me to leave."

"Leave?" Mrs Reynolds echoed.
"I cannot stay stranded in this limbo between life and death any longer. I shall leave London tonight."

"But where will you go?" Mr Reynolds asked him. "What will you do?"

"I do not know," William replied. "Nevertheless I must go."

"Why must you go, William?" Mrs Reynolds remarked. "It is an easy matter to bring you back to life. We could call your cousin and the Inspector in the morning, and have the whole thing sorted by the end of the day."

William shook his head. "My dear friends, good old faithful servants; you deserve my fortune. I know that you plan to spend it wisely. If I were to come back to life I will inherit that fortune and with it, sordidly buy a beautiful creature who has little regard for me. I would buy her and debase her in her own eyes as well as mine."

Mr Reynolds turned whiter than chalk at the resolution being formed. "William, you are alive, we cannot keep the property and fortune which is rightfully yours."

"My father wrote many Wills," William replied sadly. "How do we know if he did not intend to leave you the estate after all?"

"We don't because the one which leaves you your rightful estate is legally recognised," Mrs Reynolds cried. However, her husband gasped and turned even whiter, causing her to look to him. "What is it, my dear?"

"I did find another Will," Mr Reynolds replied. "Buried amongst the dust mounds, secured in a metal box. It left your property to us, excluding and debasing you entirely from any claim in such terms as to destroy your reputation completely."

"You must have it legally established," William urged. "And I must leave."

"No, we will not wilfully disinherit you," Mr Reynolds decided. "You will inherit the fortune your father left you."

"I do not want Elizabeth on his terms," William declared. "If I can have her, I want it to be because she wants me too, for love."

"What would content you?" Mrs Reynolds asked. "What would make you stay? Would you stay if Elizabeth cared for you?"

"Why would she care for me?" William asked.

"She's a little spoilt, but that's only on the surface," Mr Reynolds remarked. "She's true golden at heart."

"Oh, if I could but prove so," William murmured.

"What if she was to stand up for you when you were slighted?" Mrs Reynolds asked him. "If she was to be true to you when you were poorest and friendless? And all this against any interest. How would that do?"

"Do?" William echoed. "It would raise me to the skies," he uttered softly.

"Well, make your preparations for it is our firm belief that up will you go," Mrs Reynolds decided.
"But how will we do this?" William asked wondrously.

"Elizabeth was a little frightened of me at first," Mr Reynolds recalled. "She thought me a dusty and brown old bear. What if I was to become that old bear she thought me once? William, prepare to be slighted and oppressed."

William Darcy,- or rather Hurst, as he shall continue to be known until all deception is at an end - looked at his dear friends with a mixture of disbelief, surprise and wonderment as to how all this would be accomplished. "Could we do this?" He asked softly. "Is it right to continue to deceive her?"

"If she does love you," Mrs Reynolds replied. "Then she will gain all that you and she deserve. Fortune and happiness. And when this revealed, she will love you too much to care for the deception."
Chapter 17

Part 17.

After a restless night, filled with a troubled and interrupted sleep of concerned thoughts, all occupied with what had occurred the evening before, Jane was the first to rise in the Reynolds's townhouse the next morning. Silently she dressed herself in a simple gown, devoid of finery, and made her way downstairs, determined to find some quiet solitude for more rational reflection.

In the hall she found one of the footmen waiting for her, with a message that her cousin was wanting to see her outside. Puzzled as to why he had come this early, and concerned as to why he was here, Jane had little choice but to thank the footman and step in the cold and slightly ominous foggy morning air.

"Mr Collins, be calm sir," she could hear her cousin saying as she came towards them. "We have everything on our side. Hello, Jane."

"Good morning, Charlie," Jane replied, trying to conceal her increasing worry at the nature of their business with her. "What is it you wished to see me about?"

"Not here," Charlie replied, taking her arm in his firm grasp. "Let us walk to some place quieter."

Still puzzled, but seeing she had no choice, Jane consented and silently let her cousin walk her, himself and his schoolmaster, out of the rich suburbs, until they came upon the deserted graveyard of St Peter's, in Cornhill.

Mr Collins walked alittle away from them on arrival, turning his back on them in order to give the cousins some semblance of privacy.

"Janie," Charlie uttered, turning to her, "Mr Collins has something to say to you. I'll go for a stroll and I'll be back in a while. I know what Mr Collins means to say and I very highly approve of it." He pressed a kiss to her hand before releasing her from his arm. In desperation she clung to his hand, fearing to be alone one more with the man who had caused so much distress only the night before, drawing him back to her, but only briefly. "Now Jane, be a rational girl and a good cousin," he finished, before walking off.

Jane watched him go, the fear rising within her heart, unable to meet the schoolmaster's imposing posture, who seemed to loom over the surroundings as though he were a large memorial to his name, proclaiming the sad news of his state of affairs to the world. She thought to run away, but instantly dismissed the idea, knowing that it would only delay what he wished to say, not dismiss it altogether. Summoning some courage, she stepped closer to him, causing him to turn and face her.

"I said when I saw you last, I said there was something left unexplained," he began nervously. A silent pause followed, as he raised his eyes to her face, and found cause somewhere in her expression to pace the ground beneath him. "I hope you will not judge me by my hesitating manner," he explained. "Most unfortunate for me it is, that I wish you to see me at my best, and know you see me at my worst." He paused, attempting to collect himself. "It is my destiny," he murmured.

Jane knew not what to say to this. There was something so haunting in his manner, in his looks, in his speech. She longed to escape, yet felt unable to leave.

"You are the ruin of me," he uttered, starting afresh, causing her to gasp in protest. "No, you are the
ruin of me," he repeated, dismissing any further objection she may have had. "I have no confidence in myself, I have no control over myself when your near me or in my thoughts, and you are. You are always in my thoughts now. Since first I saw you." His voice rose to a cry of despair. "God, that was a wretched miserable day!"

Jane felt obliged to speak now. "Mr Collins, I am grieved to have done you any harm, but I never meant to."

"There!" He interrupted her. "Now I have seemed to have reproached you." He paused, breathing deeply, as if all his energies were being exhausted by this conversation. "There are people who think highly of me," he added. "There is one, a schoolmistress who thinks particularly well of me. I have won a station in life which is considered worth winning."

"Surely, Mr Collins, I do believe it," Jane remarked, unsure what he trying to say.

He continued as he had not heard her. "And I believe if I was to offer her...."

His intentions were unmistakable now. Jane interrupted him, wishing to spare him and herself further pain by having him continue. "Mr Collins, I think I have heard enough. Let me stop you there and go and find my cousin."

"I can restrain myself, I can restrain myself," he resolved abruptly. Taking several deep breaths, he seemed composed once more. "There," he uttered, attempting to smile.

A tense silence arose between them, broken by the sudden intrusion of a street lighter, coming to snuff out the light by the graveyard.

Mr Collins looked at her with an urgent plea. "Please, let us walk awhile," he asked.

Jane wordlessly consented, reluctantly following him deeper into a row of grave stones crypts sheltered by a leafy hedge. Despite the increasing, if a little foggy, morning light, they seemed to close upon her, preventing her from seeing some way to escape this encounter, forcing her to follow it through to its inevitable end.

"Now you know what I am going to say," Mr Collins began when he came to halt, his imposing posture giving away only a little as to the state of his emotions, by the fiddling of his hands at his cuffs. "I love you," he revealed. "What other men might mean when they use that expression I cannot tell. What I mean is that I am under the influence of some tremendous attraction which I have resisted in vain." He looked at her, his eyes as haunting as their surroundings in the ghostly, misty dawning light of the coming day. "You could draw me to fire. You could draw me to the gallows. You could draw me to any disgrace." He paused to add in a tone almost of despair, "this confusion in my thoughts is what I mean by you being the ruin of me. But if you were to look favourably on my offer of marriage, you could draw me to any good, every good, with equal force!" he finished with a passionate cry. "My circumstances are quite easy, you would want for nothing," he added, somewhat calmer.

"Mr Collins...." Jane began nervously, fearful of what he might say to her.

He forestalled her. "I am in thorough, dreadful, earnest. Now, please, please, don't answer me yet." He turned away from her, gripping the gravestone nearby for support, his body weak from the passionate display of emotion this long speech caused.

Jane stood silently, watching his actions, wondering where her cousin was. Wishing he would return, or someone else she knew would come and rescue her from this dreadful meeting. She felt a darker
motive, both behind his speech and the seeming pleasantness of this sheltered gravely patch, as though her suitor were a jailor, and these stone memorials his bars which would leap to his defence and imprison her if she said no. Yet what else could she say? She did not love him, it was as simple as that. Blindly or willingly, she could not walk into the shadow this man imposed. She had experienced its like before, to survive only by mortal release, and she could not help but feel that such an endurance would not end so well a second time.

"Now, is it yes or no?" Mr Collins asked her, breaking her silent reflection.

Jane feared to speak, knowing her reply would only incite his passions once more, but she also knew that she must answer him, and now, before she caused him further harm. "Mr Collins, I am grateful and flattered by your words, and I hope you may find a worthy wife before long and be very happy. But I do not, I cannot return your feelings, so it is no."

"And are you quite decided and is there no chance of change in my favour?" He asked, his hands still fiercely gripping the gravestone.

"I am quite decided, Mr Collins," Jane replied.

Something was wrenched out of him then; a cry of despair and anger, a sudden and violent stroke of lightning in this terrible storm. "Then I hope I may never kill him!" He cried, and with these words pounded his fist against the mournful monument, the movement causing immediate injury. Uncaring of the blood now dripping from the broken flesh of his hand, he suddenly turned and grabbed her arms, pressing her against another grave which resided behind her.

"Mr Collins! Please let me go!" Jane cried, truly terrified now, unable to meet the horrible expression in his eyes, trying in vain to resist the crushing grip in which he held her, almost as if he wished to strangle a different answer from her. "I must call for help!"

"This time I will leave nothing unsaid!" He yelled at her, refusing to let her go. "Mr Charles Bingley!"

"Was it him of whom you spoke with your murderous rage?" Jane asked fearfully, no longer just for herself. "Was it Mr Bingley that you threatened?"

Suddenly he let her go, withdrawing away, nursing his bleeding hand with the unharmed one. "No, I threaten no one," he uttered in a tone which seemed to belie his previously murderous one, while his look seemed to convey otherwise. "Mr Charles Bingley," he repeated. "He haunts you."

"He is nothing to you I think," Jane said.

Collins looked at her, and the expression within his wild, bloodshot gaze made her recoil in fear once more. "Oh yes he is," he hissed. "He is much to me," he added, the meaning frighteningly and deadly clear.

Jane calmed herself. His manner had knocked her usual politeness and will to think and behave with goodness to others, yet her tone and her words were more mild than perhaps they could have afforded to be in such a situation. "Mr Collins, it is cowardly of you to talk to me in this way," she remarked. "But it means that I can tell you, I don't like you, I never have liked you, and that no other living creature has anything to do with the effect that you yourself have produced on me."

Again he seemed not to hear her. "Of course I knew all about this Charles Bingley all the time you were drawing me to you."

"I did no such thing," Jane protested.
"Mr Charles Bingley, with him in my mind I went on and with him in my mind I have been set aside," he continued. "Oh I'm not complaining," he added, "I'm just stating the case. You may imagine how low my self-respect lies now. It lies under his feet and he treads upon it and exults in it."

"He does not," Jane objected.

"I have stood before him face to face and he has crushed me in the dirt with his contempt," Collins asserted.

"You talk wildly," Jane cried, knowing this could be not true.

"Quite collectedly," he corrected, his composure almost within his control once more. "I am quite calm. And I made no threat, remember." He walked away from her, out from the sheltered area, out on to the entrance path once more. "Phils!"

Jane followed him in time to see her cousin return from his 'stroll.'

"I am going home," Mr Collins told him. "I shall walk by myself. I shall be at my work in the morning just as usual."

If he intended to convey no indication of the result of this meeting, the schoolmaster failed utterly, for his pupil would have to have been blind to miss the wound across his knuckles, the fury within his eyes and voice, contrasted with the display of turmoil, fear, and grief upon his cousin's face.

Charlie watched him go, then turned to her, reproachful. "After all my endeavours to cancel the past, and to raise myself in the world, and to raise you with me." He took her hands in his, and continued as though he were the elder, and held some paternal authority over her, when in truth he could claim nothing of the sort. "Come Jane, lets not quarrel. Lets be reasonable and talk this over like cousins. Don't cry. As Mr Collins' wife you'd be occupying a far better place in society than you hold now. You can leave the riverside far behind you. Your ridiculous dust patrons and their patronising charities. Now we can set this straight. I'll tell Mr Collins this is not final."

Jane clutched at his hand, fearful he would tell him immediately. "I cannot let you say any such thing to Mr Collins," she said.

"You shall not bring me down!" Charlie cried at her.

"Charlie, how can you say such words?" Jane asked, puzzled as to how her refusal of marriage to his schoolmaster would ruin him.

"I'll not unsay them," Charlie replied angrily. "You're a bad girl, and a false cousin. And I've done with you. I've done with you forever."

He wrenched his hand from her grasp and walked away, leaving her alone and friendless in the graveyard.

After that distressing encounter, events were somewhat of a blur. Jane would not remember what she did following her escape from the graveyard, conducted as soon as her cousin disappeared from her sight. Nor would she remember how she recollected her bearings enough to walk in the direction of the Reynolds's house. Her mind was in such turmoil over all she had heard and said, that it could not summon up the care for her surroundings until she had formed some resolution as to what to do next.

She was woken from this daze by the appearance of another gentleman, who waited for her at the
turning which led into the lane of Portland Place.

"Miss Bennet!" Charles Bingley cried upon seeing her. Then, seeing her distressed expression, added in a tone of the deepest concern, "what is the matter?"

"Mr Bingley, please leave me alone," Jane pleaded, glancing around her to make sure they were not seen together, as she could not shake the feeling that they might be observed.

"Miss Bennet, you know I have come expressly to see you," Bingley returned, falling into place beside her as she continued to walk home.

"Mr Bingley, leave me," Jane pleaded. "And pray be careful of yourself," she added, recalling Mr Collins' murderous rage only hours ago.

"Jane, what is the matter?" Bingley asked her softly, his concern for her overriding any thought to propriety of address.

"My cousin," she replied tearfully.

"Your cousin is not worth a thought, far less a tear," he assured her.

"Mr Bingley, I have had a bitter trial today," Jane replied, anxious for him to be gone far from her, so he might be better protected. "I hope you'll not find me ungrateful, or mysterious or changeable. I am wretched." She swallowed a sob and pressed his hands in farewell. "Remember what I said to you, and take care!"

"Of what?" He asked her. "Of whom, Jane?" He gently clasped her hand. "You will not tell me to go away will you? Jane? You will not send me away from you, will you?"

Suddenly she could bear his caring entreaties no longer. She felt the walls of the houses closing upon her, threatening to jail her, just as the headstones did only this morning.

Jane tore herself away from him and ran the remaining distance to her home. She opened the door, brushing past the surprised footman waiting in the hall, and ran upstairs to her room. Once within, all composure fled and she flung herself upon the bed, refusing to move until she had cried out all her terror and grief.

Calmness returned to her as night began to fall. She sat up, wondering how no one had yet to enquire after her wellbeing, but grateful that none chose to disturb her privacy, for somehow, the release of all the grief caused by the morning had created within her the inspiration as to a solution to its end.

Though Mr Bingley may not have intended it, his words had given her a rational, if perhaps somewhat extreme, resolution to her present troubles. Silently she rose from the bed, threw open her wardrobe, and gathered her most durable, simple gowns and shawls, packing them into the large travelling bag she had arrived here with from her late uncle's home in Limehouse parish.

When that was done, she sat down at her desk, drew out some writing paper and pen and wrote a note to her sister and the Reynolds's, saying that she had received a letter from their Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, inviting her to spend some time with them.

Outside Bingley watched the window of her room from his post within the street outside the house, his mind wondering what she doing and how she was. He had no idea of what could have taken place to cause her to be in such a state, but he believed he knew her well enough to wait until she had recovered, when he would have no doubt of being received by her into the house.
"She did not insist upon my leaving," he murmured, trying to convince himself when the delay stretched into the darkness of the evening. "She would not send me away. Charles, Charles, Charles, what a business!"

Her note written, Jane took hold of her travelling bag and left by the tradesman entrance at the other end of the house.
Part 18.

While one departure began in the night, another followed in its wake, though this time with mortal intent. The river cast its victims, young and old, rich and poor, alike, it made no distinction as those who tried to ride the waves still do. Currents were dangerous, even in their seemingly calm and tranquil states, and fool was the fellow who dared not to respect them, whether in sea, stream or river.

The art of navigating them was one of a lifetime, aided by ships of wood or metal, as man put to use what talents they may in earth’s most natural source for transportation. Inevitably battle would ensue, competition for who held the right of way upon the currents. Sometimes the victor would not even see the victim they turned asunder in course of their travels, or learn of their fate, whether good or bad.

Such was the case today, and, as was usual in such towns of many parishes, Limehouse was the first to hear news of the matter; and the Fellowship of the Six Jolly Porters, the usual port of call for those in distress or witnesses to the event.

"Something’s gone down in the fog, Miss Hill!" A man cried from below, heralding the mortal departure to the good lady of the establishment.

Miss Hill was all businesslike, the victims of the river no unusual event to her, as to be rendered commonplace even; she knew the methods of treatment well. "See that the boiler's full. Hang some blankets to the fire," she ordered. "Come on, have your senses about you," she admonished as some parishioners failed to move fast enough. "Does anyone down there know what happened?" She called out to the herald.

"It is the steamboat," he replied back.

"It is always the steamboat," one parishioner commented, well-versed as any of his home streets comrades of the common cause of many river fatalities.

"It is a local craft, Miss Hill," the herald informed her, "run down by a foreign steamboat," he added, using the term to mean a stranger to the parish rather than the country. Foreign fares too, no doubt, as rarely did one mix with the other.

"How many in the craft?" Miss Hill called, while all around her those in the public house made ready to receive the victim or victims.

"One man, Miss Hill," the herald replied, just before the man was brought upstairs into the tap room, slung over a shoulder, his ill-soaked and mud ridden condition instantly translatable as one who held no hope of reviving.

Then Miss Hill caught the man's profile in the gaslight as he was carried by, and her thoughts turned dark and deep, as she recognised him.

"Good God," the blessing was flung from her, "it's Rogue Jenkinson."

Another in the room stilled upon the announcement, all thought of work and aught else immediately forgotten. "Oh God, father," Pleasant murmured. "Poor father."
Once self proclaimed partner to Jessie Philips in matters of profession, now Jenkinson looked to be partners in matters of death as well as life, however such relationship was begrudged by Gaffer. For man had no control over their mortal ends, just as surely as they had none over their birth.

Upstream, the night was like any other, as far as society was concerned, to be feted over by indulgence at some worthy's house. Tobacco and cigar smoke, combined with the smell of fine wine, port and brandy ruled the air, along with the faint whisper of gas from the lights, the clinging choking smell which accompanied it, and the confection of sweets and sour in the food. Conversation too ruled the air, audible only between groups, distinct to sex as well class. Serious matters rarely reigned here, frivolities were the chief subjects; the former being reserved for clubs and parliament.

Elizabeth sought an empty sofa, her mind in no state for socialising, present only at the behest of the Reynolds’s, while inwardly fretting over her sister's sudden departure the night before. If Jane had received news from their Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, which Elizabeth doubted, she must have taken the letter with her, for nothing remained of it in the house.

It was not like Jane to be so mysterious, the two of them had never withheld a secret from each other in their lives. Something must have driven her away, something darker than a note from their Aunt, which Elizabeth received no hint of in their last communication from that quarter. Nor had Mr Bingley been informed despite paying call upon her before her departure, for his surprise was clear to see when she and the Reynolds’s returned to the house to ready themselves for the evening’s frivolities.

The Gardiners lived near the north country, in Derbyshire, having removed from London a year before the illness struck Meryton, for the good of the children's health. Mr Gardiner still held business interests in the town, but such matters were managed now by his stewards, who were well equipped to take care of the warehouses under his management, without need for him to come into town.

No more than a few years older than the two eldest Bennet daughters, Mrs Gardiner frequently invited Jane and Elizabeth to spend time with them, and had offered to provide for the family when they were forced to give up Longbourn. Mr Bennet would not hear of it however, causing them to carry on as before.

Someone laughed, a familiar tone, catching Elizabeth out of her thoughts. She glanced up towards the source, in time to witness Mr Reynolds, amused by his circle of boon companions, empire builders all. Unlike her he seemed unconcerned by her sister's sudden departure. Once was there was a time when he felt awkward and uncomfortable in high society, just as she felt now. The alteration was distinctive.

*What a change there is in him,* she mused inwardly. *And to think that I once wished him more at ease in this company,* she added to herself. *Money has made him comfortable.* It was an ugly thought, to her who had once wished to possess the same wealth. Now she felt very uncomfortable, attired and surrounded by the effects of money, out of place in a world she once devoutly desired to be a part of by marriage.

*Oh, Jane, Jane,* she wondered silently. *Where are you now, and are you in any better comfort than I am at present.*

Someone possessed the presence of sober mind to fetch the local physician, who surveyed his patient with the solemn view that held little hope for his survival. A brief examination reached the same conclusion all the parishioners of the Six Jolly Porters arrived at; Rogue Jenkinson had breathed his
last upon this earth.

His daughter gave her blessing kiss, sorrowful for the father whom she had cared for most of her adult life. A lonely future was hers now, as lonely as the vigil she now assumed by her father's body, as he lay on the trestle table, awaiting the coffin makers.

The Fellowship resumed their previous pastime around the distressing scene, their eyes immune by now to the horrors of the river, all having bore witness to such a fate at one time or other. Rogue Jenkinson may not have been liked or respected by the parish, but they accorded his body the right of resting in peace, as a hush reigned within the tap room, silent as the grave ground which the man was soon to rest under.

The Physician partook of Miss Hill's kind offer to quench his thirst, and happened to be enjoying what was left of his pint as a sudden harsh coughing broke the silence. The racking sound of a life choking for breath, as water was retched out of their source for air.

Rogue Jenkinson lurched up from his table, instinctively turning to the side to empty his body of the foul river which threatened to choke his internal organs. His daughter kneeled beside him in sudden relief, waiting for the recovery to begin.

When his strength allowed him to sit, she spoke. "Father, you were run down on the river but you're safe now," she informed him gently. "Your friends have given you shelter."

Jenkinson looked grimly upon the place and its members, who once barred him from admittance, doubting and begrudging their generous motives in putting up his body. "A steamboat was it?" He growled out, the river still clinging to his throat.

"Yes father," Pleasant confirmed.

"Damn them to hell," Jenkinson uttered sourly. "I'll have the law on to her. And them that runs her!" He cried, his blood up.

The Fellowship returned to the nursing of their ale, satisfied and perhaps a little dismayed that all was well with their Rogue. His daughter held her peace, eyeing her father as he stared down the gaze of Miss Hill and the doctor, resentful and vengeful, unheeding their looks of admonishment and disapproval. They knew what little such appeals to the laws accomplished in the circles of the poor, and where such persons who dared to try with what little resources they had by resorting to such an appeal, ended up. Life and circumstances were a vicious spiral amongst the poor, with little hope of bettering themselves and the short expectancy that they would rarely live long enough to earn the means of a living, either for themselves or their children, however unusual or extreme it may be.

Never a lady to miss an opportunity when she was presented with one, Mrs Wickham caught sight of Miss Bennet all alone and thoughtful upon the sofa, and inwardly gleamed at the possibilities.

"You seem a little pensive tonight, my dear," she said in a caressing, yet exquisitely tailored tone of superiority as she seated herself beside Miss Bennet.

"H'm," Elizabeth barely murmured, discontented at being disturbed from her ennui.

"H'm," Elizabeth barely murmured, discontented at being disturbed from her ennui.

"My dear, I believe...." Caroline paused, thoughtfully, deliberately, before flicking her fan in a decided purposeful negative. "No I will not," she added, placing the item to her lips in a signal of silence.

Elizabeth summoned a smile from somewhere. "If you believe me to be in love," she said artfully, "I
can assure you, you are mistaken."

"No indeed," Caroline replied confidently. "It cannot be so very easy to find a man so worthy of your attractions."

"The question is not to find a man, but an establishment," Elizabeth corrected her, though the thought was no longer so satisfying to her as it once had been.

Caroline flicked her fan in a gesture of admiration. "My love, your prudence amazes me," she replied. "Where did you learn to study life so well?" She smiled at her knowingly, before looking ahead. "You're right of course. You must....."

"I don't mind telling you, Mrs Wickham," Elizabeth interrupted.

"Caroline, my dear," her companion gently corrected.

"I don't mind telling you, Caroline, that I am convinced that I have no heart," Elizabeth replied, forgetting for a moment the worry over Jane. "And as for seeking to please myself, well I don't."

"But you can't help pleasing, Elizabeth dear," Caroline countered, in a voice which was gentle and yet superior at the same time. "You'll have many admirers to shun, don't worry," she added, causing Elizabeth to laugh self-consciously as she remembered the admirer she shunned recently. "Ah, my dear, you must tell," Caroline's eyes gleamed with curiosity, determined to make what use of it she could. She watched her friend look away, and noted the direction with glee. "You do not mean Mr Fitzwilliam has proposed?"

Elizabeth blushed a little and turned back. "No, indeed not," she answered. "In terms of establishments there are others who are even less worthy than Mr Fitzwilliam."

"No my dear, I cannot believe you," Caroline protested.

"What would you say to our secretary?" Elizabeth countered, the confession out of her mouth before she was aware of the consequences.

Caroline had the grace to look elegantly shocked and peeved. "My dear, the hermit secretary who creeps up and down the back stairs?" She queried incredulously. "The man must be mad," she decided, at the thought of someone daring to breach the circles of the highest society.

Elizabeth looked down at her lap, twisting her hands. "He appeared to be in his full senses," she replied, recalling the evening now in a mind more doubtful of her refusal than it had been when she first uttered it. "I told him my opinion of his declaration and dismissed it. Of course it was very inconvenient and disagreeable," she added, convincing everyone but herself. "It has remained a secret however, and I hope I can count on you never mentioning the matter," she appealed to her friend.

"My dear you may count on me absolutely," Caroline assured her sincerely, holding the fan to her lips once more. She dealt a kiss to Elizabeth's cheek before rising from the sofa, and seeking a glass of wine for them both. Her mind meanwhile stored this useful piece of scandal, waiting for the right time to spring it upon those who would pay handsomely for the knowledge of such information.

Across the room upon the threshold of an open door, as the occasion required more than one room be sacrificed by the house for use, Lady Catherine de Bourgh found her nephew in quiet consultation with his friend. Knowing they were the source behind the latest mystery she had discovered just this evening, she paraded over to them.
"Nephew, do you recall the last time we were here?" She began, ignoring the groans from both him and his companion.

"No, Aunt, I do not," Richard replied.

Lady scoffed in exasperation at his reply. "Of course you remember, nephew. It was in this very room that you told us the romantic story of my dearly lamented nephew William Darcy. And over there, sitting very comfortably, are your golden dustmen. And what is that the golden dustmen has told me? There is another disappearance."

Richard turned to his friend, prepared to dissemble if he must, but Charles was stoic and resigned in the face of gossip. Leaning casually against the door frame, a cigar in his hands, he remarked, "tell it, Richard. Or they're sure to make you."

"The reference is to the following," Richard began, raising his voice to carry across the whole room as conversation died and everyone turned to listen and look. "The young woman Jane Bennet, niece of the late Jessie, otherwise Gaffer Philips, who you will remember was accused of the murder of William Darcy. Mr Reynolds, my client, was of course anxious to be in communication with Jane Bennet when she departed from their house suddenly one night. He referred the task to me, and I have tried my hardest to find Miss Bennet. I even have some special means," he directed a look to Charles, who quietly smoked his cigar all through this, "but I have failed because she has vanished."

"Vanished?" Lady Catherine echoed. "You mean kidnapped?" She queried, horrified. "Oh, not murdered?" She added, disgusted.

Charles lost his patience and with it his silence. "No, he does not mean that," he replied. "What he means is that she has vanished voluntarily. But she has vanished. Completely," he reiterated before walking away.

Richard watched him go with concern. Since Charles first informed him of Miss Bennet's disappearance, his concern had deepened to include not just her, but his best friend. Even when he was assured by the Reynolds's that Miss Bennet was safe at her Aunt and Uncle's and merely wished to protect his friend by keeping confirmation of her whereabouts from the public gossip, thus the need to instigate this show of a search, his concern had remained. He knew Charles would not be content to be left in ignorance of a woman whose interest had stirred his energy like no other did before.

He was deeply worried about Charles, who had taken to wandering the city alone day and night, while seeking solitary corners during the social events Richard dragged him to in an effort to get him out of his black mood. He knew Charles was searching actively for Miss Bennet, he was the 'special means' he had referred to in his speech a moment ago. His friend had told him soon after Miss Bennet vanished that he would use any means to find her, fair or foul, and by his recent penchant for nocturnal wanderings, Richard knew all too well it was the latter he had now resorted to. He had no doubt of his friend's resourcefulness.

But he worried where this searching would take him.
Chapter 19

Part 19.

William Hurst rose from his chair as soon as he heard the carriage wheels hitting the pebbled driveway. Exiting his study, he swiftly descended the stairs in time to reach the ground floor just as the door opened to usher the return of Mr Reynolds and his ward. Since their confabulation over a certain young lady, the couple had impressed upon him the details of their plan to help him win her affections. William had scrupled about deceiving her in such a way, but they reminded him that he began the lie concerning his true identity, causing him to accept their plan, else face losing the woman he loved forever. This excursion today, was a good opportunity to put said plan into effect.

He stepped to Mr Reynolds's side and deftly relieved him of the large pile of books he had carried in. "I trust you had a satisfactory morning shopping?" he asked before studying the titles with interest. "Ah, more lives of misers I see," he commented as Miss Bennet entered the house.

"That's all right with you is it?" Mr Reynolds queried in a tone of rebuke. "For those that have," he patted the volumes, "this is the required reading. Those with a fortune to protect." He added, all superior, his chest puffed out, his hands on the edges of his tailored jacket, his head raised high.

Miss Bennet looked down at her grown, embarrassed by the comment and disdain coming from her companion. "Will you be joining us this afternoon, Mr Hurst?" She asked.

"Join us?" Mr Reynolds echoed in incredulous astonishment before the secretary could answer her kind inquiry. "Join us! Hurst has my business to attend to. Come, come, Elizabeth." He strode in the direction of the drawing room, leaving Elizabeth with no choice but to glance at Mr Hurst solemnly, before following her guardian.

"Miss Bennet?" Hurst uttered softly before she stepped away, causing her to look up at him. He indicated a glance to his jacket pocket as he replied, "this came for you earlier."

Elizabeth looked to see a white folded letter sticking out of his jacket pocket. It felt strange taking it from him rather than being handed it, but since his arms were still full with the large pile of books, it was necessary. Her hand brushed the material of the his jacket, feeling the contrast between the fine material she wore and the coarser cotton which he was attired in. He stood very still as she removed the letter, his eyes glancing away from her, after Mr Reynolds, making sure this scene passed unnoticed and therefore unremarked upon by the master of the house. Elizabeth briefly glanced at the writing before she secured it within the confines of a concealed pocket in her dress. A cursory glimpse at the direction was more than enough to determine the author, and a smile lit up her face.

"Thank you, Mr Hurst," she said before following Mr Reynolds. He watched her leave, his eyes tracing her fine womanly form, remembering with pleasure the smile she showed for him and him alone, in gratitude at his solicitude and in relief due to recognition of the identity of the sender. He had seen her sad and thoughtful since the sudden departure of her sister, causing him concern over his decision to attempt to win her affections while she was in such distress over a close friend and sibling. Now this smile rewarded him and emboldened him into trying, for surely this letter would bring her relief.

The letter was from Jane, to say she had arrived safely at the Gardiners, and all was well. Reading through the letter twice, Elizabeth still could not discern anything behind the words which gave her cause for concern about her sister. There were some troubling points however; namely that her
location be kept a secret from all save herself and the Reynolds's. Jane requested that Mr Bingley especially be not informed of her whereabouts, or their cousin Charlie Philips. The latter concealment was easy enough, Elizabeth had little contact with their cousin even when he visited Jane at the Reynolds’s house.

But she wondered at her sister’s reasons regarding the former gentleman. Mr Bingley seemed to care for her sister, he had been concerned for whereabouts and safety ever since she disappeared, even before. What excuse could she give for Jane no longer desiring his company? Better ought not to mention it perhaps, though how she would escape inquiries concerning any resumption of her manner to cheerfulness was beyond her at present. This letter had accomplished little except incite more questions and a desire to see her sister as soon as she was able.

Elizabeth set the letter aside and composed her reply, gently requesting why such concealment was necessary, but promising her faithfully that she would do as she was asked.

After finishing her correspondence, Elizabeth rejoined the Reynolds's in Mr Reynolds's study, where he was holding court with Mr Hurst standing before his desk of business, and Mrs Reynolds quietly occupied herself with some needlework. Whatever conversation took place before she entered the room was beyond her knowledge, for the gentleman, the lady and the mysterious secretary were silent when she entered.

Encountering the gaze of all three of them as she closed the door, caused Elizabeth to almost hesitate, unable to escape the feeling that she was intruding. A not uncommon emotion to her mind and body, but one she had only recently begun to feel whenever she spent time with Mr and Reynolds outside the realms of Society dinner parties, balls, soirees and anything other occasion which required her to be sociable. She could not understand why this feeling had come upon, along with the other mixed sensations which accompanied it, all leading to her feeling unsettled with everyone and everything. She felt that her world was soon about to shift, and in a direction no one could predict, thus causing her fear that the outcome would not content her.

"Now, Hurst," Mr Reynolds began, once he and Mr Hurst finished watching Elizabeth enter the room and take her seat, "where were we?"

"You were saying, sir, you considered that the time had come to fix my salary," Mr Hurst replied. He had withdrawn his gaze from Elizabeth first, she noticed, in part due to the agreement she forced upon him to be constrained, a natural by product of her rejection of his feelings for her upon that evening before Jane left. However, she had also observed that it did not stop him caring for her, or keeping her in view at least, in way of protection rather than marked devotion or attraction, yet an impulse which inevitably sprung from such a move. Her feelings had softened towards this surveillance, so much so to find a strange sort of comfort within it, as she began to experience those previously mentioned ominous sensations.

"Oh don't be above calling it wages, man," Mr Reynolds replied. "I never talked of salary when I was in service." He managed to say this with a rather undeserved and therefore inappropriate superiority at having risen above such ignominious origins.

"My wages," Mr Hurst corrected himself, in a subdued manner, something which Elizabeth had lately observed in him. He appeared vulnerable, as she looked at him now, as though he had every reason to be scared of his employer, fearful of wrestling from him the means with which to live, monetary wealth required in return for his hard work which he had earned long ago.

"Now, regarding these wages," Mr Reynolds continued in that self same imperious manner. "I've looked into the matter, and I say two hundred a year. What do you think?"
"Thank you sir," Hurst replied, as Elizabeth found it difficult to conceal a gasp. She was aware that one hundred and fifty was the threshold of a gentleman, hardly an income which Society would term applying to their definition of the word, but there were distinctions in everything, during such times as these. Yet two hundred did not seem adequate recompense for Mr Hurst's services.

"It's a fair proposal," Hurst allowed.

Mr Reynolds rose from his chair behind the desk and came to stand before his secretary, clasping his shoulders in an almost camaraderie fashion, yet with ever the appearance of an overbearing employer to his most put upon employee. "You see, Hurst, a man like me has to consider the market price. Since inheriting this fortune of mine, I have become acquainted with the duties of property, and what such property is worth in the eyes of those who have it, and those have not. A sheep is worth so much in the market and I ought to give it that price and no more. Likewise a secretary."

"You are too kind, Mr Reynolds," Hurst replied, yet in that same nervous manner than implied what he just professed was not what he really believed. Nor did Elizabeth believe it, for Mr Reynolds' speech did not imply benevolence, or fairness, a good master bestowing what was due, but rather a master bestowing what was seen to be done.

"I want to keep you in attendance," Mr Reynolds went on in the same superior fashion. "I want you ready at all times. I'll have a bell rung from this room to yours. And when I want you, I'll touch it." Elizabeth flinched at this declaration, for to her mind it sounded a kin to something insidious, unworthy of the position in which a secretary was held. Rendering him a servant, and a lowly one at that. This entire interview in fact seemed to be served with the intention of making Mr Hurst feel inferior, small, vulnerable and fearful of his employer, and wholly dependent upon him.

"I don't call to mind that I have anything more I have to say to you." said, Mr Reynolds, who turned away from Mr Hurst disdainfully, dismissing him from the room to that impersonal study of his. For the first time Elizabeth wondered if he felt as lonely in there as the room now appeared so in her mind.

Hurst bowed to Mr Reynolds, then to his wife, and then finally to Elizabeth, with a small look, one that seemed to convey to her more than its length would allow. She felt immediately as if she understood his feelings to be the same as her, that he felt the injustice of his treatment just as much she did, yet bore the hardship, in favour of seeing her, and giving her assurance of his continuing regard, and her continuing comfort, with the deliverance of letters, like the one he gave her from Jane today, as well as many other things, which would be revealed in time. In the past, such an avowal of affection would have called her to reject him, as she had already. Now however, she derived from them a certain comfort, took them as a constant, in this increasingly ever uncertain world.

The door closed loudly, the echoing sound bringing her back to an awareness of her company, and of the tension that seemed to still haunt the room which Mr Hurst has so recently vacated.

"Edmund, my dear," Mrs Reynolds began hesitantly, her manner nervous and uncertain, Elizabeth noticed, as though the emotions which the secretary displayed just now were also haunting the room just like the tension.

"Yes, my dear?" Mr Reynolds returned, his voice warm and genuine, all the superiority disappeared. Yet Elizabeth could still feel a part of it, present within the room, which seemed very crowded now, ghosted by as it was with all these negative emotions resulting from wrongful conduct.

"Excuse me putting it to you, but don't you think you're being a little strict with Mr Hurst?" Mrs Reynolds asked tentatively, as though she though she was a little fearful of her husband, something Elizabeth had never witnessed from her. Indeed, when she first came to live with them, the
Reynold's appeared to possess the kind of relationship her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner displayed between each other, the kind of relationship she herself had always wished for, before such illusions were sunk into the sea, along with the promises of old men and young ones with conditional fortunes to inherit. "Don't you think you're being little not quite your old self?"

Mr Reynolds had barely sat down behind his desk before leaping up again at this inquiry with an energy that was rather fierce and boundless, and inappropriate to the inquiry which merited it. "Why, old lady, it's the same with Hurst as with the footman. You must either scrunch them or they'll scrunch you."

He glanced to their ward, capturing sight for the first time of her concerned expression, and turned on her with the same boundless energy, a miserly eagerness acquired within his eyes. "Now this isn't entertaining, Miss Elizabeth, now is it?" he turned to his wife, a hand gesturing at their companion, who seemed disinclined to answer him with the truth of what she felt concerning his assertion.

"Now Elizabeth, for her age, is remarkably well up on what to go in for. You're right my love," he said as he loomed over her with that monetary glint still present. "Go in for the money. Make a profit from your good looks and from the money me and Mrs Reynolds will have the pleasure of settling on you, for we're very fond of you, my dear. A golden ball of opportunity lies at your feet, Elizabeth, my dear!"

Elizabeth nodded, but inwardly her mind was suddenly concerned at the change she saw in her once kind and generous guardian. Mr Reynolds appeared so altered from his first brush with wealth as to be quite unrecognisable.

Looking at him as he returned to his desk, remembering the fearful expression across his brow as he loomed over her, and the unjust treatment of Mr Hurst, Elizabeth could not help but wonder if this was what money did to you; worsen and corrupt the character and mind until you no longer knew yourself, or others that you once cared for, for now you cared for nothing but money.

Money, she found herself forced to conclude, was spoiling Mr Reynolds, and not for the first time did she fear becoming mired within the same sinking affliction.
Chapter 20

Part 20.

Nightfall fell in slow increments upon the city, blinding those who had not lost their vision to the fog or smog which plagued the poorer streets. Time for all citizens of London to seek their beds or board, a safer alternative to the perils that came with the fall of darkness. As for the richer side, they had their gaslights and candles and carriages to aid them in returning home, still no less to fear from the encroaching blackness as the poor, if not even more so, for they had the more to lose.

During the night these vast divisions of Society were never more apparent, the comparisons never more broad. Blackness threw up a wall between rich and poor, barring one from the other, until the daylight could be seen again, though in some areas, the wall was still present, crossed only at one's peril. Rare was the man who from the richer side who dared to cross the barriers into the poor areas, and often he was also unwise, for that way held danger, both to his wealth and to his life.

However, there was such a man abroad tonight, in an area which a man of his wealth would be a fool to enter, even in the alleged safety of daylight. Such entry from such fools usually caused them to part with some of that wealth, either due to some debt or addictive affliction, such as gambling or the temptations of the opium dens. Occasionally the affliction or debt was too great, causing that man to never emerge from the area, his remains to be washed ashore, or torn to ribbons by the ferries. But this man was different from the rest. His wealth was new, his origins old, and from the area he was now traversing. He knew his surroundings well, he would not be caught unawares by a curious opportunist.

Yet he was not unobserved through his nocturnal adventure. Two sets of inquisitive eyes watched his movements, as he navigated his way through the dust mounds surrounding his old house. They saw his crouching, furtive manner, caught sight of the shovel which he carried within his hand, the skill with which he used it. If they were too far away to see what he might have been concealing or revealing, the distance was no barrier for speculation.

"He's looking for something," Old Wickham murmured. "What's he doing?"
"He's got a shovel," Mr Younge remarked. "And he knows how to use it." They watched him move to another series of heaps, digging away anew. "He knows these mounds like his own garden. He could bury us without a trace, if we give him reason. Come on," he urged the retreat to the house.

Barely were they there safely installed within the comfortable but batted armchairs which resided in the parlour before the front door was pushed open, and the glow of a lantern entered the darkened hall, followed by Mr Reynolds.

"What's the matter, Wickham?" He asked as he caught sight of the man's blanched countenance upon his entrance. "You're as pale as a candle."

Wickham forgot to breathe in his rush to cover his pale complexion, and his body rebelled the oxygen as a result.

"Physic yourself to be order for the morrow," Mr Reynolds advised, before catching sight of the other companion in the room.

Wickham ceased his coughing and ushered the man out from the concealing darkness. "This is a friend, Mr Younge," he revealed.
"Of Clerkenwell?" Mr Reynolds sought to confirm, receiving a nod in return. "I've heard of you," he added, brightening eagerly. "You knew the old man. Did he tell you of any hoardings of money or even better?" He inquired in the manner of someone in need of every penny, when clearly such was not the case. "Oh by the by, I've decided to sell off the mounds, Wickham," he added, almost as an afterthought.

The tenant who had thought himself entitled to whatever treasure remained beneath these dusty covers was rightly stunned. "What?"

"Gonna lose the mounds," Reynolds repeated. "They're to be carted off that's the end of it," he added abruptly, considering the matter at an end. "Goodnight," he continued in farewell, forestalling the man's ushering to the door. "No, I know the way out."

Younge restrained his companion, who was ready to grab their departing visitor by the coat tails, and strangle him for ridding him of his claim to wealth. "Did you hear him! He's going to cheat me! Cheat us! Before we can find anything! Let me get at him."

"Now why would you be wanting to do that?" Mr Younge asked him. "Think, man. The clearing will take more than a day, weeks even, I dare say, and the movement may reveal the treasure quicker than our fumbling could ever do."

"I hope you're right, Younge," Wickham remarked stilling at last under his friend's restraining hand clasp upon his shoulder. "For I fear the morning arrival of all those carts, carrying away the fortune I am entitled to."

Several days after he was brought into the tap room of the Fellowship for the Six Jolly Porters, left for dead, Jenkinson came to a weather-beaten series of wooden planks, laughingly called a walkway across the dredges of the river. Silently he crouched before the edge, his eyes peering into the grimy water, attempting to descry the nature of the depths below. He remembered heaving the muck from his mouth; the poisonous liquid clinging to his throat and lungs, the knowledge of how close he was to death. But how long he spent in the water, where the river washed him up, or what caused him to almost surrender to dark currents beneath these boards, was up for speculation.

He felt the pressure and tread of someone else walking those planks, and looked up to encounter the figure of a man sombrely clothed, with a countenance to match, grim and closed mouth, saying only what he chose.

"Been walking and lost my way," the man revealed. "Been looking out for someone I used to know," he added, resting his hands on the frail support ledge. "I feel she may have passed this spot."

"She?" Jenkinson queried, curious, despite himself. "The lady travels alone?"

"Yes," the man replied. "At least I believe so. You've not seen a man have you?" He asked him. "A city man, a man of law? His name is Bingley."

"Bingley," Jenkinson echoed, recollecting the man and his companion. "Oh, I'd know him if I saw him."

"You are acquainted with this man?" His companion asked.

"I am indeed," Jenkinson confirmed. "Along with that Fitzwilliam fellow. When I was cheated at the time of Philips's death."

The stranger regarded him with new interest. "You are Jenkinson."
"What's it to you?" Jenkinson countered, forcing the man into silence. He crouched for a moment longer, considering. "This river's drowned me once," he revealed. "I mean to get the better of it." He rose to his feet with the practice of an old river hand. "I'm thinking of taking a job up river. More respectable. What do you think?"

"You know Philips's niece?" The stranger asked.

"None better," Jenkinson replied. She was kindest soul that ever lived in this neighbourhood. A far better carer than his burden of a daughter.

"Have you seen her?" The stranger asked.

"Not since the day of Gaffer's death," Jenkinson replied.

"And him, Bingley," the stranger inquired. "Did you ever see them together?"

"Certainly I have," Jenkinson agreed.

"And did he make a show of being kind to her?" The stranger inquired.

"Oh yeah, that was very definite," Jenkinson grinned, remembering the occasion he saw him stare into the window of her dwelling, and his comment to Lawyer Fitzwilliam, concerning how he felt like a dark combination of a traitor and a pickpocket when he thought about Miss Bennet.

The stranger reached into pocket and retrieved some silver. "Suppose I was to offer you five shillings?" He remarked.

Jenkinson grinned at him. "Well I'd take it," he replied, opening his hand to receive the proffered funds. "What's this for?"

"I don't know, I don't know," the stranger replied, sounding suddenly so very lost, that Jenkinson almost felt sorry for the man. "Look, do you know where she is?"

"No," Jenkinson answered.

"Well if you do have any intelligence of her, or of him, would you be willing to part with it?" the stranger asked. "Look you can trust me, I'm a schoolteacher."

Jenkinson nodded, storing away the information about the man. He watched the stranger walk away. "I don't know where to find ya," he called out.

"I'll know where to find you," the schoolteacher replied. He stopped suddenly, seemingly at a loss once more. "Oh, the five shillings, I don't know what I want for it, remember. No I don't know. If anything," he finished before walking away.

Jenkinson watched him go, knowing that with a little bit of detective work, he could find the school which answered in the affirmative to having such a teacher who matched that stranger's description. Yes, there was money to be made out of this encounter, if he bided his time and put it to good use.
Chapter 21

Part 21.

Elizabeth woke one morning to a complex of puzzling sounds emanating from the ground floor. Despite the magnificence of the townhouse, the richness in the materials which were used to build the place, the walls could not hide certain noises from reaching every room no more than her father's house in Holloway. Or Longbourn, for that matter, but she often refused to dwell on her memories of their once ancestral home.

Slowly she rose from the pillows, casting her gaze around the bedroom, noting the condition of the daylight entering through curtained sash windows, judging the hour how her father had taught her to in her youth on the grounds of her first home in rural Hertfordshire. Despite the contrast between London and Meryton, it was a science which depended little on surroundings. Once an estimate of an hour was established firmly in her mind, she moved from the bed to dress herself, her mind returning to the internal speculation as to the origins behind the sounds which had woken her in the first place.

There was little peace within her since Jane had escaped to their Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, perhaps even before. Elizabeth just felt that the inability to remained settled and contented, was much more apparent to her now than it had been. Many things disturbed her equilibrium; the noises below were the last in a list which could be summed up in two words; William Hurst. Everything which disturbed her related in some way to him, no matter how indirect the degree of connection, from the changing temperament of Mr Reynolds, to the absence of her sister at a time when she most needed a confidant.

Jane's absence troubled her, even though she could hazard the possible cause as to her sudden departure one night for their maternal Uncle's home. Elizabeth felt this fresh parting deeply, more so than when Jane was caring for their Uncle and nephew Philips. The secrecy which her sister used was doubly disturbing, for rarely did the two of them hide their thoughts and feelings from each other. She knew her sister's reasons for leaving were no doubt sound, but she did not know the exact nature of them, other than that they might involve Mr Collins. This was only a supposition however, and not a certain one at that, for while she knew of the man's visits to the house, Jane had chosen not to confide in her the subject of those visits.

On the rare occasions she had been in the company of the man, Elizabeth had seen nothing in Jane's manner which could cause her concern, but as far as her own counsel went, she did not trust their nephew's old schoolmaster. There was something foreboding in his manner, a dark depth to his character. Elizabeth had only seen the merest hint of this, but the aspect became more apparent in Jane's behaviour after she returned from private conversations with him. Just as it had the day she left.

There had been little correspondence since her sister's departure too, and when Jane did write her letters were full of their aunt and uncle and nieces and nephews, nothing concerning why she left. It concerned Elizabeth that her sister was so reluctant to confide in her, because she could not help but think that the truth was dangerous for all of them, most of all for Jane herself. Her sister strove to protect their family whenever she could, her loyalty was far more powerful than her own.

A violent thump which caused the floor below her feet to vibrate, broke Elizabeth's reflections just then. Having finished her toilette, she quit her bedroom and made her way down to the entrance hall, which turned out to be the location from where the noise was travelling. Descrying the sight
before her as she came to a halt midway down the last set of stairs, Elizabeth silently concluded that the noise was not the only thing which was travelling.

A large collection of luggage bags and suitcases littered the black and white marble tiled hall, some in the process of being transferred by servants from the room to a carriage outside, an equipage which she could espy out of one of the front facing windows. Mr Reynolds stood upon the threshold before the gathering of these cases, Mr Hurst beside him. The faithful secretary's head was bowed slightly over a note book, taking notes of his employer's instructions.

Mr Reynolds looked up as her tread upon the stairs became audible. "Ah, Lizzy, my dear," he greeted her in the usual way. "Hurst is travelling to Derbyshire today."

Elizabeth frowned in puzzlement. "Derbyshire?" She queried.

"Yes, to survey the late Mr Darcy's estate; Pemberley," Mr Reynolds replied.

"And how many days will Mr Hurst spend there?" Elizabeth asked, silently judging the quantity of luggage left before them.

"Oh, only today, my dear," Mr Reynolds informed her. "The cases you see before us are to be stored at the house for when we decide to visit the place." He looked at her carefully, before adding, "you may go with him, if you like."

"May I?" Elizabeth asked, thinking of her sister.

"Of course, Lizzy, my dear," Mr Reynolds assured her. "Visit your sister Jane, I'm sure Mr Hurst can escort you there. Lambton is but five miles from Pemberley."

"I will escort Miss Bennet anywhere she wishes," Mr Hurst replied quietly.

"When do we leave?" Elizabeth asked.

"As soon as you are ready, my dear," Mr Reynolds replied.

"I will go and fetch my travelling clothes then," Elizabeth informed him before turning round to return to her bedroom for her coat and bonnet.

Mr Reynolds however stopped her before she had reached the landing halfway. "Let the servants get them, Elizabeth. That is what they are there for," he added with a look to Hurst, the full meaning of which his secretary could not fail to comprehend, before he left them alone in the hall.

The train left at the station just when it was due, taking Mr Hurst and herself away from the hustle and bustle of the London streets into the quiet and peaceful countryside. Elizabeth took the window seat in the carriage, her fine dark eyes gazing out at the passing views of the lush green fields and the various cottages or country estates from station to station, but her mind remained full of her sister, wondering if this surprise visit would cause Jane to confide in her, for she held no hope that it would allay her fears or concerns.

After the train departed from the last station before Kympton, Elizabeth turned to her travelling companion, silently studying him. His eyes were upon the opened pages of the leatherbound volume which was resting in his hands. It struck her that this was the first time they would be alone for the day since that evening he made known his feelings for her. She had rebuffed his advances then, and a part of her still felt that she was right to do so, but it was increasingly diminished by other evidence which stood in his favour.
His gentlemanlike manners, his considerate and respectful silence when they were in company with Mr and Reynolds, and his quiet acceptance of the change in Mr Reynolds's manner towards him. Elizabeth did not agree with Mr Reynolds's altered behaviour, but she did admire Mr Hurst's silent refusal to treat his employer in kind, or raise some objections concerning the treatment. It spoke well for his temper, a character trait which she had come to hold certain reservations of at late, especially when it was displayed by other persons she was acquainted with.

He must have sensed her gaze upon him, for he looked up from his book and asked her, "shall you be delighted to see your sister after so long a parting from each other?"

"Very much," Elizabeth replied. "It has felt strange to be without her after only just having her company again. I believe I feel her absence more now than when she was helping my Uncle and nephew Philips." She paused, before asking her own question. "Do you think well of my sister, Mr Hurst?"

"I think quite highly of her," He replied.

"I'm so glad of that," Elizabeth found herself replying, though she did not know why she was pleased that he approved of her sister. "There is something refined in her beauty is there not?"

Mr Hurst nodded. "She is very striking."

"Yet there is a shade of sadness upon her. I noticed it even before she left London," Elizabeth remarked, admitting for the first time the concern she felt for her sister. "I'm not setting up my own opinion here. Mr Hurst, I'm asking for your opinion."

Her travelling companion nodded. "I noticed that sadness. I hope it may not be as a result of the false accusation against your uncle."

Elizabeth could not fail to discern the distance in his tone, and sighed. "Mr Hurst, Please don't be so hard on me. Don't be so stern. I wish to talk to you on equal terms."

He closed his book and rose to seat himself next to her. "I was forcing myself to be constrained as required by our agreement." He smiled at her. "But there, it is gone."

"Thank you," Elizabeth uttered, taking his hand.

The train came to a halt, and they disembarked. To his surprise Elizabeth did not let go of his hand until they had left the station and came upon a wide footbridge covering a gentle flowing stream. The walk was brief in its production, but he felt deeply the sensations caused by the clasping of their hands, the touch of his skin against her own. The desolation he felt when her hand parted from his was most acute.

It was a warm summer's day, and in the current easiness of her company, William felt himself able to remove his jacket, revealing a white shirt restrained by a black waistcoat and fitting narrow armbands, designed to keep the shirt free of stains and creases. He folded the edges of his jacket inward and placed the garment on the stone wall. "In her letter to Mrs Reynolds, Jane stated that her name and residence must be kept strictly secret. I was hoping that you may be able to try and find out why."

"Of course. I'd be glad to help if I can," Elizabeth replied. "I have my own suspicions as to why, but you must allow me the privilege of sisterly confidence. I will not reveal anything unless Jane allows me to do so."

"It is only natural that you possess such feelings," William replied. "And I am sure that Mr and Mrs
Reynolds will respect your silence."

"Thank you," Elizabeth uttered. She came to join his resting stance against the metal rails of the bridge, resting her bent arms across them, as her clasped hands hovered above the gently flowing water. "Mr Hurst, it seems so long since we've spoken to each other naturally. I'm embarrassed to bring up another subject, yet I can no longer keep silently wondering. It is Mr Reynolds. You know that I am not only grateful to him but I have a true respect for him."

"Unquestionably," William replied. "And that you are his favourite companion."

Elizabeth nodded. "That makes it difficult," she turned her face towards his. "Mr Hurst do you think he treats you well?"

William hesitated, uncertain how to answer her. "You see how he treats me," he added eventually.

"Yes I see it clearly," Elizabeth replied. "You see I have been watching Mr Reynolds these past few weeks."

He smiled at her choice of words. "You? Watching? Surely not."

She blushed, knowing to what evening he inferred, inwardly touched and embarrassed that he seemed not to hold her words said then against her. "I have to admit I have been watching him. And though on my first meeting with Mr Reynolds I found him gruff and dark and somewhat dirty I'm ashamed to confess, I've grown to find him kindly and unspoilt by his good fortune. But now...." She sighed, unsure of how much to say.

William found her eyes with his own, hoping that his solicitous gaze would inspire her to continue. "Now?"

"But now I have to admit that fortune is spoiling Mr Reynolds," Elizabeth added. "And I've seen the way he treats you and it gives me pain because I cannot bear it to be thought that I approve of it."

His features acquired a softened, almost ardent look as he replied, "Miss Bennet if you could know with what delight I see that fortune is not spoiling you."

"This treatment," Elizabeth added. "Well, I sometimes think that it must lower you in your own estimation."

He thought of the conversation with the Reynolds, of their plans and his own, choosing his next words with infinite care. "I have very strong reasons for bearing with the drawbacks of my current position."

"Well, I sometimes think you repress yourself," Elizabeth confessed. "You force yourself to act passively."

"You are right," he replied, for her words were true, from a certain point of view. "I force myself to act a certain part, to appear to be something else to those who might be watching. But I have a settled purpose."

"And a good one I hope?" Elizabeth asked him.

William inclined his head. "And a good one I hope," he added, taking her offered hand once more. "Come, I better set you on your way to see your sister."
"Jane," Elizabeth cried as her sister opened the door of the Gardiner's residence to admit her, "I am glad to see you."

"And I you," Jane replied, embracing her. "Aunt and Uncle Gardiner are out with the children in Lambton just now, you find me all alone here."

"That is to the good, for I want a frank conversation with you," Elizabeth replied. "On a subject which you seem disinclined to confess on paper. How are you, Jane? Why did you leave London so suddenly?"

Her sister breathed deeply, taking care to let her reply sound as calm as she could possibly make it. "There is a certain man, a passionate and angry man who says he loves me, and I must believe does love me. He's a friend of our cousin."

"Mr Collins," Elizabeth deduced astutely. "And you're hiding here because you're afraid of him?"

"As you know, I'm not timid generally, but I'm always afraid of him. I'm afraid to read the newspaper or to hear of events in London in case he has done some violence."

"But you're not afraid of him for yourself," Elizabeth determined, knowing her sister well. "Then you must excuse me but it must be that there is someone else?"

"His words are always in my ears and the blow he struck when he said them is always in my head. 'I hope I may never kill him.'"

"'Kill him?'" Elizabeth echoed. "Is Mr Collins so jealous?"

"Of another," Jane confessed. "Of a gentleman. I hardly know how to tell you. Of a gentleman so far above me and my way of life. He's shown an interest in me since our Uncle's death. You know whom I'm speak of, Mr Bingley. He must not know I am here or give at least clue where to find me!"

"I see," Elizabeth pressed her sister's hand tenderly. "Of course I see."

"I live here peacefully," Jane replied. "And I hope you do not mind that I stay here for a time, until I feel the danger has passed."

"Of course," Elizabeth replied. "And I hope you may forget both these men. The violent one and one who causes you such worry."

"Oh I do not want to forget about him," Jane protested.

"I don't understand, Jane. If you care for Mr Bingley so, why not allow him to know that? Wouldn't confirmation of what he feels and might be willing to endure, be better than living in hiding?"

Elizabeth countered. "Where is the gain, my dear?"

"Does a woman's heart seek to gain anything?" Jane asked her. "If I were to forget him, I shall lose the belief that if I had been his equal and he had loved me then I would have tried with everything I had to make him better and happier. I have no more dreamt at the possibility of being his wife than he ever has. And yet I love him, I love him so much and so dearly. When I think my life may be weary, I am proud of it and glad of it to suffer something for him. I may never see him again. His eyes may never look at me again. I'd not have the light of them taken out of my life for anything that life can give me. There I've told you everything. I didn't mean to. I did not want you to worry about me more than when we last parted."
"I only wish I deserved your confidence more," Elizabeth replied. "Do you wish Mr and Mrs Reynolds to know why you left?"

"I do not wish to trouble them so," Jane answered. "Just tell them that I am helping out our Aunt and Uncle."

"And make sure Mr Bingley does not learn where they live," Elizabeth added. "Oh, Jane, I wish I could ease things for you. If only I knew how."

"Mr Collins' passion will pass the longer my absence from London lasts," Jane prophesied. "He will forget me and we shall go on as before, as common and indifferent acquaintances." She smiled at her sister. "Now, how has it been for you since I went away?"

"Mr Reynolds continues to alter," Elizabeth replied. "His treatment of Mr Hurst worsens by the day. I am thankful that I never told him or his wife of that evening when he confessed his feelings for me. I dread to think what might happen if that event were made public."

"And Mr Hurst," Jane added, "has your opinion of him changed?"

"He is a friend," Elizabeth replied. "I endeavour to treat him so more and more since Mr Reynolds's change in manner. He does not seem to hold that evening I cruelly rejected him against me."

"No one who truly loved you would, Lizzy," Jane revealed.

"You do not?" Jane countered. "His feelings are evident just by the attention with which he continues to show you. If he ignored you, I would be less certain of his feelings, for avoidance can be both due to the desire to continue to love you or to fall out of such love. And your feelings have changed for him, which leads me to believe that he is merely waiting for a chance to ask you again."

"A man who has been refused?" Elizabeth asked incredulously. "How could I ever be foolish enough to expect a renewal of his love? Is there one among the sex, who would not protest against such a weakness as a second proposal to a woman? There is no indignity so abhorrent to their feelings!

"Love does not give up at the first stumbling block," Jane pointed out. "Nor should it do so, else we would never find it so fulfilling as to desire it with all our hearts."

Elizabeth walked back from the Gardiners, the five mile distance from Lambton to Pemberley no trouble to her. When her father still had Longbourn, she would spend most of her days rambling about the countryside, rain or shine, whatever the season, her return to the house witnessed and despaired of by her mother, who would cry aloud at how her second daughter would ever gain a rich husband, when she chose to run wild about the countryside, causing her dresses to gain inches of mud about the hem lines. To which her father would reply that such displays show a healthy disposition rather than a constant concern as to the money which said gentleman would feel threatened by. She frowned now as she recollected such teasing, for she realised once more how her comments must have hurt her father the last time she saw him. Resolving to summon her courage upon her return to London and apologise to him in Holloway, she went on.

Reaching the beginnings of a gentle slope into a deep, lush, green valley, she slowed her pace, catching sight of something which made her stop altogether. Before her stood a magnificent house, constructed from local stone, with generous windows, casting a glorious reflection into the shimmering lake before it. She caught her breath in vain for it was taken away by the sheer beauty of
the place. When she travelled with the Gardiners in her youth, she had toured a number of stately homes, all of them impressive in their own right, but none which touched her heart as this one had. It seemed to belong to the landscape, as though no architect or landowner was responsible for placing it in this valley save nature itself. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste.

'And of all this,' she murmured inwardly, 'I might have been mistress.' With these grounds she might now have been familiarly acquainted! Instead of viewing them as a stranger, she could have rejoiced in these woods and hills as her own and welcomed visitors. But, no, she recollected to herself, for she would be with a husband who was a stranger to her, bound by contractual agreement, unlikely to welcome relatives who were so far below his situation in life. This was a lucky recollection, - it saved her from something like regret.

She descended the lush green slope, rounded the natural lake, her admiration of the house and grounds only increasing as it came nearer to her fond gaze. Finding a gardener by one of the borders before the stairs which led to the house, she asked him for the whereabouts of Mr Hurst. He kindly replied with clear directions to the estate office, and she thanked him, before continuing on her way.

The estate office was situated in a separate building by the stable blocks, which, had she taken a closer look, would have appeared unusually active for an estate that was reportedly shut up since the death of last incumbent. But Elizabeth paid this no mind as she possessed no reasons for such suspicions just yet. Instead she found the building described to her by the gardener and knocked on the door.

"Welcome to Pemberley, Miss Bennet," Mr Hurst greeted her as he opened the door. "What do you think of the place?"

"I like it very much," she answered, her eyes drifting to admire the building and grounds once more. "I would say that it is beautiful, but I fear there is an inadequacy with the word to describe this place."

"I feel that too," Hurst agreed, though his eyes lingered on her far longer than they had the house, his need to learn that she approved of the estate far outweighing his desire to see a place which he last saw during his childhood. Such innocent days were a stark contrast to the times he lived in now. "Would you like a tour? Mr Reynolds gave me the keys, and I have been reading enough of the papers to pass muster as a guide, I believe."

Elizabeth turned to him, her sister's words on her mind, but too still caught up in the beauty of the place as well as a desire to see more of it to concern herself as to what he might read into her acceptance just yet. "If you are able to free yourself, then yes, I should like that very much. I know Mr Reynolds gave you a lot of instructions however, and I do not wish to inconvenience you with my curiosity."

"No, no," he assured her. "Your visit to your sister was all the time I needed to fulfil Mr Reynolds's instructions." he gestured to the path behind them, leading into the inner courtyard and entrance of the house.

She soon found Hurst's estimation of his abilities as tour guide to be typical of the rare opinion he professed aloud of his intelligence; under-exaggerated. Not only was he acquainted with the layout of the house and the pieces of furniture contained therein, but he also knew enough of the family history to satisfy her questions as to the identity behind certain likenesses, or who adorned a room with a particular look or ornament. He led her through all the principle rooms in an unhurried manner, allowing her to gaze at her leisure.
When they reached the music room, another gasp escaped her lips, as she caught sight of a fine Broadwood Grand which resided in one corner of the room, beside an equally fine harp. Before she was aware of her movements, her feet moved to place her body before the keys, her slender fingers idly picking out a tune. Only then did she note the production date of the piano, which caused her to realise her actions.

"Oh, perhaps I should not have come, as I seem to have ruined a surprise," she remarked, catching Hurst out of his reverie. "Mr and Mrs Reynolds must have ordered this for their visit for Jane and I to play."

"Well, I won't tell them if you don't," Hurst replied, inwardly relieved that he did not have to think of an explanation. For the piano was intended for a sister, his who still lived in the Cape with her companion, and his hoped for wife, who had just stepped away from the gift. Forcing the memory away, he followed her and carried on with his tour.

The last principal room was the gallery, and he took her up the flight of stairs which led to it feeling a considerable amount of trepidation, for there was a particular likeness within this room that her keen eye could find, causing her to realise everything. But the room could not be avoided, for there was a drawing of how the room looked some centuries ago, in another room, which had caught her curiosity.

Elizabeth studied all the fine paintings, asking him about the identity of each person painted therein, which he answered calmly, inwardly surprised he could, considering his state of nerves. When they reached the portrait in question, he tried to give it as little emphasis or meaning as he had dealt the others in the gallery.

"That is your Mr Darcy," he answered her inquiry. "I understand it was painted in the Cape last year, and sent to this house along with rest of the luggage. Mr and Mrs Reynolds asked for it to be placed here alongside his ancestors."

She stared at the likeness in silence for such a long time, that he feared she had noticed the resemblance between the painting and himself. Then she turned to him and smiled. "Come, Mr Hurst, he was never really my Mr Darcy. I never even met him, after all."

Hurst was both relieved and regretful that she had not noticed what he most feared her to. "And that one," he added, as they moved on to the next portrait, "is of his sister, Georgiana."

Elizabeth gasped as she surveyed the image of a young, blond haired blue eyed girl, placed in the same tropical surroundings as her brother. "I had no idea he had siblings. Surely the estate must be hers now? And why isn't she here, does she even know of her brother's violent and untimely end?"

"I er, believe Mr and Mrs Reynolds wrote to her," Hurst hurriedly answered, for the need for such explanations had not occurred to him until now. "And she chose to stay in the Cape with her companion. It is, I understand, the only country she has ever known, as she is more than ten years her brother's junior. But Old Darcy, her grandfather, had no knowledge of her, and therefore she is not recognised in the Will."

"The poor girl," Elizabeth murmured, her heart going out to her. "She must miss her brother terribly."

"Yes," Hurst answered, "she must."

Later, as they walked away from the estate, the bell from the parish church was heard to chime,
disturbing the peaceful and comfortable silence in which the end of their time together had placed them.

Hurst mentally counted the number of chimes and retrieved his pocket watch to confirm matters. "We will make the train if we walk swiftly," he observed. "You look rather serious Miss Bennet," he added as he glanced at her.

"I feel rather serious," Elizabeth replied. "Would you believe Mr Hurst I feel that I've passed whole years today."

He smiled at her. "You are overtired."

She shook her head, taking his kind observation with an equally kind reply, a pleasant contrast to the days of their first acquaintance with each other, when such a remark would have provoked a defensive response. "No, I'm not all tired. I feel that much has happened to myself, you know?"

"For the good I hope?" he asked her, receiving a nod in reply. Noticing how the wind ruffled the lose dark brown curls of her hair, curls he often long to kiss or encircle his finger with, he added, "You're cold. You're trembling." Immediately he took his jacket off and placed around her shoulders.

When Elizabeth took his arm companionably in reply, he could have shouted his joy to the spectacular summer sunset which caressed the horizon that they were walking past. "What a beautiful sky," she commented, observing it. "What a glorious evening," she added with a glance at him, followed by another clasp of his hand.

Ahead a train whistled, causing him to boldly take hold of her hand and run for station.
Chapter 22

Part 22.

Back in London, in the area of the Temple and the law courts, Charles Bingley entered lodgings he shared with Richard Fitzwilliam to find his friend sitting in an armchair by the fireplace, smoking his pipe. His eyes were half closed, unruly dark brown hair falling over his forehead, pale grey fog seeping from the brown wooden cup at the end of the narrow tube sucked by his mouth. In the hearth the heat turned the coal a shade of dark red, the crystals sizzling as they knocked against each other. The fire cast a warmth around the bachelor lodgings, adding a comfort to the simple wood panelling, the Spartan furnishings, the small dining table with its four Chippendale chairs and the two large leather armchairs, one of which the lawyer in question reposed within.

"My dear Richard, you are the express picture of contented industry," Charles observed aloud. "Reposing after the virtues of the day."

He took possession of the facing partner of furniture in his usual fashion, a languid air of easy tiredness about his movements, an energetic study of lethargy.

Richard took the pipe from his mouth as he took in the seemingly languid state of his friend as he retrieved a cigar from the nearby box and began to smoke. "And you, my dear Charles, are the express picture of discontented idleness. Where have you been all day?"

Bingley gestured with the newly lit cigar to the streets outside their lodgings carelessly, a sprinkle of ash falling into the hearth. "I've been about town. And I am about consulting my eminently respected solicitor about the state of my affairs."

"Well, your highly intelligent and respected solicitor is of the opinion that your affairs are in a bad way, Charles," Richard replied. "How could they be any other, Charles, when you spend your entire day wandering the streets in search of a certain personage?"

Charles rose from his armchair to rest an arm on the mantle ledge of the fireplace, his booted feet kicking idly at the fender. Yet his disposition had acquired a sudden serious air in response to his friend's inquiries. "Tell me, Richard, have you ever seen me take so much trouble about anything?"

"My dear Charles, I wish I had," Fitzwilliam answered.

Bingley left the support of the hearth and walked to the window, where he gazed out at the nocturnal
prospect. "If my taking so much trouble to recover her does not mean that I care for her, what does it mean?"

Richard shook his head, gathering his arguments once more, as his hands occupied themselves with the refilling of his pipe. "You must consider the consequences."

"You know I'm incapable of that," his friend replied with a small smile, his gaze briefly switching from Fitzwilliam then back to the panes of glass.

Their serious discussion was disturbed just then by a knock at the door, which Richard made move to answer, half rising from his armchair before being forestalled by his friend.

"I'm on duty tonight," Charles replied before disappearing to retrieve their caller.

He returned barely a minute later with a man whose sight caused Richard to rise out of his chair with a start, almost dropping his pipe in utter astonishment.

The figure was a collection of ill-kempt rags and hair, skin oiled by the toils of the road and a life lived in the bottle. He half stumbled, half staggered into the room, despite Bingley's best efforts to keep him upright. A wild look possessed his aged features, gleaned eyes gazing about their new surroundings as though the walls were the cage in a zoo, or the conditions of bedlam. Indeed, Fitzwilliam half wondered if their visitor had escaped from that disreputable asylum.

"Now," Charles began as he ushered the man into the room, a sudden energy acquired to his manner and disposition, "this interesting gentleman is a cab driver who I found it wise to make the acquaintance of. My dear, Richard, may I present Mr Dolls?" He barely paused for Richard to incline his head in reply, let alone speak. "Now I believe Mr Dolls endeavours to make a communication to me, but it may be necessary to wind him up before any sense can be got out of him. Brandy, Mr Dolls?"

"Three penn'orth of rum," the already half-cut man barely managed to reply.

"Mr Dolls' nerves are considerably unstrung," Charles added. "And I think it upon the whole, expedient to fumigate Mr Dolls."

Richard watched as his friend took the coal shovel from the fire, poured a powder in it from a small tin on the mantle of the hearth and proceeded to do just that. "Bless my soul Charles, what a mad fellow you are! Why is this creature here?"

"Mr Bingley," Dolls queried, his gaze wildly following the attorney as he swept around him with the coal shovel, followed by the trail of fumigated steam. "This is Mr Bingley?"

"Of course it is," Bingley answered half irritably as he continued to fumigate the man and the area surrounding him. "What do you want?"

"Three penn'orth of rum," Dolls repeated, proffering his glass forward.

"Would you do me the favour, my dear Richard?" Charles asked his friend, who now reluctantly moved from his stance by the fireplace. "Wind him up. I'm occupied."

"You want directions don't ya?" Dolls recollected as Fitzwilliam carefully retrieved the carafe of rum and poured the required amount into the small glass that the coachman clutched in his shaking hand. "You want to know where she is?"

"I do," Charles confirmed, pausing from his fumigation for a moment.
Dolls attempted to salute. He was unsuccessful so settled for draining his glass instead before replying. "I'm your man."

"Have you got the direction?" Charles asked, his attempts to fumigate abandoned as his mind focused on the reason behind this unusual visitation.

"Three penn'orth of rum," Dolls requested once more.

"Wind him up, Richard," Charles commanded. "Wind him up."

Richard caught his friend by the arm as he realised the full nature of to what these inquiries were intended for. "Charles, you cannot stoop to this."

"I said I would find her by any means, fair or foul," Charles reminded him as he began to fumigate the coachman once more. "These are foul, I will take them." He turned to Dolls, pausing in his actions to urge the man on. "Can you remember the direction? If that's why you've come, tell me what you want?"

"Ten shillings, three penn'orth of rum?" Dolls asked eagerly.

"You shall have it," Charles promised. "Just give me the direction."

"Fifteen shillings, three penn'orth of rum?" Dolls haggled.

"Get me my wallet, Richard," Charles asked, to which Fitzwilliam reluctantly complied, leaving the parlour for a moment to visit one of the two bedrooms in the lodgings for the item in question. He returned from his friend's room, took a position nearby as he retrieved the coins from their confinement and handed Bingley the required amount.

"Here you are, Dolls, all yours as well as all the three penn'orth of rum you can drink," Charles showed the money to the drunkard. "Now, give me the direction."

"Plashwell cottage, Lambton, Derbyshire." Dolls replied, his eyes glowing as he eagerly eyed the carafe of liquor and the coins.

Charles returned the coal shovel to the fireplace, poured the fifteen shillings into the man's pocket, placed a large bottle of rum in one of his hands, and hauled him out of the parlour, towards the door. "There. Drink yourself to death for all I care."

Richard watched as the door closed and drew breath, preparing himself for another serious conversation with his friend, inwardly wishing that the Reynolds's would tell him the location of Miss Bennet so he could have prevented his friend from sinking to these methods of discovery. The dustman had been his first port of inquiry when Miss Bennet was gone, indeed the man had initiated the search, only to drop it just as suddenly, without explanation from him, his wife or his ward, who all seemed satisfied that the young woman was well and safe where she was, wherever that happened to be. Since then he had tried in vain to prevent his friend from continuing the search, and now that Bingley had discovered the location, he knew that all further attempts of persuasion could prove impossible.

"It seems to me that you have had no money at all since we've been married," Caroline Wickham, née Bingley, commented to her husband as they sat down to a dinner which lacked all the usual finery they were accustomed to on the evenings when they ventured out of Sackville Street to neighbourhoods of Portland Place. Indeed it was rare that the couple chose to stay at home rather than venturing out into Society, so lacking were they in the comforts to which they had long been
accustomed to acquiring. No fine works of art painted by respectable artists graced their panelled
dining parlour, nor elegant linen their simple mahogany table. Threadbare cushions resided upon
their chairs and sofas, tiny embers glowed in their hearth, remnants of candles hung in the sconces.

"What seems to you to be the case, may possibly be the case," Wickham conceded amicably before
taking a spoon and a sip of their meal. "In any case, we're soon to be bankrupt if we do nothing
about the case."

A servant entered, placing another dish before them, causing the couple to fall into silence until they
were alone once more. Considering their state of affairs they were lucky to still possess a half decent
household, and a confidential one at that, so behind in the wages were they, for Society would have
long deserted them if the truth were known, shocked by the state of affairs which their once
newlywed friends were now reduced to.

"We find ourselves in a corner," Wickham confessed to his wife. "What do we do?"

"There's nothing to sell?" Caroline asked him, glancing around their parlour, which lacked all the
gifts gullible well-wishers gave in joy of the couple's nuptials, no china or porcelain ornamentation,
and sparse furnishings.

Wickham shook his head. "Nothing. The furniture is surety already."

"So we must borrow," Caroline concluded. "Then I suppose it is natural to think in an emergency of
the richest people we know. And the simplest."

"The Reynolds's?" Wickham determined astutely. "They're too well guarded."

Caroline rose from the table and took out one of the thin cigarettes she had taken to smoking of late,
a narcotic relief from the present monetary turmoil of her married life. She put the drug to her mouth
and inhaled, calming herself for the betrayal which she was now about to make. "Supposing if we
could be of inestimable service to Mr Reynolds. He has grown very suspicious of late, remember?
And simultaneously rid him of his secretary?"

Wickham turned to his wife, a wicked smile gracing his features as he listened to her explanation of
how they were to achieve this feat, then timely step in, and fill the breach, providing another service
to the sovereigns of industry without losing or parting with any of their remaining possessions, save
perhaps honour and decency.

As the night continued to darken, Richard was still concerned about the methods which his friend
had now stooped to in his search. He had secured a small table by his armchair for the carafe in order
to partake of some brandy, as the produce of the pipe he was smoking was no longer sufficient to
quieter the turmoil in his mind, while his friend wandered the limits of the room, arguing his case for
the defence of the visitor they had just entertained, supping from the snifter of brandy in one hand,
inhaling the smoky aroma from his cigar carried in his other, all the languor and lethargy gone from
his disposition.

"Think about it this way," Bingley proposed as he continued to pace the length of the parlour,
turning as he reached the end of every sentence. "I give our Mr Dolls useful employment. Keep him
off the streets. Pay him exorbitantly."

"You could make almost anything musing, Charles, but not this," Richard remarked as he leaned
back in his armchair with a sigh.

Charles ceased his pacing for a moment, a seriousness acquiring itself to his expression as he gazed
at his friend in surrender of the case. "Yes, I'm rather ashamed of it myself, so let's change the subject."

"It is so deplorably underhand of you," Richard continued in delivering his judgement upon the affair. "So unworthy, setting up this pathetic spy."

"Ah, now you have suggested a new subject," Charles said, causing Fitzwilliam to frown at him, for that wasn't his intention. "Isn't it amusing? I never can go out after dark but I find myself attended. Always by one spy, sometimes by two."

"Are you sure?" Richard asked, learning forward in his armchair, all disapproval fading from his countenance, his voice, and his manner as his concern for the safety of his friend conquered all other turmoil. "Charles, have you some debt I don't know about?"

"Observe the legal mind," Bingley mused with some joviality, before continuing to pace the floorboards once more. "Respected solicitor, it is not that. The schoolmaster's abroad."

"The schoolmaster?" Richard echoed, somewhat confused, not by the reference for he recollected the person in question vividly, despite his one and only encounter with him, when he first learned of his friend's energy and interest in a certain young lady, but by the circumstances behind this person's fascination with his friend.

Bingley disappeared into his room to retrieve his coat, before proceeding to stock the pockets with a liberal supply of cigars and matches. "Yes. Sometimes the schoolmaster and the pupil are both abroad. Don't you believe me? Then I shall prove it to you now. Get your coat, we're going hunting."

Richard obliged, grabbing his travelling cloak and walking stick, which was a sturdy, useful weapon, concealing a fine sword within, an inheritance from a military ancestor, just in case the schoolmaster intended to do his friend harm.

Charles halted outside their lodgings, turning first one way then the other, studying the prospect each direction afforded, considering the streets both led into. "A fine night for the chase. Which way for the scent? East or west?"

"East," Richard decided.

They headed out together from the Temple Inn on to Fleet Street, where the Strand ended and Chancery Lane began, walking parallel with Holborn, the other main road that together with Fleet, Chancery and Dury Lane encircled Lincoln's Inn Fields and Temple.

"Now when we get to St Paul's churchyard," Charles remarked, "we shall loiter artfully and I shall point out our prey. Get your wind, for we'll be crossing the city tonight."

Charles set off down Fleet street and Richard followed. As they entered the churchyard of St Bride's, the parish bell struck nine. Silently they continued walking, passed the crossing for Farringdon Bridge, which led on to Blackfriar's, until Fleet Street turned into Lugate Street, widening into the circle for St Paul's and its Churchyard.

Here they paused, though Richard had glanced back earlier to catch sight of their quarry, until now seeing nothing but the inference of a trailing shadow. Now with Bingley he cast his eyes about the graceful surroundings, till they caught sight of the Schoolmaster in the full gas light, whereupon he resumed his swift pace, exiting St Paul's Churchyard on to Cannon Street. Only the master scholar was abroad tonight, a dark, ominous figure stalking their shadows with equally dark intent.
Richard shuddered at the vision of the scholarly stalking shadow before falling into step with his friend as they continued down Cannon Street, crossing Queen's, which led to a bridge across the river. Behind them he could hear the quiet deadly tap of the schoolmaster's shoes, in time with his and his friend's, together with his walking stick, which he was grateful he had thought to take with him, for he could not help but fear a sudden mortal confrontation followed by a potentially tragic end.

"Charles," he uttered quietly, careful that his voice did not carry to reach the ears of their stalker, "how long has this been going on?"

"Almost ever since a certain person disappeared," his friend answered in the same low tone, briefly glancing at his friend and their silent follower, before resuming the swift pace he had set from the beginning.

Reaching King William's Street, they continued on into Gracechurch Street, passing the crossings of Lombard and Fenchurch, then up Bishopsgate towards Shoreditch, passing the lane that reached the Old Lady of Threadneedle and St Mary's Axe.

Still the schoolmaster kept up with their swift pace, deadly and determined, silent and stealthful, an ominous mortal hangman, ever watchful for the rope with which to secure the scruff of his prey, who hounded him as he hounded them, desperate for news of the girl who unknowingly and unconsciously ensnared their hearts upon first encounter.


Entering Shoreditch, they passed a beggar, into whose cap Bingley dropped a few coins, causing the pitiful wretch to speak his thanks and look hopeful to their faithful follower, who was so intent on not losing sight of his quarry as to ignore the proffered cap completely.

"This is what happens night after night," Charles explained as they passed Church street which led into Bethnal Green. "I tempt him all over the city. One night westward, another north. Sometimes walking, sometimes riding." They walked on, past the crossings into Old Street and Hackney before Bishopsgate became Kingsland. "I plan my routes during the day, and execute them at night."

As Charles reached the end of Kingsland, he turned abruptly, looping round Kingsly Green and Richard followed, causing the schoolmaster to halt as they appeared to confront the scholar, before brushing past, turning into Ball's Pond. "I pass him by and refuse to even acknowledge his existence."

Picking up pace once more, the lawyers continued up Ball's Pond until it became Saint Paul's, passing by Highbury Park, whereupon they turned into New North Road into Canonbury Square, confronting the schoolmaster as they toured every side.

"As you see he is undergoing grinding torments," Charles commented quite composedly as they passed so close as for Richard to observe the schoolmaster's tormented countenance by the gaslights. "I goad him into madness."

They exited Canonbury Square via Cany Lane, entering into Upper Street, the tormented schoolmaster still doggedly following them. He stalked them all the way down the road, as they passed Barnaby then Cross Street, Church Street then Theberton, until the route rounded Islington square. Upper Street became High Street, dividing into Pentonville, Goswell and City Roads. They took the second of these three, the schoolmaster following them still, even as they continued down
until Goswell became Aldersgate, reaching the crossings of Cheapside and Newgate, whereupon St Paul's Churchyard came into view once more. From there it was a short walk into Lugate and then Fleet, before they returned to their lodgings at Temple.

Richard clasped his friend's arm as they reached the grand entrance, pausing their hunt by the sign of names assigned each flat. The schoolmaster was out of sight now, but Fitzwilliam could still feel him loitering in the shadows, waiting to see if they truly meant to go back inside, or were merely tricking him only to take another tour of London. "Charles, don't you think you're running a terrible risk goading him like this?"

Bingley sighed. "Richard, listen. Listen. Jane's gone. She's gone. And these night chases are my only solace. They give me an expressful pleasure."

"And what happens if your foul method is telling the truth?" Richard asked. "Will you allow the schoolmaster to dog you all the way to Lambton? Will you be solaced if he sees Miss Bennet and does her harm?"

"Of course not," Charles retorted. "But how will he afford to do that? And how can he when he has children to teach during the daylight hours?"

"I don't know," Richard conceded, "but I ask you to take care, Charles. If not for your safety, then at least for hers."

"Very well, Richard. If it puts your mind at ease, I shall take care to lose the schoolmaster before I go to Derbyshire."

Richard let his friend go to bed and tried to do so as well, but his mind would not let him settle, the schoolmaster continuing to haunt his thoughts as he had haunted his figure during the long walk through the city streets. Two or three hours of restless turning later, he entered his friend's bedroom and glanced out of the window into the approaching dawn warily, fearful to see the schoolmaster still watching their lodgings.

"What's the matter, Richard?" Charles asked as the creaking floorboard woke him to the sight of his friend, leaning cautiously by the wooden frame of the sash window.

"Nothing," Richard uttered absently, his focus and his gaze still on the street below, as he watched the alleys and corners by every lodging, afraid to see the schoolmaster lying in wait of the next venturing from their rooms.

"What the devil are you doing sleepwalking then?" Charles remarked, with barely a concern or a care directed at the reason behind his friend's disturbed stance.

"I'm horribly awake," Richard confessed as he continued to stare out at the gradual approaching dawn. "Charles, I cannot lose sight of that fellow's face."

"Which fellow?" Charles asked as he rolled over to face his friend.

"The schoolmaster," Richard answered.

"Odd," Charles laughed. "I can." He rolled over and returned to sleep.

Richard sighed, turning his face from the window to gaze at the unconcerned slumbering figure of his friend. Charles seemed to have few cares in life, save what related to Miss Bennet, and those only on her disappearance, not how the schoolmaster might be connected to that, as his stalking had begun when she disappeared, leading Richard to be of the opinion that the schoolmaster believed
Charles knew her whereabouts, and would eventually lead him to her.

But Charles had been in ignorance until now, and knowing that, capitalised on the schoolmaster's nature, goading him into madness, a solace to one, a torture to the other. He appeared to possess no conception of what this would goad the schoolmaster into, the possible injury he might visit upon him or Miss Bennet.

Richard however, could speculate such consequences all too well, and he did not like any of them.

Collins did not sleep well either; his mind indulging in a perverse mood, one which finds joy in plotting cruel and unusual ends to the life of the man he trailed each night. An intelligent Christian, he knew well the sin of this thought and the consequences when he carried such a violent deed out, but he was long since passed the point of caring. Bingley had to know the whereabouts of Miss Bennet, or if he was still in ignorance, he would find out from the Reynolds's in Society circles soon enough. He had no other means of tracking her down, not with his limited resources.

Rising from his bed to greet the new day after a short respite from stalking the lawyers all over London, Collins splashed water on his face, the haggard creature that was his reflection in the mirror causing him no concern. It had been his appearance for awhile now that even the pupils dared to hazard about it no more.

Charlie Philips had passed his exams awhile ago and was established in his apprenticeship in another school. There was no need for him to save Miss Bennet for her cousin's sake, for Charlie could now care less. Collins could give up this care without a consequence to anyone save himself and Bingley, doubtless causing the both them some eventual beneficial ease.

Yet he could not erase her beautiful features from his mind, nor the passion with which he cared for her. He had to see, her reason with her, persuade her to return his feelings.

If not for her sake, for Bingley's, else fear what his passionate nature and violent thoughts would drive him to commit.
Chapter 23

Part 23.

Once she had informed her husband of the secret with which she could secure a means to recover some of their living expenses, possibly even their future security, any thought of compunction concerning the betrayal of such a confidence, or decency in respecting the privacy of another woman's life, left Caroline's mind, if indeed they had ever existed in the first place.

Together husband and wife debated the best way to inform Mr Reynolds's of the indiscretion a member of his household had the impudence to commit, settling on a plan for him and Caroline to talk alone. The conversation could not be had in Sackville Street, for their home was not suitable to entertain such a wealthy personage, or indeed convey the idea of the Wickham's wealthy reputation. So they settled upon the plan that Caroline would wait outside the Reynolds's townhouse in Portland Place, where, once she had caught sight of Mr Reynolds's and called him to her, the conversation would take place.

It was the evening before Caroline's patient watch in Portland Place upon the townhouse of the Reynolds's, once the old townhouse of the Darcy family, was rewarded with the sight of Mr Reynolds returning home alone. Since the early hours of the morning she had been waiting outside the gates, idly smoking her tiny cigarettes, indifferently admiring the golden initials that a past Darcy ancestor had wrought into the iron fixture, all the while keeping watch on the road for the person who had inherited this wealth. Opening the little window of her now grossly expensive Hansom cab ride, she called out to him.

"Oh, good evening, Mrs Wickham, I hope you're well," he returned.

"Not so well, dear Mr Reynolds, I'm uneasy and anxious," Caroline replied doing her best to sound as though she felt those emotions she had just named, yet never experienced in her life before. "I've been waiting for you for some time. May I speak with you?"

"Of course." Reynolds assured her, gesturing with the walking stick he carried to the welcoming lit windows of his townhouse ahead, waiting for his return. "Will you not join me in my home where I can offer you some refreshment?"

Caroline drew back into the confines of the cab. Though the comforting glow from the grand house tempted her with images of finery and elegant society, she knew that such a location was not the best place to disclose her news, particularly if Mrs Reynolds was in company, to coax her husband into a sympathy neither she nor Wickham desired that she caused him to possess. "I'd rather not, Mr Reynolds. The matter I have to speak to you of is very delicate. Do you think this strange?"

"No madam, of course not," Reynolds replied, though it was quite apparent from the expression splayed across his features that his protestation was not entirely truthful.

"It is difficult to speak, but it is my duty," Caroline replied, though indeed, nothing could be further from the case. She opened the door of her cab. "Would you mind stepping into the carriage?"

Reynolds obeyed, mounting the step, then bending a little so he did not cause an injury to his head as he entered the vehicle, taking the empty seat across from her. "Now, madam, what is it that concerns you?"

"The proper conduct of your staff, Mr Reynolds regarding your ward," Caroline answered. "I
understand you wish for her to be well matched?"

"Yes," Reynolds replied with a frown, puzzled as to where Mrs Wickham was going with this. "But I do not see what the conduct of my staff has to do with this Miss Bennet's marital prospects."

"She told me in confidence, Mr Reynolds," Caroline added, "but I cannot help but be concerned for her, after all the man could persist and perhaps compromise her against her inclination."

Now Mr Reynolds was truly concerned, his mind speculating on the possible improper behaviour of one of his footman regarding Elizabeth or even Jane, for it would explain why she had left so suddenly. "Who do you speak of?"

"Mr Hurst," Caroline answered in a tone which implied the identity of the person involved was obvious. "Elizabeth told me that he declared himself one evening. I fear for her, Mr Reynolds, a young vulnerable woman with only your generosity to rely on."

Reynolds took care to his features devoid of expression as he received this news. What he had previously dismissed as being a figment of Mrs Wickham's imagination, he now knew to be true. Society was scandalised and he must act accordingly. "Thank you for the information, madam. You can be assured I shall deal with the matter at once."

"Oh, I am so relieved," Caroline replied, opening the cab door, a clear sign of dismissal, as though he were a servant bound to do her bidding. "And if there is anything else George and I can assist you with, please don't hesitate to let us know."

Reynolds nodded and exited the cab. As he entered the grounds of the Darcy townhouse, he heard the vehicle turn and clatter down the road behind him, presumably in quest for Sackville Street. Stepping inside the house he was greeted by Hurst, who appeared to have been waiting for him in the grand entrance hall for quite some time.

"Who was in the cab?" Hurst asked as he closed the door behind Mr Reynolds and help the man to doff his hat and coat. "It has been here all day."

"Mrs Wickham," Reynolds replied grimly. "Come, let us go into my study and talk."

Once inside he related everything which had taken place inside the carriage.

"Undoubtedly she has a more nefarious motive for telling you this," Hurst speculated aloud when he heard all. "Given their situation concerning their debts, unpaid staff, for I have heard much gossip below stairs, I would deduce that they want money."

"I don't mind paying them off," Reynolds confided. "But it won't end there unless you are gone." He paused, then inspiration struck, causing him to ask. "Are you prepared to declare yourself again?"

"Declare myself?" Hurst echoed in disbelief. "How will that help matters?"

Reynolds frowned. "I thought you said Lizzy and you are closer now?"

"We may be," Hurst allowed, recalling the visit to Pemberley, "but I don't know if she will accept me if I try again."

"Well, I think you must, my son," Mr Reynolds remarked, "just in a different manner to your last endeavour."

Hurst glanced at him intrigued. "Alright, what do you propose?"
"Prepare yourself to be slighted and oppressed," Reynolds continued. "I shall confront you openly with her present and we shall see how she reacts."

"And what if she stands by your accusations and rejects me once more?" Hurst asked.

"Then you will have lost nothing," Mr Reynolds pointed out. "Do you really have so little faith in her, son?"

"No," Hurst bowed his head. "If anything its myself I no longer have faith in." He turned to lean on the desk, as he had done long ago, when the truth was first revealed to Mrs Reynolds, that desolate evening. "Did I lose my mind when those scoundrels threw me in the river, Edmund?"

Mr Reynolds stepped forward and put an arm about his shoulders. "No, my son, you lost your heart, when you set eyes upon your intended. And when she learns the truth, when the time is right, she will understand." He gave the shoulders a comforting clasp. "These things were sent to try us, son. We would not be worthy of the rewards bestowed if nothing test our strength or our faith."

Elizabeth, on her way through the entrance hall into the breakfast room the next morning, witnessed Mr Reynolds pacing his study, mumbling something in audible and therefore intelligible to himself, a storm cloud splayed across his face, one hand pounding a fist into the palm of the other, and inwardly grew fearful of what could be troubling the man at this early hour.

When he joined them for breakfast, an uncomfortable silence settling over the room as he did so, he ate with only his fork, drumming his knife against the china with an ominous tattoo, a black look directed at Mr Hurst. Nothing could cease his actions, nor rouse him into conversation, not that Mrs Reynolds or Elizabeth wished to make him speak, fearful for what reply might be wrenched from his mouth if they did so.

The Secretary stood the tension for as long as he dared before rising from his chair and with a bow directed to the ladies, quitting the breakfast room. Instantly the tattoo ceased, leaving Elizabeth and Mrs Reynolds no doubt as to who was the cause of his distemper, if the black look had not betrayed such information before. Elizabeth could only speculate as to what Mr Hurst could have done to rouse his employer's wrath.

She knew Hurst was trying to bear with the changing character of his employer, possibly - she dared to hope sometimes - for the sake of being with her. Since their visit to Pemberley, she had gown flattered by such consideration, by his quiet, gentlemanlike manner, in contrast to such behaviour shown from his employer, whose character seemed to worsen by the hour. It caused her to wonder afresh whether she really belonged here, or in the simple comforts of her father's house, loved for who she was, as opposed to what money could make her.

Moments after she and Mrs Reynolds finished they meal, Mr Reynolds summoned them to his study, where he and the secretary were waiting, in stances similar to when the employer announced what wages he was to give the man, and threatened to have a bell hung from this room to Hurst's, in order to summon him whenever the whim arose.

His wife took her usual seat and retrieved her usual piece of needlework with which to occupy her hands. Elizabeth hung back by the door, wary of the look which Mr Reynolds was directing at her, and the way Mr Hurst was facing him, his expression as if he were about to do battle with someone.

"Come in, Elizabeth, my dear," Mr Reynolds urged, moving from his stance by the desk to take her arm and usher her further into the confines of the parlour. "Do not be alarmed, my dear. We are here to see you righted."
Elizabeth frowned at the choice of words, for she was not aware that anything had taken place that was deemed to have wronged her "See me righted? Sir?"

Reynolds nodded, guiding her to take a seat beside his wife, before he turned to face Hurst, who regarded him with his head held high. "Now sir. Consider this young lady?"

"I do sir," Hurst replied.

Too late did Elizabeth realised what was about to occur. With those words let lose from Mr Hurst, as solemn as a wedding vow, the full nature of the wrong done to her was revealed. She was powerless to prevent it, nor the event which would undoubtedly follow. All she could do was listen and observe as everything unfolded before her.

"How dare you tamper with this young lady!" Reynolds cried, the force of his protest causing everyone within the room to flinch as if struck. "How dare you come out of your station to pester this young lady with your impudent proposals. This lady was far above you. This young woman was looking about the market for a good bid. She wasn't about to be snapped up by fellows that had no money to buy with."

When she was first sensible of the feelings which Mr Hurst had harboured for her, Elizabeth would have supported the claims Mr Reynolds was making now. But time had begun to soften her miserly ambitions, to temper her bitterness, reverting her character to the young woman who lived within herself as she rambled about the Longbourn estate. The one who desired that nothing but the very deepest love tempted her into matrimony. Who realised that never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him now, when all love must be in vain. She felt her power sinking, as everything must sink under such a humiliating assurance of the deepest disgrace. Appealing to Mr Reynolds for leniency in this was pointless, so she turned to his wife. "Mrs Reynolds...."

"My dear," that lady interrupted, her voice and gaze full of tears, her nerves close to hysterics, "I can't let,"

"Old lady, you hold your tongue!" Mr Reynolds shouted at his wife, quelling her into an even greater sorrowful silence. "Now Elizabeth, don't you be put out. I'll right you."

"But you don't," Elizabeth cried, causing Hurst to briefly direct his gaze away from his employer to her fine eyes, a hope beginning to burn within his breast. "You don't right me, you wrong me!"

Mr Reynolds ignored the pleas of his ward, turning his full attention on to Hurst, who faced him proudly, unwilling to give way. "This lady did herself tell you of your presumption did she not?!!"

In desperation did Elizabeth seized on this query, hoping she could persuade Hurst with a pleading look to deny his previous avowals. "Did I Mr Hurst? Did I?"

But disguise of any sort was his abhorrence, though an irony such a principle was just now, yet in this he would speak nothing but the truth. "Do not be distressed, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth turned back to Mr Reynolds,. "But I've asked him to forgive me since and would again now if it would spare him." The sorrow in her voice along with Mrs Reynolds's general distress over this matter, caused all restraint on that lady's grief to be lost.

"Old lady, stop that noise!" Mr Reynolds shouted at his wife before he continued, his wrath redirected once again on his wayward employee. "Now what have you got to say for yourself?"

"My interest in Miss Bennet began the moment I saw her," Hurst revealed, his gaze not on his employer now, but on the woman he loved. "Even before."
"H’m. This is a longer scheme than I thought," Mr Reynolds mused. "He gets to know about me and my property, about Elizabeth and the part she played in poor William Darcy's story and he says to himself ’ah, I'll get in with Reynolds and my ship will come well and truly in.'" Mr Reynolds turned to Elizabeth with a smug expression. "But he didn't know who he was dealing with, did he, Elizabeth, my dear? He thought to squeeze money out of us. And he’s done for himself instead."

"I have borne my position here so that I might not be separated from Miss Bennet," Hurst continued, ignoring Mr Reynolds's untrue and unfounded accusations, continuing to direct his gaze to Elizabeth, who as he spoke, listened with a heart and mind that somehow rejoiced while at the same time despaired. "And since she rejected me I have not urged my suit with one syllable or look. But my devotion to her has not changed, except that now it is deeper and better founded. My feeling for Miss Bennet is not one to be ashamed of. I love her. And when I leave her in this house I go into a blank life."

"Let me assist you into that blank life," Mr Reynolds remarked contemptibly, dropping a pile of notes on the floor in front of Mr Hurst. "I dare say you can stoop to pick it up after what you've stoop to here."

Mr Hurst went down on one knee to collect the money. "I have stooped for nothing but this. And it is mine for I have earned it by the hardest of labours."

"You're a pretty quick packer, I hope," Mr Reynolds added smugly as his former employee rose up from the floor, the pile of notes in his hand.

Mr Hurst nodded, even deigning to give a bow of respect to his former master. "You shall have no fear of my lingering."

"One thing before you go," Mr Reynolds said, causing the young man to blink, and Elizabeth to flush as he attributed more falsehood upon her character. "You pretend to have a mighty affection for this lady but what is due to this young lady is money and the young lady knows that very well. This young lady only wants money and that is the end of it."

"You slander the young lady," Mr Hurst replied, rising to her defence before she could speak aloud such assurances herself.

"You slander her," Mr Reynolds countered forcibly and angrily. "It's money she makes a bid for, money, money, money!"

Mr Hurst chose not to respond to that last claim, and turned to the ladies. "Mrs Reynolds, for your delicate and unwavering kindness, I thank you." His gaze moved to Elizabeth, inwardly wondering if this would change anything, longing to take her into his arms and wipe the grief away from her face. "Miss Bennet, goodbye."

Elizabeth watched him take the short walk to the door and could bear it no longer. She rose from her seat and joined him there, her words causing him to halt the act of reaching to clasp the handle, turn and open the edifice. "Oh God, make me poor again! Someone, I beg, or my heart will break!" She turned to Mr Reynolds, slowly walking towards him, as Hurst listened her, still facing the door, scarcely able to hope. "Don't give me money, Mr Reynolds, I don't want money. Oh God, help me!"

"There, there, my dear," Mr Reynolds remarked in a warm tone. "It's all right, you're righted now. It's all right."

"I hate you," Elizabeth declared, making him pause and blink. "I've heard you with shame, for myself and for you. I am afraid that you have become a monster!." She turned from him and returned
to Mr Hurst's side, who held his breath at her words, his eyes scarcely able to meet her gaze. "Mr Hurst, I'm deeply sorry for the reproaches you've borne on my account. I earnestly and truly beg your pardon. The only fault you should admit to is that you laid yourself open to be slighted by a worldly, shallow girl whose head was turned and was quite unable to rise to what you offered."

Tears threatened to conquer her at the last, causing him to take her hands tenderly in his own and raise them to his lips, pressing a soft kiss upon the pale skin of each. Then with one last look to her he opened the door and parted from her side.

Elizabeth watched him go, the mark of his lips on her hands awakening a mixture of feelings, too overwhelmed with grief at present to define. "Oh, Mrs Reynolds!" she cried in tone that once perhaps resembled that of her mother when disappointed of a scheme, going to her, and falling into her comforting arms.

Mrs Reynolds held her close, and glanced up at her husband, who met her look with a eloquent one of his own, offering a heartfelt apology in view of the grief which he had just put her, the girl in her arms, and the young man in the process of leaving the premises through. With one glance she forgave him, knowing the show had been necessary, for the future contentment of all concerned. There was also a silent hope with both of their breasts, as they prayed that this little performance of slighting and oppression, engineered by the schemes of one avaricious couple, would serve to thwart their plans, while bestowing a long awaited happiness to another.

"You vicious old thing!" Elizabeth cried to Mr Reynolds when her tears were spent and her emotions and mind and heart rose high to defend the actions and words of herself and the gentleman who had just left.

"Don't be rash, my dear!" Mrs Reynolds urged from her position on the sofa, all motions of comfort and support seemingly forgotten in the face of the insults thrust at her husband. "Think well what you do."

"Yes, you think well of it," her husband added from his stance behind his desk.

Elizabeth ignored the request for caution, any care or respect for the man before her having disappeared long since. She stood proudly before Mr Reynolds, a scheming young miss no longer, instead an avenging angel. "Your money has turned you to marble. You are a hard hearted old miser, who is wholly undeserving of the man you have just lost."

"What? You'd set Hurst against me?" Mr Reynolds scoffed as if the idea that a man with barely a penny to his name could be superior to him was preposterous.

"He is worth a million of you," Elizabeth avowed.

"Ah, yes I'm sure," uttered Mr Reynolds, taking her hand to clasp in his as he tried to coax some sense into her. "Now listen, I'm not angry, I'll overlook this."

"No," Elizabeth declared, wrenching her hands from his grasp, raising them to skies as if to warn him off her. "I must go home for good."

Mr Reynolds stayed her hand. "Now, don't do what you can't undo. Stay where you are and all's well. Go away and you can never come back. If you leave us like this you can't expect me to settle any money on you. Be careful, Elizabeth. Not one brass farthing!"

Elizabeth nodded, wrenching her hands free of him, exiting the room. She headed for the stairs, ascended, then walked to her room, where she opened one of the armoires and retrieved her small
travel bag, together with the simple country dresses she had worn when she first came to the
Reynolds's. Her fine eyes caught sight of the rich muslin she now wore in the large ornate mirror, the
silks in the wardrobes, the gemstones upon her dresser. How she had once longed to see such things,
and know they belonged to her.

Now the sight of them sickened her. She realised all her opinions on finding an establishment, on
marrying for money, were no more her own now than they had been when the past granted her such
an idle fancy. A chance encounter in her youth caused her to take for granted that she would attract a
man who possessed those qualities, as well as her mother's influence and continued instruction. She
had sworn to marry for nothing but the deepest love, when she knew that the chance encounter
would prevent such a vow from ever being carried out. And now that such a freedom was granted to
her by the drowning of that chance, she surrendered to the desire for financial security, knowing past
experience taught her nothing was certain, causing her to refuse a man whom she could no longer
deny that she cared a great deal for.

Mr Hurst may be worth a million of Mr Reynolds, but Elizabeth was no longer certain that she was
worthy of his regard, indeed if she were superior to him in any way. While she professed opinions
which were not her own, he had remained steadfast and constant in his affection for her. He may not
have urged his suit with words or looks, but his desire to encourage their friendship, their
companionship, had resulted in her change of feelings regarding him. That he had fallen in love with
her in the first place was astonishing, for their early acquaintance was hardly begun under the best of
terms; she determined take offence at his every action, he continually trying to figure her out.

Idly she glanced at the riches of her current life once more, her eyes fixing on her timepiece and
noting the hour. Doubtless Mr Hurst had returned to his lodgings by now, at her father's house. Had
he hoped she would follow him after his dismissal from here, she asked herself, which caused her to
speculate as to whether she should. Mr Reynolds had threatened her in such a manner as for her to
understand that, presuming she stayed here, relations between them would never quite be the same.
The situation would cause her to be uncomfortable both here and in society, thus eliminating any
chance of finding someone else to love as much as she might Mr Hurst.

Which only left her one alternative. Silently she changed into one of the country gowns, then packed
everything else she had brought from Holloway before leaving the room, carrying case in hand, a
note upon her dresser addressed to Mrs Reynolds, thanking her for her kindness to herself and to
Jane throughout their stay.

As she approached the offices of her father's work, she felt a little of her previous doubts, fears and
shame returning. Seeing him apparently content in his position, knowing that her words might
trouble him as she had done the last time she arrived to see him, this time without the assurance that
she would be welcomed back at his home.

However, of these anxieties she was soon easily rid; her father only had to look up, catch the rather
pensive expression on her face, observe the travelling bag within her hand, and he was outside in the
street before her.

"Elizabeth, I am glad to see you. Have you come for a holiday?" He asked as he sought to confirm
his deductions.

"No, I have come to my senses, father. Am I able to return?" She inquired softly.

"Of course, my dear," he replied, and with a signal to one of his colleagues, he took hold of her free
hand and escorted her home.

In an effort to make her feel comfortable he amiably informed her of all that had occurred within her
family's life since her last visit, so that by the time they turned into the street on which the house was located, Elizabeth felt able to tease him as she used to.

"I suppose Kitty has abducted my room in my absence, having declared a preference for it more than once when I was at home?"

"Indeed, she has, my dear, but I'm sure she will make way." He turned to her with a gentle, loving smile. "You have been quite missed by all of us, Lizzy."

They came closer to the house, when a door could be heard to close somewhat violently, causing them to halt in the street as the one above the raised entrance opened, and Mr Hurst ran out.

Elizabeth had scarcely time to realise his intent before he was standing in front of her, striving to speak and catch his breath at the same time, a joyful yet hopeful smile gracing his open mouth.

"My dear girl," he uttered before taking both her and her father by surprise as he embraced her. "My gallant, courageous and noble Elizabeth." He drew back to gaze into her eyes, anxiously seeking confirmation. "You are my love?"

Elizabeth smiled at him, as she chose to answer at once, rather than taking a moment to savour this second and previously thought impossible proposal. "Well I suppose I am, if you think me worth the taking."

His reply was such as a man violently in love can be supposed of taking, with a father and open street to witness. A hug which though was sensible, rendered appropriate to occasion by pressing his lips to her hair, as he closed his eyes in silent relief that part of his desires since he returned to life were now accomplished.

The rest depended entirely on the goodwill and cooperation of others.
Part 24.

Later that evening, when all the fuss from Mrs Bennet's highly strung disappointed nerves, caused by another daughter ruining and squandering all her hopes of an excellent marriage in returning home and the distemper of Kitty from being forced to make way for her sister, had worn out conversation and put them both to bed, Mr Bennet joined his soon to be son in law for a drink and some conversation in his lodgings.

"I imagine, sir, that this has surprised you," Mr Hurst remarked after the first sip of port passed their lips.

"You imagine quite astutely," Mr Bennet replied. "In fact, it would be difficult to do otherwise. I must confess that I am wondering how all this came about, though presumably the two of you spent a lot of time together at the Reynolds's?"

"We, did, sir." Mr Hurst confirmed.

"Given your somewhat early return here, followed by my daughter, I take it that Mr Reynolds has dismissed you from his employ," Mr Bennet further deduced. "So my next inquiry is how do you expect to provide for my daughter."

Hurst's hand halted in mid journey to his mouth, and he took a deep breath as he returned the glass to the table. "This is why I wanted to see you privately, sir. I know how much Elizabeth cares for you, which makes it important to me that I have your blessing as to how events proceed now. The simple answer to your inquiry is that I can provide for your daughter far more than my public financial situation would testify."

Mr Bennet raised a eyebrow. "And the complicated answer?"

Hurst met his gaze solemnly, before relating every article he had confided to the Reynolds's previously. When he reached the end of his tale, he raised the port to his lips to slake his thirst, and quietly observed his soon to be father in law's features, waiting for his vocal reaction.

"Well, you have certainly proved my private theory that the husband of my favourite daughter would surprise me," Mr Bennet remarked. "However, your story has assured me than you can provide for her. My only concern now is why you have not chosen to confide in Elizabeth concerning all this?"

"I am worried about her reaction," Hurst replied. "I know how much she disliked the position of being left in a Will to me. I am afraid that she will choose to overlook that I chose this course in order for us to have a chance to find happiness, instead of hating me for the deception." He took another sip of his drink. "There is also the matter of Wickham."

Mr Bennet frowned. "The one whose wife caused this early conclusion to your unusual courtship of my daughter?"

"No, the Wickham who I speak of is his father." Hurst drained his glass and poured another, inwardly surprised that he was about to confide so much of his troubles in a man soon to be his father in law. How was it that when it came to telling Elizabeth that he was so terrified of her reaction, when here he sat telling her father all? He put the query aside and continued his tale.

"Old Wickham is the grandson of my grandfather's steward at Pemberley. He followed his father into
soldiery, but unlike him, survived the battlefields on which he served, though not without injury. Having worked on the estate all his life, Mr Reynolds has known of the long standing history between my family and that of the Wickhams. Past intrigues of his ancestors caused us to become distant relations. When he discovered that Wickham was getting his living on the streets, his charitable nature decided to help him to a position; namely in charge of the dust mounds that my father built his fortune on. During his employ there, Wickham happened to see Mr Reynolds hide something which consequently he found and now intends to blackmail Reynolds with, his motive being to accomplish revenge of my family where so many of his antecedents have failed."

Mr Bennet studied the man before him. "How do you know he intends to blackmail you and Mr Reynolds?"

"When I asked Mr Reynolds to retrieve the piece of paper, he was unable to find it in the place he had left it. And the Wickhams have a history of blackmailing anyone connected with the Darcy family for their own nefarious advantage."

"Will this piece of blackmail have any consequence on you and Elizabeth, if made public?" Mr Bennet asked.

"None whatsoever, sir, for Mr Reynolds and I do not intend to provide Wickham with such an opportunity."

"In that case I wish you god speed in the matter," Mr Bennet said, stretching his glass forward for a refill. "As to your fears, I assume that you do intend to tell my daughter the full worth of what she is entitled to sooner rather than later?"

"You made assured that I will, sir, once I find the courage," Hurst answered. He took another sip of his drink before venturing more. "I confess, sir, that I find myself relieved at your reaction to all of this intrigue, particularly with regards to your daughter's ignorance."

"I find that I approve of you," Mr Bennet replied. "And, as you shall discover, sir, when I approve of someone, I take delight in finding out whatever articles of wit or oddity they seem to possess."

Elizabeth awoke early the next morning, half inclined to wonder if all that had occurred to her was nothing more than the result of a long sleep. Confirmation lay waiting for her in the form of a note by her beside, in her father's scrawl, saying that he wished her and Mr Hurst every happiness. The postscript included a request from her fiancee, asking if she would join him in his lodgings so as they might reach agreement over a wedding date. The coupled words caught her a little by surprise, it had not occurred her until this moment that her agreeing to marry him would entail a wedding. Finishing her ablutions, she walked to the window and surveyed the familiar street of her second home without any focus on its features, except as her recollections of her routine spent in this building. Silently she remembered her days filled quietly reading or mending, helping her mother and her sister in an effort to console their sorrow concerning the change in their circumstances. While she had missed them, a part of her had no desire to return to such a routine for a great length of time. Calling upon her imagination, she speculated as to what her married life might entail. The prospect of time spent in a house by herself with none but Mr Hurst for company did not seem altogether evil, indeed she found the idea very attractive. A frown caressed her face when she remembered that he lodged in the rooms above, and, as far as she was aware, little in the way of funds to afford them somewhere else. Not that she disliked the lodgings, indeed she had helped her mother fit them up before they were advertised. Still, she had hoped that her married life would not begin in such close proximity to her family.
None of these wonderings would be resolved however, without some consultation with her future husband, she realised. Removing herself from the window, she went to look for him.

She found him where her father's note said he would be, waiting in the principal room of his lodgings, a selection of breakfast foods, along with tea and coffee adorning the small circular table before him. He was seated in an arm chair, an open book resting in one hand, his eyes instantly removing themselves from the pages upon her entrance.

"Good morning, Elizabeth," he uttered, closing the book and rising from his place to welcome her. "Shall I take the sight of you this morning as confirmation that you are not offended by presumption to ask you to meet with me?"

"Why should I be?" Elizabeth countered as she neared him, taking the hand he proffered. "We are engaged after all."

"Yes, but does that allow to meet in my lodgings without a chaperone at so early an hour?" he queried.

She took a step back towards the door. "Sir, if indeed you are so concerned as to proprieties, there lies an easy remedy. I am sure it will not take too much time to rouse my father from his bed."

"Only if you wish it," he replied.

Elizabeth smiled and shook her head. "No, I believe I can trust us to behave within the boundaries of society. And I have some inquiries sir, that my father may not wish to hear the answer for, if he is to lose a lodger and daughter at once."

"I took the liberty of informing him of such last night," Hurst replied, resuming his seat once more and gesturing with an eloquent look and hand for Elizabeth to take the other nearby. "As to the question which follows such an answer, I assure I do have enough money put by to provide us with somewhere to live, dependent on your approval of the place of course."

"And as to our living there, will you be able to find another position?" Elizabeth asked. "I suppose neither of us can ask the Reynolds's for references."

"I gained my position with Mr Reynolds without a reference," Hurst remarked, "but I cannot suppose another employer to be so eager not to hold such a lack against me. All I can promise you, my love, is that I will endeavour to find a means of providing for us, as quickly as society will allow me."

"What about the wedding?" Elizabeth asked. "I must confess, until your note, I had forgot such a ceremony was needed."

"That can take place as soon as a licence is procured, and a date is fixed between us," he replied, glancing at her.

"In that case, why not as soon as possible?" Elizabeth asked.

He smiled at her eagerness. "You do not wish to spend some time with your family?"

"With my father, yes, I shall be glad to mend the relationship between us. But as for my mother and Kitty," Elizabeth sighed. "I would rather not be a burden to them. I fear the sight of me would cause them to wonder why I gave up such an advantageous station in favour of a man with little but character to recommend himself."
"Then I shall sort out the licence today," he replied, before he gestured to the food before them both, whereupon they proceeded to break their fast.

So it came that one morning Elizabeth and her father stole out of the house in Holloway, to a church where Hurst awaited, a bunch of wildflowers in his hand, gathered in the dawn hours to fulfil the task of being his bride's bouquet.

The priest exited the church upon arrival of the intended couple and in law, his gentle voice opening the ceremonial rituals of welcoming them into the marriage state, reminding them of the reasons such a union was formalised and obtaining their vows to commit to each other for richer, for poorer, for better or for worse, until death did they part.

All ceremony at an end, Mr Bennet threw petals about them as Hurst drew his wife forward for a kiss more intimate than that of the day when he declared his affections were unchanged, and she was driven to confess that hers were not.

The trio moved to a nearby park, where they wondered down the wide avenue arm in arm, the newlyweds passing smiles between each other, their meaning eloquent to none but themselves.

Elizabeth espied a young woman of her or her sister's age, attired in the dark weeds of mourning, with a gentleman seated on the bench beside her, his manner attentive and solicitous, answering to every appearance of a lover. She broke from her father and husband to hand the young woman her bouquet in expectation of the happy event to come, receiving a wordless smile of gratitude in return.

Further on in the park there stood a photographer, earning his means to live by taking photos of willing passers-by. Two children from the prosperous middle class were posing for their photos at present, and the trio waited for their turn to come.

The children possessed a generous and curious nature, allowing them to join in the photos, and they amused themselves by posing for various family like scenes. Then the children went, leaving the photographer to take images of the trio, then just the bride and groom, Hurst wrapping his arms around Elizabeth's waist, then Mr Bennet, Hurst and Elizabeth all by themselves.

When all the moods of such likenesses were satisfied, the trio moved to a pleasant area of grass in order to take their ease, before going home to spring their news upon an unsuspecting mother and sister in law, who would no doubt be torn between scorning the inequalities of such a match, the poor prospects that await them in the future, and disappointed that they had not been invited to attend the event.
Chapter 25

Part 25.

An announcement of the wedding made a notice in the paper, simple and discreet. 'Miss Elizabeth Bennet to marry Mr William Hurst,' without a syllable said about her who her family or where she came from. But for those who possessed an eagle eye, the notice was immediately caught and the news spread.

"To lose the ward and the secretary in one afternoon, that is extremely impudent of Mr Reynolds," Lady Catherine de Bourgh bemoaned. "What is worse is that Miss Elizabeth Bennet and that Hurst fellow have run off together." She turned to her nephew, her hapless companion at this present moment, and now a source for admonishment. "Oh really Richard, when you know the man needs counsel."

Richard Fitzwilliam shrugged. Though he learned of the news before the union was made public, it was still second hand, via Mr Reynolds, his client, who despite all reports seemed little disappointed to hear of the event. "I hardly see how I can be to blame. If two people are inclined to run off with one another, a lawyer is the last person to prevent it."

"I said no good would come of settling so much money on a dustman," Lady Catherine reminded all present, confident and proud of the strength and proof of her convictions, holding no desire to be magnanimous. "How will he protect himself from the jackals now? The man is a mere novice in the ways of the world."

These words of warning were said in the presence of two such jackals, who did their best to appear as innocent of such a low and degrading practice as any such progeny of that dubious pedigree should. Caroline exchanged a glance with her husband, causally flicked her fan, and took a sip from her glass, while George inhaled another lungful of tobacco, before affecting to maintain his previously bored and indifferent expression.

Younge looked up from his latest additions to the shop floor as the bell signalled the arrival of his comrade in crime and arms.

"So have you found anything?" He asked, studying the old squaddie curiously, searching for the merest hint of deception. "Do not attempt to conceal anything from me."

"Well man and brother and partner in feeling, equally in undertakings and actions, I have found a cashbox on the dustheap." Wickham Senior reported. "On the outside was a parchment label saying 'my Will, George Darcy, temporarily deposited here.'"

"We must know its contents," Younge remarked, in a tone still awed by the wonder of the discovery.

"That was my feeling exactly comrade, so I broke the box open," Wickham reported eagerly.

Younge froze, a suspicion of doubt entering his mind about his supposedly loyal comrade in arms and crime. "Without coming to see me first?"

"Exactly so," Wickham replied. "I was bent on surprising you, sir, before we were surprised by that rogue Reynolds. I examined the document, regularly executed, regularly witnessed. In short, he, George Darcy, leaves to Edmund Reynolds the little mound which is quite enough for him and he leaves the whole rest and residue of his property to the crown."
"The date of the will must be proved," Younge murmured, scarcely daring to believe what he was hearing. "It may be later than the one generally accepted."

The old squaddie beside him nodded triumphantly. "Exactly my thinking, comrade. I paid a shilling, mind I did not ask you for sixpence, to look up that will. It is dated months after the generally accepted one."

"I would have thought that you would have consulted your partner earlier as to a course of action," Younge remarked, glancing at his comrade with a raised brow.

Wickham was all innocence. "But sir, think of the surprise!"

Younge hesitated for a moment, then relented. "Let's see this document at last."

His companion obliged, retrieving the parchment from his dusty old rag-worn coat, placing it on the table, so that Younge could run his magnifying glass over the elaborate legal wording and attempt to translate it into layman's understanding.

"Am I correct in its content, partner?" Wickham asked.

"Partner, you are," Younge confirmed.

Wickham slapped his hands together in eager satisfaction of the bounty that was to come their way. "We'll extract a hefty payment from Reynolds to keep this secret."

Younge frowned a moment as a sudden black thought entered his mind. "What if he's honest and gives up all according to what is written legally?"

"Him?" Wickham queried, incredulous at the suggestion. "Prove honest? He's grown too fond of money for that."

"The question is, who is going to take care of this will?" Younge mused as he rolled the parchment into a cylinder. "Do you know who is going to take care of it?"

"I am?" Wickham sought to confirm.

"Oh dear, no," Younge replied. "That's a mistake. I am."

Wickham grabbed the free end of the bundled legal document and for a moment a brief struggle of possession ensued.

"Now I don't want to have any words with you," Younge remarked, "and still less do I want to have any anatomical pursuits with you."

"What do you mean?" The old squaddie asked.

Younge glared at him a little. "What I mean is that I'm on my own ground. And I'm surrounded by the trophies of my art, and my tools is very handy."

Wickham resisted for a moment, confident having served in a war and lived in the gutter that he could do some damage, until he caught sight of the unusual items for sale, placed within handy reach of the proprietor, who looked more than capable of using them to his advantage.

Reluctantly, he surrendered hold and possession of the Will.

"Now, I presume, having had the advantage of time, you have formed a view of how we should
proceed?" Younge questioned.

Wickham nodded. "Yes comrade. I propose that we wait while Reynolds clears the mounds to see if we can profit equally. And then we can use this to make him pay in money and in humiliation."

Fortune continued to favour the rogue that was Jenkinson, granting him the means and opportunity to acquire a roomy dwelling by the river, some distance upstream from the cavernous city, with leasehold of a good, hardy lock, to fund the rest of his natural life. This profession, though difficult in colder weather, granted him not just monetary gifts from those who requested passage along the river, but also information, which might prove useful to his further, future advantage.

"Lock, ho!" One of these passerbys called out as their wooden boat glided towards the solid, secure impasse.

Jenkinson rose up from his reflective pose to raise the doors, catching sight of the man's profile, and recognised him. "Mr Charles Bingley t'other governor," he murmured to himself, consideringly. "What exercises you on the river today?"

Charles Bingley guided the boat through the upward passage, then drew out the coins for payment. As he prepared to toss the fee to the lockman, he also acquired recognition. "Ah, its you is it?" He remarked, before throwing a coin. "Honest friend."

Jenkinson caught the circle of metal and answered. "Yes I'm the keeper here. No thanks to you for it, or lawyer Fitzwilliam."

"We shall save our recommendation for the next candidate," Charles replied, "the one who offers himself when you are transported or hanged. Don't be long about disappointing him, will you?"

Jenkinson glared at the carefree boater long after he had ceased to become a concern of his, watching him as he progressed up river, his mind quietly speculating if it were possible to do that lawyer some personal damage. When the boat was nothing but a speck upon the horizon, his gaze travelled amongst the hedgerows which covered the opposite bank. And there he spied another man whom he knew from the city.

"Oy there! Lock ho," he called out. "Mr Schoolteacher if I'm not mistaken. Lock ho." he cast a speculative look upon the man's profile, startled and suspicious to see a curious resemblance between them. "Well bless me t'otherest if you haven't taken to imitating me. Never thought myself so good looking before."

"These are my holidays," Collins replied, his gaze travelling from Jenkinson to the boat now far up river, his expression turning stormy.

"Well your working days must be stiff'uns if these is your holidays," Jenkinson commented. He grinned inwardly as he divined the object of the man's stare. "Don't worry. He takes it easy that one. But you know you could have outwalked him."

Collins turned back to his companion. "Would you say I'm following him?"

"I know you're following him," Jenkinson answered.

"Yes, well, I am," Collins confirmed, before seeking to move on, only for a staying hand of Jenkinson's. "He may land,..."

"Be easy," the lock keeper murmured. "He'll leave his boat behind as a marker won't he? He can't
carry it ashore under his arm."

Collins found little fault with that observation so he took a breath awhile beside the lock and river. "What did he say to you?"

Jenkinson shrugged, showing that the insults traded between him and the lawyer Bingley hardly troubled him. "Cheek. Spite. Affronts. Said I'd be better hanged."

"Damn him!" Collins swore. "Let him get ready for his fate when that comes about."

"Oh, then I make out, t'otherest, that he is going to see her," Jenkinson deduced, remembering his last conversation with the schoolteacher, concerning Jane Bennet, niece of his late partner, Gaffer Philips.

"He left London yesterday," Collins revealed sombrely. "Until now he has done nothing but torment me by walking the streets of that city. And now he suddenly ceases and leaves, taking care to do it discreetly? I have little doubt he's going to see her."

Jenkinson stilled as he observed the schoolteacher. There was a quiet deadliness about him, as if a passionate fire of dark purpose was burning deep within. "Are you that sure?"

"As sure as if it were written here," Collins replied, placing a hand over the piece of his shirt that covered his chest, where his heart beat below.

The lock keeper caught the tell tale shadows under the eyes, along with the certain hollow pallor to his face, indicating that the schoolteacher had undergone many stresses since their last passing encounter. "But you have been disappointed before, it has told on you."

"I've followed him day and night now, through the summer holidays," Collins revealed. "And I won't leave him till I've seen him with her."

"And then?" Jenkinson prompted.

Collins rose up from the grassy bank. "I'll come back to you," He retrieved a few coins from his pocket and handed them over to the rogue. "Now I must go. Though he'd have to make himself invisible before he could shake me off."

"You'll put up at the lock on your way back?" Jenkinson asked, which caused Collins to nod before he left.

"Now why did you copy my clothes, schoolmaster?" Jenkinson murmured to himself as he watched the man walk on in search of the lawyer that could lead him to a glimpse of her. "What is your plan?"

He entered his dwelling and went to the clothes chest, retrieving a red scarf, which he placed around his neck. "Now if I see him in a similar, I'll know its not by accident."

Later, as the afternoon gradually surrendered to the dusk, the sombre figure that was the schoolmaster returned to Jenkinson's dwelling by the dock. The owner awaited his return, leaning upon the bow of the lock, pipe in his mouth, the small chimney of smoke visibly indicating the coldness of season.

"He's put up for the night," Collins informed the lock keeper. "He goes on early in the morning. I'm back for a few hours."
"You need them," Jenkinson diagnosed, for the schoolmaster looked worn out, as though he had been trekking through the mountains, not an easy stroll down the river bank on the trail of a boat and its rower.

"I don't want them," Collins replied. "But if he won't lead, then I can't follow." He glanced down at the sheer, dangerous looking shaft which led to the bottom of the river and the lock. "This would be a bad pit for a man to be flung into with his hands tied."

"The gates would suck him down afore he'd have a chance of climbing out," Jenkinson observed, before darting across the narrow bridge to join the schoolmaster on the other side of the river bank.

Collins watched in admiration of his seemingly reckless manoeuvre. "Yet you run about over six inches of rotten wood. No wonder you don't fear being drowned."

"I used to," Jenkinson confessed, "but I can't be drowned now."

"You can't be drowned?" Collins echoed dubiously.

"Nah, Its well known," Jenkinson confirmed, "I've been brought back out of drowning and I can't be drowned again. You should better come along and take your rest." He led the schoolteacher into his dwelling.

Down in the city, where night was illuminated by the gas lamps adorning many a fine residential street, a dark avaricious figure stalked the brightly lit windows that belonged to the Reynolds' house.

"Honest," Wickham murmured, echoing the word his partner and comrade in crime had previously uttered that day. "He's grown to fond of money for that. What wouldn't you give me for my box? Look out for a fall, my lady dustwoman, I'm gonna have your Reynolds, I'm gonna turn him upside down and grind him down."
Chapter 26

Part 26:

There had been few times in Jane's life when she was truly scared. The first was during the year an illness came to Meryton and took two of her sisters. The second was when Mr Collins had threatened to kill Mr Bingley, causing her to run from her sister and Mr and Mrs Reynolds, from her mother, father and lastly her sister, from London, to her Aunt and Uncle in Derbyshire.

Life was such a contrast here when compared to the dusty and smoke filled town. She had forgotten how quiet the country was, how lush the greenery appeared to the sight and touch, the smell of the flowers, the sound of the birds. In Lambton she had rediscovered the quiet tranquillity that she lost when her father sold Longbourn. The Gardiner's house was by no means as large as that estate, but it was comfortable and fashionable, without leaning towards ostentatiousness, or the dark gothic style which had infected society of late. The rooms were large and airy, the few servants pleasant and hardworking, her cousins well behaved children who made her duty of looking after them a pleasure. Here she could almost forget the tragedy which had struck her and her family, indulge in a belief that she was simply vacationing with her Aunt and Uncle.

Which she did, until a few weeks before Elizabeth came to visit her. The indulgence was abruptly broken by an article in the newspaper, on the rise of industry built fortunes, using the Darcys as an example. The article included everything concerning the mysterious circumstances of the heir's death, how his body was found and by whom, bringing the full horror of that time back into Jane's mind.

It mentioned the solicitor in charge of the case, it mentioned the involvement of his friend Charles Bingley, it even included a brief postscript about her Uncle Philips' death and his only surviving son. The mere mention of Charlie caused Jane a turmoil she had not known before. It was as though she was experiencing the full horror of what Mr Collins might do to Mr Bingley for the first time. Her motive for running away returned with full force.

For days she anxiously scoured the papers, fearing to find reports of Mr Bingley being attacked, or Mr Collins connected with acts of violence. She was concerned that her absence from London would cause more tragedy than her presence there. Eventually she became reconciled to this too, and her mind returned to the quiet tranquillity she had first discovered, with the added noble cause of protecting the best man she had ever known.

Then, one day, as she walked out into the village on an errand for her Aunt, that tranquillity was once more disturbed, by the familiar sight of a figure awaiting her before a table outside the local Arms.

"Hello Jane. What a pleasant surprise," Charles remarked as he rose up from his chair in an attempt to get her to sit with him. "I was out for a day on the river." Observing her continued resistance, he resumed his previous position. "Actually I was on business and who should I find?"

For a moment Jane couldn't breathe, much less move. When she found her voice again, her first thought was for his safety. "Mr Bingley, you must leave this place instantly."

Charles regarded her solemnly. "I will. If you'll grant me an interview. A private interview. Then I will leave, I promise. I give you my word."

Jane had no choice but to comply, nodding her head, all while her mind silently wondered if Mr Collins was still in London.
Had she the foresight to glance around the outskirts of the Arms, upon the rural alleyways which led into other lanes, she would have received the answer to her question, in the shape of a shadowy figure, darkly attired, a red scarf wrapped around his neck, almost as a portent of the tragedy to come.

Jenkinson retired to the relative safety of his cottage as soon as the storm set in, seating himself by a window as he watched and waited for the return of the schoolmaster. It was dark before that creature returned, in a hurried run, caught in between flashes of lightning, as he sought the shelter of the house, bursting in through the rapidly opened and shut front door.

"You've seen him?" Jenkinson asked. "With her?"

"I have," Collins confirmed in a hoarse voice, turmoil visible in the plains of his darkly troubled visage.

"Where?" Jenkinson queried.

"Upstream," Collins replied. "His journey's end. I saw him wait for her and meet her!"

"What did you do?" Jenkinson sought to discover.

"Nothing," Collins answered desolately.

Jenkinson uttered the final part of his catechism. "What are you going to do?"

For a moment Collins had no answer. Instead he sank upon the bed, and suddenly began to retch, blood dropping from his mouth. "I don't know how this happens," he choked out when he had breath left to speak. "I can't keep it back. I taste it, I smell it, I see it and then it chokes me."

The dock keeper watched the schoolmaster as he retched again before heading back outside. Through the window, illuminated by the lightning flashes within the storm, he saw Collins tilt his head towards the sky as he sought the comfort of the rain into his mouth. After a while he turned and came back inside.

Jenkinson rose and fetched him a generous snifter of ale. "You're like a ghost."

"You asked me what I would do," murmured Collins despairingly. "I don't know! What can a man do in this state?"

Taking the ale away, Jenkinson guided the schoolmaster to the bed, where he helped him lie down. "Here. Sleep now," he uttered in soft, hypnotic tone. "Sleep. Smooth and round. And when you wake, you'll know what you have to do."

The old rogue sat at the edge of the bed for a moment, observing his sleeping guest, then with all the care of an old Charon, he rose and gently pulled at the covers about the schoolmaster's neck, to reveal a red scarf, identical to the one he had sought to attire himself in only this morning.

It was clear to him now that some part of Collins knew exactly what he would do when the lawyer Bingley met with Jane Bennet.

Charles had been wearing a path out in the grassy field upon the outskirts of the village almost from the moment he woke, having taken a brief repast at the local Arms, where he spent the night. So far his only company had been the white squat beasts that patrolled the field, otherwise known as sheep.
One gazed at him now, contentedly chewing grass, the inscrutable visage seemingly able to ask him for his judgement.

"Yes, you're stupid enough, I suppose," he answered mildly. "But if you're clever enough to get through life tolerably, then you have the better of me."

A sound of a distant rustling drew his gaze from the animal to the grate, where he observed the arrival of the woman he had been waiting for. Silently he watched her walk towards him, waiting until she was before him to speak. However, as his brown eyed gaze caught sight of her face, he realised something which almost made him abandon the meeting altogether. Of all the expressions he had imagined her to possess when he was reunited with her, terror wasn't one of them. Jane looked downright fearful of him. Sure her eyes were bright, there was a serene smile splayed across her lips, but barely hiding behind them was powerful, nearly soul consuming fear of something, and his mind could only speculate as to who or what was the source.

"I was saying to myself you were sure to come," he murmured gaily, hoping his eagerness would infect her, "even though late, as you always keep your word."

"I had to linger through the village, Mr Bingley," Jane replied, and he found himself analysing her voice, for behind the serenity, there was undercurrent of nervousness and vulnerability.

"Are the villages such scandalmongers?" Charles asked, attempting for levity, as he held out his hand in quest for hold of hers, hoping it might give her some courage.

Instead Jane flinched and stepped back. "Will you walk beside me, Mr Bingley, and not touch me?" she asked him reproachfully.

"I'll try," he replied, forlornly withdrawing his hand. She continued to keep her distance, walking slightly ahead of him. "Jane, don't be unhappy. Don't be reproachful."

"Mr Bingley, you must leave this place," she pleaded once more, turning slightly so she could see his confused and stricken face.

"Jane, you know I can't go away," he replied, refusing to be convinced by the fear in her tone, or the equally terrified expression barely concealed by her serene features.

"Why not?" She inquired, half frustrated.

"Because you won't let me," he answered, causing her to falter. "I don't mean that you design to keep me here, but you do it. You do."

For a moment, his answer reminded her of Mr Collins, when he talked of her leading him into any fire, or committing any dark deed. Self doubt arose within her mind, asking herself if it was she, however unconsciously, who caused men to act this way, rather than their natures. Yet the resolution was still the same. She had to keep her distance to protect him, whether this were true or no.

"Mr Bingley, will you listen to me while I speak to you very seriously?" She asked. When receiving only a mild inclination of his head in reply, she summoned her courage and continued. "When you said you were much surprised to see me, was it true?"

"It was not in the least true," he confessed. "I came here to find you."

She was not surprised by that answer, for in truth she had left him little alternative but to come, having paid him no farewell or let him know of her whereabouts. She bemoaned her actions back then, that final night in London when she realised she had to leave. One last conversation conveying
an excuse that her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner needed her could have prevented this encounter. "Can you imagine why I left London, Mr Bingley?"

"I'm afraid you left to get rid of me," he deduced astutely. "Not very flattering, but I'm afraid you did."

Jane halted and bowed her head, for she was ashamed to confirm his fears, as it was true, from a certain perspective. "I did."

"How could you be so cruel?" He asked her, halting behind her.

"Is there no cruelty in your being here now?" Jane countered, despairingly.

Bingley heard the grief in her voice and feared that if he walked the short distance which separated them, then turned to look upon her, he would see tears staining her beautiful complexion. "Please, don't be distressed," he begged.

Jane resolutely shook herself into a better composure, or at least an attempt of one, before she turned to face him. "What else am I to be? You put me to shame!"

Bingley saw the grief upon her face which he had descried in her voice, and abandoned the questioning in favour of confessing why he had followed her, in the hope that it would lessen her grief, as well as his own, caused by seeing her in such a state. "Oh Jane, I never thought there was a woman in the world who could affect me so much. You don't know how you haunt me, you bewilder me. You don't know how the carelessness that helps me at every other stage of my life cannot help me now, you've struck it dead. Sometimes I wish you'd struck me dead with it."

Here there was more shades of Mr Collins' speech to her. Jane drew another breath, refusing to let herself be shaken by the reference, and continued in her attempts to dissuade Mr Bingley from pursuing her. "But you must think of what you're doing," she appealed.

Think of what he was doing? Nothing else had consumed him so since his passage into adulthood. "What am I to think of?" he asked her.

"Think of me!" she cried.

Bingley sighed. Something which had consumed him so. "Tell me how not to think of you and you'll change me altogether."

"Think of me as belonging to another world from you," Jane explained. "I have no protector, except in yourself. Respect my good name. If you have feeling for me as if I were a lady then give me the full respect of a lady. I was once, until the illness that changed mine and my family's fortune, causing me to become a working girl. If you were a true gentleman..." she paused, at loss as of how to continue.

He gazed at her solemnly, realising, perhaps for the first time, how much grief he determined pursuit of her had caused. "Have I injured you so much?"

"If you don't leave me alone consider what you'll drive me to," she added.

A dark hold settled over his heart. For a moment he could not breathe, let alone speak. This conversation had left the direction he desired it to follow long ago, and now he feared that he would never be able to turn it back, or turn her. Softly, he dared to ask her, "What shall I drive you to?"

"I live here peacefully, respectfully and I am well employed by my family," Jane answered. "If you
continue to see me, you'll force me to leave here as I left London and by following me, you'll force me onwards."

A sad expression crossed his features, all but weakening her resolve. He took the final few steps which separated them to stand before her as he dared to ask another question. "Are you so determined to run away from me?"

Distressed, Jane leaned against him, her fevered forehead pressing into his own hot brow, inflamed by the stress of the conversation. Seeking some relief, gently they fell to their knees upon the soft cushioning of the grassy field, the long green tuffs flattening under their weight.

"Answer me this," he asked her tenderly, his eyes desperately searching her own in the vain hope of salvaging something positive from this encounter. "If we had been on equal terms, would you make me leave?"

"I don't know," she replied, moving to rise, anxious to bring this distressing interview towards the desired end, but his arms clasped hers, refusing to let her. "Please let me go."

"I swear I will let you go directly," he promised. "I will not follow you, but you must answer. Would you still have hated me?"

Jane shook her head at his mistaken impression, and then met his eyes for the first time as she answered him. "You know me better than that. How can I think of you as being on equal terms? That first night I met you, when you looked at me so attentively, I had to draw away. Having so looked up to you and wondered at you since that night and at first thought you to be so good as to be at all mindful of me."

Bingley searched her face, inwardly struck at how upon hearing confirmation of her feelings for him, he could feel nothing but grief. "At first so good, and now so bad?"

"So good, so good," she assured him. "But our continued acquaintance is impossible. If you do feel for me the way you said this evening, then there is nothing left us in this life but separation. Heaven help you, and heaven bless you."

Their faces were so close, their hearts pounding so loud and so in tune, the next move was almost inevitable. His hands slipped upwards from her arms to the soft planes of her cheeks. Within another move, he was kissing her. To his joy she returned the gesture, giving as fiercely as he, receiving and acknowledging all that lay between them, the barriers enforced on them, parting them forever.

Resolved, Jane parted softly from his lips and drew away from him. Reluctantly, he let her go, rising to his feet only a moment after her.

"I promised I'd not follow you but, shall I keep you in view at least?" he asked, with a slight gesture to the late afternoon light that now surrounded them. "It grows dark."

Jane shook her head, for she feared he would follow her to her Uncle's house and call upon her in the morning. Her Uncle Gardiner was an early riser and would not rest until he and thus Mr Bingley, learned why his niece refused to see a gentleman lawyer who desired to pay a call on her. "I am used to being alone at this hour. Please do not."

Charles bowed his head in compliance with her request. "I promise. Jane, I can promise you no more tonight, except I will try to do as you wish."

The thought of encountering him again as she walked into the village tomorrow, or indeed any day after this, filled her with the same dread as refusing to see him in her Uncle's house. Not just dread
for her, but for his continued safety, after all, it was entirely possible that where he had managed to trace her, so had Mr Collins. "You will spare yourself and me, if you leave this place tomorrow morning," she added.

"I will try," he replied, inwardly knowing that it would be a failed attempt. Silently he watched her go, waiting until her figure faded from his vision before he turned away, walking towards the river.

"Oh Richard," he uttered, wishing his friend were here to console and catechise him in his usual manner, "who could believe this ridiculous position. And yet I've gained a wonderful power over her," he realised. "She loves me. She is so earnest, she will be earnest in that passion. We must both follow our natures, and we must both pay for them."

He stopped for a moment as he considered his next move. "Now suppose I married her. Impossible. And yet I should like to meet the fellow who could tell me I do not love her for her true beauty and warmth, and in spite of myself, I'd not be true to her."

Shaking his head, he resumed his wandering, he mused as to his distant friend's opinion of this affair. "I can hear you Richard, your sorrowful voice bemoaning, 'Charles, Charles this is a bad business.' Yet I'd like to hear any fellow say a word against her."

"Yet she begs me to go away," he murmured, unable to think of any good reason that would justify such an action. "I'll not go away. I will try her again. She shall not resist me." He smiled as he imagined Fitzwilliam's response upon hearing such a resolution. 'Ah Charles, Charles, this is a bad business.'

Someone brushed past him just then, the surrounding countryside too dark now from him to make out who or what caused the altercation.

"Hello there, friend are you blind?" he asked, before returning to his more immediate dilemma. "Out of the question to leave her. Out of the question to marry her. Richard, we have reached the crisis."

Here his mental and doubtless physical wanderings would have continued, but for the sudden violence of another knocking him forcibly to the ground. Shaken, Bingley made to rise, but the other anticipated the motion and beat him back to the ground, striking him again and again, first with fists, then with a oar, until, much to his relief and the attacker's, unconsciousness claimed all his senses.

Jane had not walked far, only to the outskirts of Lambton, before her own thoughts overtook any desire to go home, causing her to turn round and take a wander in the fields on her own in an effort to reconcile her mind to another no doubt difficult meeting with Mr Bingley on the morrow. For a while she contemplated telling him the truth behind her escape to Derbyshire, her fears that if she continued to spend time with him that Mr Collins would carry through on his threat to kill him. Would he scoff at her concerns as he had done so just now, or would he take them seriously, and accede to her wishes for separation?

She wandered on for some time, without any care as to direction, and thus she was still close enough to hear the crash of waves. A shiver of dread stole over her, causing her first to halt, then turn and run towards the source of the sound, also immediately fearing and knowing who she would find.

Darkness surrounded her, threatening to blind her sight, but the river was lit by the light of a full moon, and she had her experiences from helping her Uncle with his Charon like duties to provide her with enough vision to guide her first into the waiting boat, and then out into the river.
He was lying unconscious in the middle of the stream, bloodied and bruised, his breathing slowed, a paleness haunting his complexion, indicating that his body had suffered much injury, and was certainly near death. In the darkness and due to the violence visited upon him, she could not make out his features, but in her mind and heart she knew them well, almost as well as she knew her own.

"Oh, Uncle, help me now," she pleaded to her dearly departed relative, as she hauled Mr Bingley out of the water and into the boat, their combined weight fortuitously not enough to be in danger of sinking the light yet sturdy craft, "help me make amends. Help me restore this poor soul to someone who holds him dear."

There had been few times in Jane's life when she was truly scared.

Unfortunately for all concerned would not be the last, but the first of many more to come.
We open upon a series of wakings throughout our tale, as morning conquers the fearful and violent events of the night before, the sun and blue sky casting a warmth over the green grass, country villages and estates, even the dusty, smoked filled towns of the industrial ventures, permeating through all realms of society, rich and poor, high and low, for it does not necessarily follow that one is the other, or vice versa.

No rain, either of a meteorological or metaphorical nature threatened to blot the landscape, ensuing a gentle calm after the torrid events of the night before. Up and down the rivers of Victoria's great imperial headquarters, dawn was calling people from their beds, noting who was absent and who was not, calling attention to what would face them today, what new trials lay ahead to bring torment or pleasure to their lives, or hinted perhaps at the portents to come.

Church bells from the numerous churches which occupied various areas of that aforementioned regal sovereign's great capital, greeted one of the lawyers who inhabited the quarters otherwise known as Lincoln's Inn, Grey's Inn, and Temple Bar, their chimes penetrating through the window panes into the rooms behind, calling him to rise and attend to his metaphorical lightly covered legal piece of furniture, also answering to such a descriptive name as the third of those aforementioned boroughs.

Richard Fitzwilliam abandoned all thought to attend to his usual morning ablutions, instead rising from his bed and wandering from his room to that of his friend's still in his nightshirt. A sight which he had observed for several days now, once again greeted him this morning. Crisp white sheets which adorned the bed belonging to his friend lay undisturbed, the pillows freshly plumped, without any indentation as to betray evidence that the piece of furniture had been occupied during the course of the night.

His friend had yet to return from his sight seeing jaunt. Richard's features grimaced, as his mind was forced to speculate once more on the whereabouts of his friend. Bingley had not given him a reason as to his motive for leaving the city, causing him such trepidation within his mind, a feeling which only worsened as the length of his absence continued to increase.

Richard knew that there was nothing of a legal nature which required that Bingley leave his lodgings for a time, as his friend had not been called to the Bar since before the Darcy romance, as he had taken to calling the circumstances surrounding his cousin's death. That left only matters of a personal nature calling Bingley away from the city, and since it was customary for Mr Bingley Senior, or 'most generally respected father' as Charles referred to him between themselves, to visit his son rather than summon his son to visit him, Richard was left with only one explanation as to why Bingley had left.

Jane Bennet. As the name of the young woman entered his mind, Richard's expression darkened a little further. Barely a week of her absence passed before his client Mr Reynolds called on to cease in his efforts for searching for the sister of his ward, his late cousin's intended bride, as the ward had received news from sister that indicated she was staying with their Aunt and Uncle in the country. He had informed Charles of this, thinking that to be the end of the matter. That was, until a strange visit was paid them some nights ago, by a drunken carriage driver, that Bingley had piled with three penny after three penny worth of rum until he revealed the location of that Aunt and Uncle to be Lambton, Derbyshire.

Lambton. Richard counted himself fortunate as to be familiar with the likely destination of Bingley's
sight seeing jaunt. By a strange stroke of providence, Lambton was not five miles from Pemberley, the estate that belonged to his late cousin's family. He remembered running from the boundaries of that country home to the great chestnut tree by the village Smithy every morning when he and Darcy were boys, when Darcy's grandfather was alive and his father, Richard's Uncle, let him visit the estate.

Lawrence Darcy loved children, particularly his father's namesake, and generously allowed the offspring of his and his brothers in law free rein to visit Pemberley whenever the whim took possession of them. Many a delightful summer had Richard passed, sometimes with his siblings and cousins, sometimes just his siblings or just his cousins, rambling up and down the valleys which surrounded the estate, or the villages that bordered it. Even now he could claim as intimate a knowledge of Lambton as he possessed of the villages bordering his father's estate in Matlock, or the streets of London.

Thus, if Bingley's absence continued, it would pose little difficulty as to finding him, supposing him to be in Lambton. Richard did not have to ask for directions as to the Gardiner's address, and therefore acquire the concern of Mr Reynolds, he could easily travel into the village and ask one of the inhabitants that were mutually acquainted with him and the Gardiners for the whereabouts of their niece and thus his friend. Or even just seek a room at the local Arms and wait for Bingley's return, as doubtless it was the only place where his friend would seek lodgings for the duration of his stay.

Yet, even as his mind pondered the practicalities, Richard could not help but feel a certain dread as to what might await him in Derbyshire. His mind continued to recall the disturbing evening when Bingley bribed and imbibed the carriage driver, and the hunt which followed. He could not help but think of the man who preyed upon them, the schoolmaster, following them down every street, goaded into madness by his friend, who claimed such deeds were his only solace. Richard feared that Bingley had not taken care to shake off the dogged pursuit of that schoolmaster, and that Mr Collins had followed his friend to Derbyshire.

Further downstream, in what was then the rural suburbs of Blackheath, a faded redbrick, leafy wrapped cottage with a lovely tended garden greeted the dawn far more contentedly, having no troubles to plague the occupants from the night before. It was by no means a large cottage, but neither was it a small one, possessing adequate means of accommodating a growing family, or a childless couple. The structure was sound, the roof tiled, the windows paned and inside, the walls plastered. Airy rooms, consisting of beds, kitchen, halls and three good parlours, one of which doubled as a study, occupied the interior of this cottage, furnished comfortably by the owner and his wife, with more attention to sustain-ability and warmth that any desire to appear fashionable.

It was into this cottage which Mr Hurst had carried his wife, formally, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, over the threshold after they left her father's house in Holloway. He brought the place with his savings, and the furniture from his lodgings was moved into the rooms, along with a few other pieces which the couple received in celebration of their union, from the Gardiners and the Bennets. For a time they took occasion to become accustomed to living as man and wife inside the cottage, before Hurst sought fresh employment in the city, soon finding himself a job at one of the China Houses. Today was one of the many mornings when such employment called him to rise from his bed and depart from his house and wife.

Inside the house, Elizabeth opened her eyes and turned to see the peacefully asleep figure of her husband, William Hurst, resting beside her. Asleep, he had all the appearance of a little boy, with dark curled locks of hair caressing his forehead, crying out to be ruffled by her fingers. Domesticity had settled upon them since their removal from Holloway to Blackheath, and she found herself vastly
contented, both with their comfortable arrangements and all the extraordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to their new situation.

Though her husband's gainful employment called upon her to spend many of the daylight hours alone in the house, Elizabeth found herself able to occupy and while away those hours, usually with the perusal of a novel or housekeeping or factual, historical book, or some needlework such as mending her or William's clothes, or a piece of furnishing for the house, or embellishing a handkerchief with their initials. She took great delight in the simple tasks of domesticity, such as helping their maid with the house work, cooking a meal for herself and her husband, or baking a delicacy with which to tempt their palettes.

She had never done such tasks before her marriage, for at Longbourn Mrs Bennet had made a point of her daughters being above such menial tasks that families such as the Lucases taught their offspring, before their great grandfather's knighthood and acquirement of an excess of wealth that granted them access to the highest circles of Society. Even in Holloway, Mrs Bennet had insisted that their father hire a maid of all works to cook for them, though it caused them a further stress on their now meagre finances.

Elizabeth smiled as she recalled her husband's reaction when, for the first time he arrived home, to find her putting the finishing touches to a small cake that was to be their desert that night. An expression of heartfelt delight diffused over his face, adding another attractive quality to his already handsome features. That night he had felt no need to ask her, as he usually did at least once a day, if she was happy with marrying for no wealth at all, he had known it from her flushed and delighted features as she presented to him their evening meal.

She often wondered why he felt a continual need to be reassured by her regarding such concerns, for as much as he told her that he did not doubt her word, the daily question caused her to speculate that he must have a motive, but what it was she did not know, nor could she begin to figure out. Each time she attempted such a thought provoking endeavour, she would be forced to conclude that it was a shade of his character, a solicitousness born from either nature or nurture. She could not help loving him for it, as indeed she loved him for other shades of his character, the kindness, the gentlemanlike qualities, the manners, tenderness and passion with which he loved her each day of their married life. It was no hardship to be contented by such daily, unchanging treatment, to return such loving gestures just as deeply. Over all, she was happy with her life now, able to look back on her past as she to, with a remembrance which gave her pleasure, and to continue to gaze into the future, where she saw saught but her and William's continued happiness.

Closing her eyes, for the time that required them to rise was still some distance off, she joined her husband in the nocturnal realm for another half hour or so.

In the more crowded streets of the chaotic capital, where the dust yards ruled Maiden Lane and its surrounding boroughs, a crippled squaddie woke, not to the chimes of any of London's great churches, but to another canopy of noise that was of a more industrial nature, which caused a sudden and violent awakening, as though it were a storm greeting the quiet calm of the night before.

Scrambling for his supporting crutch, it was with speed and therefore great difficulty that Wickham rose from his bed and hopped his way across the short distance over to the window. He drew back the shard of well worn material to gaze out on the hazard that was greeting him with such a violence of sound this morning.

Outside in the yard below, people were hard at work, shovelling mounds of dust and goodness knows what else into the wheelbarrows brought in to rid the yard of the source of the previous
occupant's fortune and move to more salubrious surroundings. Given the state of the yard, along with the sight of many already full wheelbarrows, it was clear that the people had been employed in clearing the mounds for many hours, and, if the quantity employed was any indication, their employer intended for the mounds to cleared as soon as humanly possible.

Wickham was incensed. Ever since he took up Mr Reynolds' offer of keeping guard on the old Bower and the mounds, he had come to view the probable fortune contained in the mounds below as his own. All his life, he had listened to his father's tales of woe, of having been disappointed of his rightful inheritance by the son of his godfather, forcing him to take a commission in the army. How such misfortune tallied with marriage to a woman who was the younger sister in law of this son was unclear, but Wickham never bothered to speculate, he was too conscious of the desire to revenge himself and his family upon that son and his descendants. When his father perished on the field of Alma, this desire overwhelmed him, but it was not until his own injuries caused by his own career in the army that he was allowed to be shipped home from the Crimea, thus in a position to fulfil that desire.

Meeting Mr Reynolds in London had not been entirely a matter of providence, he had researched the fortunes of the Darcys until he found the whereabouts of the current heir, and stationed himself in the borough to which Maiden Lane belonged, waiting for the first news of the return of that Darcy heir from Africa. When the death was published in the papers, along with the news that the Reynoldses would inherit, he followed Mr Reynolds until the man acknowledged him, whereupon he sold him his sob story of being injured out of his chosen career, thus angling himself into gainful employment. He settled into the house, confident that given enough time, he could wrangle his own fortune out of the mounds, thus depriving the Reynoldses of further profit, and revenging himself on his grandfather's employers.

When he found the Will, dated later than the one recognised, that intended all the fortune to go to the Crown, he was further incensed against a man like Mr Reynolds, who had the nerve to grab such a fortune that the country was entitled to. He felt, as a man who once served in her Majesty's army, that he had a duty to deprive Mr Reynolds of this fortune. That this Will, and, consequently the fortune, was his just reward for all the injustice which his forefathers had endured. And now, to see the mounds in the process of being cleared away, without any warning, or indeed so much as a by your leave, before he had a chance to profit from them, or proposition Mr Reynolds, it was enough to make him considerably angry. He felt all the injustice visited upon his father descending upon him afresh, overwhelming his senses, causing him to fume.

For a good ten minutes he stood before the window of his bedroom, gazing out upon the yard, fuming as he watched the people steadily clear the mounds away. Abruptly, a sudden calm settled over him, as his military mind awoke within him, and he began to realise the practicalities of time. Despite the size of the people employed and diligence in which they carried out their work, it would still take many days before the yard was completely clear of the mounds. Thus he had time to visit Mr Reynolds and put the man's nose to the grindstone. He would also have the advantage then, of Mr Reynolds acquiring more money due to the clearance of the mounds, thus granting him the opportunity to profit even further from his proposition.

"Clear the mounds, clear off the evidence!" Wickham crackled once he finished his ruminations. "It won't make any difference. I'll have you Reynolds. Your destiny is downfall and I'm the one whose destined to bring you down."

Up river, in the lock keeper's cottage that was situated upon the lock just outside Lambton, Jenkinson woke from his sleep to discover that the guest bed was empty. Not only that, it displayed little evidence that it had ever been occupied during the night. Rising from his own bed, he attended his
ablutions, dressed, and exited his humble abode to discover that his house guest who had evidently quitted the cottage when he fell asleep, had passed his nocturnal slumber on the grass outside. Silently he abandoned his morning exercise, usually consisting of a stroll with his pipe down to the village and back, and walked over to observe the changes as to ascertain where the schoolmaster might have been.

Mr Collins lay upon his back across a small stretch of grass that lay between the hedgerows and the river. His complexion was flush, almost fevered, with the added stains of mud, grass and blood, spread across not only his face, but his hands and the part of his chest where the shirt was open to give himself the freedom to breathe. The very sight of such an open shirt suggested another observation to deduce, that his struggle to breathe had been caused by an altercation that required such clothing to be undone.

Such speculation was further evidenced by the overall state of his clothes, for aside from being worn by the usual wear and tear caused by wearing, they also possessed the appearance of having being in an altercation, stained with mud, grass, blood and sweat. There was also another dampness, which was different from the stains of sweat, as it was colourless against the faded white cotton shirt. Such dissimilarity was not easily distinguishable to the common observer, but then Jenkinson never thought so humbly of himself to consider his observations as anything out of the common way.

About the neck there was also a large circular bruise, caused no doubt by something, or someone for that matter, pulling at the red scarf which the schoolmaster had tied about himself, in what Jenkinson was convinced was a deliberate attempt to frame him for any dark actions that the schoolmaster decided to commit.

"He's been hung on to pretty tight," Jenkinson observed aloud, for Mr Collins was sleeping the heavy sleep of someone exhausted and unlikely to be disturbed by speech, providing such speech was not unduly loud. "He's been in the grass, and he's been in the water." For Jenkinson, having been raised by a career in the many occupations involving the river, knew the difference between sweat and water stains when he saw them. "And he's spotted and I know with what. And I know with whose."

Within the village of Lambton, in the locals Arms, a distressful scene was to be met by the local physician, as he arrived that morning, having been summoned from his home and his family only minutes ago. A local man, he was the latest of his forefathers to have been born and raised in the village, and in the profession which he chose to train for. He was blessed with a natural compassion when it came to dealing with patients and those closest to them, that was only enhanced by his medical training. There were few people in the village and outside it that could not speak well of his affability and ability to tend to the sick.

The scene which caused him distress was the sight of a young woman, cradling a man in her arms, a man who was bloodied and bruised, and, given the condition of his general appearance alone, looked miraculous to have survived the night.

Gently he crouched beside the young woman who held the man, silently surveying the severe damage which had been visited upon his body as he asked the occupants within the room a question. "Who brought him in?"

"I did sir," the young woman beside him replied, causing him to blink as he took a fresh impression of her.

"You, my dear?" he murmured, amazed, as he observed her slender figure, and stricken countenance. Despite her clothes, she looked for all the world to be a daughter of gentleman, or at
least a comfortable merchant, not belonging to the circles that used their fists to settle disputes, which the man in her arms looked to be the victim of. "You could not lift, far less carry, his weight."

"I think I could not, sir, but I'm sure that I did," she confirmed.

The physician nodded, and moved his gaze from her face to his patient. Summoning his training, he carefully and diligently examined the injuries, ascertaining their depth, the damage to the bones, muscle and or organ situated below, and assessed what little progress the body itself had made to try and heal these wounds.

All through his exam, the young lady did not move, except to assist him in moving the patient, her slender hands tending to the man's fevered brow with a gentle, soothing caress. What concerned him even more, was the lack of response from the man himself, who continued to remain in an unconscious state as he was moved and prodded, unaware of what was taking place.

"What happened to this man?" he asked the young woman. "Were you able to see what foul act befell him?"

The young woman shook his head. "No, sir, it was dark. I was walking in the fields outside the village, and I heard a splash."

"You were out alone in the fields at night?" the physician sought to confirm. Receiving a nod, he felt it his duty to admonish the young woman for such ill thought as to her safety. "It is dangerous to be out at such an hour of the day, my child, even such a village with as good a reputation as Lambton has. You never know with what ruffians you might meet."

"I know, sir," the young woman answered. "I have lived in London, sir, and I know what horrors men or women are sometimes driven to. I am used to being awake at such an hour, and I can protect myself."

He nodded, laying a hand on her own. "Forgive me, I did not mean to cause you further distress. You were saying you heard a splash?"

"Yes. I went to the source, and I saw Mr ... Bingley lying in the river."

"Mr Bingley?" He echoed. "The gentleman told you his name?" If this man had managed to regain consciousness at some point during the night, there was hope for him yet.

"No, I knew him in London, sir. He is a lawyer, he had occasion to deal with a case involving my family. I could see he was unable to remove himself from the water, so I took the boat that I saw was lying nearby, out into the river, and fetched him aboard."

"So you retrieved him from the river and carried him to the village?" the physician concluded, and when the young woman nodded, his estimation of her rose even further.

"Sir, shall I send word to his family and friends?" the young woman asked.

For a moment the doctor hesitated in replying, for he did not wish to alarm the young woman by asking her to send for the family, leading her to conclude the worse. "It might be beneficial, my dear, if he has a friend, for word to be sent. The voices of those he holds dear could give him the strength to survive."

The young woman nodded. Rising to his feet, the doctor reluctantly parted from her and the patient, to meet the landlady who stood waiting upon the threshold of the room, to deliver his dreadful diagnosis.
"Attend to the girl," he advised the woman, who was a good and generous owner of this fine establishment, respected by parishioners and guests alike. "She must be amazingly strong at heart, but I fear that she's set her heart upon the dead."

Back at Blackheath, in the dearly situated cottage, Hurst observed his wife as they broke their fast, wondering if today he would tell her, and, seeing the contented state of her beautiful features, immediately deciding against it. Everyday he contemplated whether or not to tell her the truth, and everyday he would see her so happy that he feared to bring out news which would surely spoil the emotion, for clearly she was satisfied with what little they had now, and saw no need to desire more.

He glanced at his briefcase, packed for work at the Reynolds's, for he visited the townhouse everyday, taking care to arrive by the servants entrance so as to avoid the surveillance of Mr and Mrs Wickham, who since his dismissal had taken it upon themselves to watch the Reynolds's everyday, no doubt in expectation of the earliest opportunity to foist themselves upon them and scrounge what money they could. His glance was one of reluctance, for there was little reason for him to go to work, as he did not have to earn for their living. Indeed, the only motive he had to absence himself from the house and his wife, was in order to keep alive the deception concerning his name and his true fortune. Now that he had Elizabeth's love, there was nothing but his own fears to prevent him from telling her that they were rich, his fear that she would resent him for lying to her.

Turning his gaze from the briefcase, to the woman beside him, he caught her own eyes occupied in travelling the same path. "Is there something wrong, my love?" He asked.

"No, nothing, my love," Elizabeth replied, but not without something in her tone, which indicated that she intended to say more. "I was wondering..."

"Yes?" He encouraged, eager to answer whatever concerns she might have.

"Well, if one day I might go with you to the china house." Elizabeth looked to him, her beautiful face full of eager curiosity.

An image sprung to his mind; of her accompanying him to the Reynolds's, discovering that it was not the china house, that his real name was Darcy, the man she was promised to, like a horse, or a dog or a package, and turning from him in disgust, their marriage falling apart, caused him to rise from the table with a sudden enthusiasm for work. He had never forgot the words she said to him when he first confessed to having an interest in her, they preyed on his conscience even more so since their marriage, increasing his fears that she would spurn him when the truth was known. "I'm afraid you would find my office life in the city very boring."

Elizabeth shook her head. "No," she protested as she followed him from their kitchen into the hallway to stand before the front door, watching as he readied himself for departure and journey into the city where that office was located. "Its just, I watch you pick up your briefcase in the mornings. I do not know where you go, or what you do, with whatever is in that important looking case."

Hurst ceased his preparations to leave, in order to clasp his arms tenderly about her waist, concerned that this seemingly light-hearted teasing curiosity on her part might be out of a need for more comforts than their present situation could reasonably afforded them. "Are you bored, Elizabeth?"

"Of course not," she replied so assuredly that it convinced him such was the truth of her happiness. "Our own dear house. Spending our own dear lives together. There's so much to do, how could I be?"

"You are not regretting it?" He asked, searching her gaze. "Having married no money at all?"
Absolutely no future whatsoever!"

"You must not tease me," Elizabeth returned. "Its clear I'm being tested in some way, but you will not break me, no you won't."

He leaned forward and kissed her tenderly. Another symbol of her love, another avowal of how happy she was, in their simple lives. Would she resent the sudden influx of wealth, he wondered once more, as he walked away from her. He had promised the Reynolds's that it would not be long before he told her, but seeing her so happy every day, in their dear, little house, made him muse that it would be nice to remain in Blackheath forever, without the demands of society and responsibilities that his fortune would impose upon them. For, while it did not deprive them of the advantages of a comfortable life, this anonymity did protect them from the opinions and occupations of Society, and the duties that his estate in Derbyshire would thrust upon them, such as the welfare of his servants and his tenants.

The welfare of his servants and tenants. Acknowledgement of such duties caused him to pause in his thoughts for a moment. It was not that he doubted of the ability for Mr and Mrs Reynolds to cope with such duties, indeed it was what they had been trained for, before they moved from Derbyshire to London to be with his father while he sought his fortune. It was rather that he could not help but feel that his refusal to publicly acknowledge those duties was an act of selfishness on his part, a crime against the reputation of his ancestors who had left him this inheritance to manage. He was merely a custodian afterall, it was expected that he would not shirk such responsibilities.

He hadn't, insofar as seeing to the welfare of the tenants and servants, both at Pemberley, the townhouse in London, and the numerous other cares of the Darcy estate, but he had not let it be known that he was a Darcy, and responsible for their welfare. It was a minor distinction, but a distinction nonetheless. In the desire to protect himself and Elizabeth, had he neglected the welfare of all those under his care and employ? It was a disturbing thought, and one which he resolved to ask Mr Reynolds about, during the course of the day.

Jenkinson clung to the shadows of the hedgerows that bordered the environs of the lock and his cottage, as he watched the schoolmaster rise from his deep slumber. He had spent most of the day before, sleeping beside the river, and now his body began to awaken, and rid itself of the violence it seemed to have visited on someone, in a similar manner as to what he did when he was revived from almost being drowned in the river. He stood silent, as Collins coughed himself into an awareness of his surroundings, then hurriedly attempt to brush away the evidence of how he had spent the night. This care caused Jenkinson to inwardly grin, for such concealment was useless, as he was about to inform the schoolmaster, once he sought him out.

Emerging from the hedgerows, he watched Collins attempt to hide the blood which was littered about his attire, as he walked along the lock to greet him. "Why t'otherest, I thought you been and gone and lost yourself," he remarked. "Two nights away. I almost believed you'd given me the slip. 'Cept I knows you's an honest man and a respectable schoolmaster."

Jenkinson gestured for Collins to follow him inside his house, presenting him with a table and chairs, upon which was laid some bread and cheese, enough for a meal for himself and the schoolmaster. "Eat, you must be starved after all your travelling."

"I'm not hungry," Collins protested, but the sight and smell of food was enough to alter his mind, and a violent hunger conquered him, causing him to grab a knife and attack the humble provision before him with a vengeance.

"Watch out, t'otherest, you'll cut your hand," Jenkinson remarked, and sure enough, the schoolmaster
soon did. He showed the lock keeper the wound, almost in defiance, shaking the blood from the
wound upon him, before his host fetched a cloth with which to bind the injury.

Jenkinson observed the schoolmaster carefully as Collins returned to meal, attempting to cut the
bread with a great deal more care than before, as he revealed what he knew. "Well, t'otherest, news
has gone downriver before you."

The schoolmaster froze noticeably, gripping the knife in what appeared to be fearful anticipation.
"What news?"

"Who do you think picked up the body?" Jenkinson remarked, inwardly grinning, for not only did he
know who, he also knew how much consternation this would cause to the schoolmaster. When he
saw Collins appear incapable of speech, he prompted him. "Guess."

"I'm not good at guessing anything." Collins responded resentfully, sensing a little of the glee his
host possessed, and attempting to appear unruffled by it.

"She did," Jenkinson uttered, laughing as he watched the schoolmaster blink, drop the knife in
shock, an exclamation escaping his mouth. "You did well there sir. She picked him up. She used her
skills to recover the body."

Collins sank down into a chair, a darkness visiting him. When he struck Mr Bingley, he intended for
the river to carry him some distance hence, away from the village, to claimed for dead by strangers,
who had no knowledge of his acquaintance with the lawyer. He had watched as Bingley met with
Miss Bennet, as they walked and talked, his mind reeling as they fell down upon the grass and
shared a kiss before parting. He had not dared to watch them from a vantage point where he might
hear their conversation, for fear of being seen, so he could only speculate as to what might have
passed between them. Given their kiss, he was forced to assume that they were soon to unite
themselves in the holiest of bindings.

This conclusion incensed him and caused him to remain, while she left the field, presumably for the
village, while Bingley continued to stroll in it. Then he rose from where he had hidden himself and
made his way to his rival, brushing past him before setting himself upon Bingley, attacking him.
Minutes seem to pass them by as they struggled, but he knew that it could not have been more than
one or two before he rendered him incapable of fighting back, and dumped him in the river.

During the fight, he had not given one thought as to how far the girl might have travelled. It had not
occurred to his fevered brain that she could not have gone far before he set upon Bingley. He should
have waited, followed the girl, taken the risk that Bingley would linger in the fields before seeking
his bed. But it was useless to ponder the alternatives, now that he had committed the deed. It
mattered not now that Jenkinson had referred to a body, not once saying that Bingley was still alive.
Whether the lawyer was alive or no, his fate had not changed.

As Miss Bennet had rescued him, she would know who had attacked him, for he had been too
foolish and angry that day she refused his proposal, to conceal from her his murderous intentions. He
had doomed himself almost as surely as he had doomed his enemy. And her. He said once that she
was the ruin of him. Now he had proved it utterly. "I intend to leave as the sun goes down."

"Well, t'otherest, you won't get far without something to sustain you," Jenkinson pointed out eagerly,
for he had no desire that the schoolmaster leave yet, not while there was a chance for him to confirm
why he was so bent on framing him, and what profit he could possibly gain from that. "So eat."
Chapter 28

Part 28:

While the sudden energy to clean the dust yard in Maiden Lane roused the old squaddie that was Wickham into a state, his comrade and partner that was Younge of Clerkenwell, sobered himself out of the depressed condition which the combined influences of drink and unrequited love had served to make him vulnerable to the old soldier's schemes.

As he began to return to usual self, Younge realised the evils of the schemes, and the probable cruelty it would do to the Reynolds's, of whom he had always heard nothing but good. Even from Old Darcy, when the miser was alive, there had been praise for his servants, who helped run the dust yard and raised the children he grew to hate and dispossess. And now, since the Reynolds's inherited his fortune, they were known for being all that was liberal and generous around their old neighbourhood, doing what they could to improve the living conditions of their employees.

It further deepened his guilt, the thought that he would deprive these good people of the means to continue their charitable endeavour, by entering into a partnership with Wickham. The old soldier had little planned to do with what money he could blackmail out of the Reynolds's that did not involve enriching himself.

Younge could not imagine what he would do with such a fortune, except improve his shop and the lives of people he knew. The fortune would not alter his lonely life, it would not give him the hand of the woman he loved. If knowledge of his actions were ever made public, his reputation would surely be ruined. He had no motive for this scheme other than his verbal, drunken agreement to a partnership with Wickham, whom, Younge was certain, would be glad to keep all the money to himself.

In short he had nothing to gain and everything to lose. With this in mind, Younge sent a note to the Reynolds's, with the intention of apprising Mr Reynolds of the nefarious scheme, and, if it were possible, help him keep his inheritance, thus redeeming himself from the evils Wickham colluded him into. The note was short and succinct, containing very little beyond a name, directions and the request to see Mr Reynolds at his premises in Clerkenwell as soon as possible. Younge preferred to tell the man in person of the sin about to be committed against him, it was the honourable thing to do.

"Well I lost no time," Mr Reynolds remarked when he arrived, closing the shop door behind him. "I know an urgent summons when I see it," he added, gesturing to the note he held in one hand with the other.

Mr Younge brought them both a cup of tea, courage for himself and calming for his guest, taking sip of his before he began. "Before starting, sir, I have to ask we be in confidence."

Mr Reynolds nodded. "I suppose that sounds fair."

"I have your word and honour, sir?" Mr Younge challenged.

"Good fellow, you have my word," Mr Reynolds assured him. "How you can have that without any honour, I don't know. I've sorted a lot of dust in my time. I never knew the two things go into separate heaps."

"Very true, sir, very true," Mr Younge agreed. "Mr Reynolds, I have to confess I fell into a proposal of which you were the object and oughtn't to have been. I was in a crushed state at the time, having
recently being subjected to a romantic disappointment."

"Quite so, Younge," Mr Reynolds offered understandingly.

"That proposal was a conspiracy," Mr Younge revealed, "against you, sir. I ought at once to have made it know to you, but I didn't, Mr Reynolds, and I fell into it. Not that I was ever hearty in it and I viewed myself with reproach for having turned out of the paths of science in to the path of..." he paused, seeking an appropriate name, at last settling on making his own, "....Wickhamery."

At the lock in Lambton, the schoolmaster finished eating and, having endured an atmosphere akin to a dead man being served his last meal for long enough, said a short, almost curt farewell to his host, before rising from his chair and heading for the door. Outside the greeting of the weather was little better, the cold air that signalled the onset of winter touching his skin with all the comfort of an executioner preparing him for the hangman's noose. Collins had felt the hemp close around his neck ever since Jenkinson announced what news came before him down river. The brief pleasure experienced in delivering violence upon the lawyer Bingley faded quickly in the face of such gossipping reprisals.

Doubt now resided where the pleasure had once been housed, and a larger nor more grandiose estate could not be conjured into being. Hindsight guarded the entrance to the room in which it was housed, beside memory, who replayed the act over and over again in his mind until Collins began to comprehend the depth of failure to which he had sank.

He realised now, that he had let his passionate nature rule his better judgement. That he should not have attacked Bingley that night, but waited, until there was no possibility that someone would rescue him from the violent blow that he dealt to him. Emotion had always been his enemy, the window to his soul that harboured his hopes and dreams of archiving something better than his dreary drudge of a life. Now emotion was his hangman. He had once said to her that she would be the ruin of him, certain that she would save him from this. But because of his passion, he had let her damn him forever.

Collins was an apprentice to this craft. Murdering may need no training, but the aftermath required a mastery which he, like any first timer, lacked. Nothing had prepared him for the conflict waging within his mind, just like no one had forewarned him of the evils that would hinder his escape. He had realised that such violence required planning, demanded that he conceal not just the act but his involvement in that act, but it had not occurred to his passionate inflamed mind that such concealment might be seen through. That by choosing to pin the blame on someone else, he would lay himself open to detection. It was true what the Inspector said, that murder lay within anyone. What was also true that one murderer can usually recognise another, long before they are even aware of it.

Jenkinson was one such man. When Philips accused him of robbing a sailor, and a live sailor at that, he had known that the sailor paid the price for making such a accusation. Nor that the sailor had not been the first or by any means the last. There was the sailor who gifted him William Darcy, the young man travelling home to claim his fortune and his bride.

Jenkinson knew from the moment he met that sailor, that the seaman intended to kill William Darcy and pocket the inheritance. That was why he followed him to the lodging, waited for the sailor to attack William Darcy, and then he would attack the sailor, robbing him of the inheritance he desired to plunder. Pinning the blame on Gaffer Philips took no great craft, just as he realised now that it would take nothing from Collins to do the same to him.

So Jenkinson waited for the schoolmaster to leave the house, then quietly rose from his chair and
crept outside to follow him. Retribution was within his mind, even though he yet to have the proof required as justification. Evidence was not needed for his own peace of mind, nor for the schoolmaster's, or even the court. It was the threat of evidence, that would lead to courts which he needed in order to achieve his ends.

Without that threat, he could not profit from this act, just as he had profited from all the other murders committed in his name, albeit by his own hand. He knew that if it came to court, it would be the word of a rogue against a schoolmaster, but he also knew that would never get that far. For the schoolmaster would be too terrified to rely on his profession to prove his innocence, too consumed with the doubt and fear that his victim and his lady waited in the wings to testify against him.

With this scheme in mind did Jenkinson follow the schoolmaster, down the path that ran along side the river, far from his lock until the respectable dwelling was hidden by the greenery which surrounded hunter and prey both. Into his greenery did the rogue advance, using what pockets he could find to conceal himself when the schoolmaster abruptly halted, where from he observed his former guest divest himself of his clothes he had taken such care to make so similar to the ones Jenkinson wore, and then descend into the river.

"Not thinking of killing of yourself, schoolmaster," Jenkinson murmured, for he recalled the man's face when he told him of the news concerning the lawyer being recovered by Miss Bennet. He might not know the details of the relationship between the schoolmaster, the lawyer and Gaffer's niece, but he knew a black humour when he saw one, and Collins had worn such a murderously expression of that metaphorical garment since the news was relayed. "Not before I've squeezed the last penny out of yer!"

Instead of proving such an assumption true, and ridding the rogue of the profit he felt he deserved in payment of being framed for another murder, Collins began to wash himself, his body shivering under the assault of the cold water, causing his host some relief. No stranger to such customs of cleanliness in others, the lock keeper continued to watch as the man finished his ablutions and retrieved the clothes he had been wearing only minutes before.

He bundled them together and threw the bloodstained attire into the river, before dressing himself in his usual black school clothes, the uniform Jenkinson had seen when he first encountered the man, before he left London for his lock, receiving five shillings for his trouble of saying that he had witnessed the lawyer Bingley's kindness to Gaffer's niece.

"I see what you're doing," Jenkinson murmured, his eyes travelling the path of that bundle, knowing, thanks to his trade craft around water, where it would end up and how long he could wait to retrieve the bundle of evidence. "Trying to throw your crime on me. Well, we shall see about that, t'otherest. We shall see!"

Mr Reynolds quietly listened to everything that Mr Younge had to reveal, about the discovery of the Darcy Will among the dust heaps, the reading of it, and the quest to find out whether it was of a later date than the one officially recognised, and the plan to rob him of what they could by blackmail. He was not surprised that Wickham was behind it, but the lack of such emotion disgusted him all the more. Vindictiveness seemed to run like a hereditary disease within that family, tainting one generation after the other, settling to deprive one Darcy scion after another. The latest heir of the Darcy fortune was a deserving young man who did not need to experience more hatred than what his miserly father had already bestowed on him, causing even further grief to himself, his wife and Mr and Mrs Reynolds.

"Now look here, Younge," Mr Reynolds remarked when the tale reached the end. "If I have to buy Wickham out, I shan't buy him any cheaper for your being out of it. Might you pretend to be in it till
Wickham was brought up and then hand over to me what you'd been supposed to have pocketed?"

Mr Younge shook his head. "No, no I don't think so, sir."

"Not to make amends?" Mr Reynolds persisted.

"Well, it seems to me, the way to make amends for having got out of the square, is to get back into
the square," Mr Younge reasoned.

"And by the square you mean?" Mr Reynolds asked.

"The right, sir," Mr Younge elaborated.

Mr Reynolds sighed. "I suppose there's no doubt as to the genuineness and date of this confounded
Will?"

Mr Younge shook his head. "None whatsoever."

"And where might it be deposited?" Mr Reynolds asked.

"Its in my possession, sir," Mr Younge revealed.

"Is it?" Mr Reynolds' gaze widened. "Now for any liberal sum of money that could be agreed,
Younge, would you put it in the fire?"

"No sir I wouldn't," Mr Younge replied.

"Or give it to me?" Mr Reynolds pleaded.

"That would be the same thing," Mr Younge pointed out.

As Mr Reynolds began to despair of finding a solution to this matter, he heard the sound of singing,
from someone making their way up the road.

Younge made to destroy all evidence of the presence of his visitor, removing the tea from the table
nearby to the vicinity of the fire once more. "Hush! Here comes Wickham. Hide behind the young
alligator in the corner, and judge him for yourself." He gestured to a beast which Wickham had long
regarded with apprehension, and therefore would not care to examine more closely, thus discovering
his comrade's decision to desert the latest scheme of revenge upon the Darcys. "Get your head well
behind his smile," he instructed. "He's a little dusty, but he's very like you in tone. Are you alright,
sir?"

"Yes," Reynolds just had time to reply before Mr Younge had to shut the drapes to conceal the
animals, just as the shop bell struck, and Wickham entered.

"Partner, how's our stock in trade?" Wickham asked as he prowled the shop floor, sparing only a
glare towards the exhibits he had long since tired of seeing. "Still safe, partner? With all your friends
watching over it?"

Mr Younge noted the stress of slight fear upon the word 'friends' and inwardly breathed a sigh of
relief that his quick concealment had succeeded, before he retrieved the document and showed it to
his new visitor. "Nothing new, Mr Wickham?"

Wickham nodded angrily. "Yes, there is. That foxy old grasper and griper!"

"Mr Reynolds?" Mr Younge sought to confirm with a glance to the alligator, from which behind that
foxy old grasper and griper peered anxiously over the meeting, trying to judge in a fresh light a man he had once taken pity over and offered employment.

"Mister be blowed!" Wickham scoffed at such a title applying to the man who had disturbed him so rudely this morning. "Dusty Reynolds sends his dust carts at dawn to wake me up. He's clearing those mounds to get the better of me. When I see him put his hand in his pocket, I see him taking liberties with my money! Flesh and blood can't bear it. No I go further, a wooden leg can't bear it. His nose shall be put to the grindstone for it!"

"How shall you do that, Mr Wickham?" Younge asked, with another discreet glance in the direction of the alligator.

"I propose to insult him openly!" The old squaddie cried. "Then, if he offers a word in return, I'll say, add another one to that, you dusty old dog, and you're a beggar! I'll break him. I'll drive him. Put him in harness, bear him up tight! The harder he's driven, the higher he'll pay! And I intend to be paid highly, Mr Younge, I promise you!"

"You speak quite revengefully, Mr Wickham," Younge observed, and which Mr Reynolds noted with regret concealed behind the alligator.

Wickham shrugged as though such a motion could shake such evil emotion and notions from him. "Perhaps I've allowed myself to brood too much. Be gone dull care! I'll be seeing you afore long. But let it be fully understood that I shall not neglect bringing the grindstone to bear and putting Reynolds's nose upon it until the sparks fly off in showers."

The old squaddie left the premises, leaving Mr Younge to glance at Reynolds, who waited for the sight of the soldier to disappear from view before he emerged from behind the alligator. For quite some time did he remain in the shop with Mr Younge, as both silently contemplated how they would foil this product of vengeful scheming without laying themselves open to further losses which the law would require.

At the school in which Collins taught, the man to whom that name belonged stood before his black board, his chalk in his hand, writing down the multiplication tables for a fresh intake of boys, who sat behind tables in his classroom, waiting for his instructions. But his mind not within his body, instead it was far away from him and his pupils, and far away from London, travelling upriver towards that place where there lay evidence of the violence which he had visited on the lawyer Bingley.

When he returned to London there was more news awaiting him in the newspapers; that the lawyer was on his death bed at a local Arms, in the village of Lambton, Derbyshire. Bingley may not be wealthy man by himself, but as the heir of his wealthy, if some what unconventional father, by choosing to have his children earn the money they would inherit, he held a reputation that required such attention by the press as to whether he still lived.

Details on the nature of his attack were still sketchy, but the reporters who wrote the newspapers had the joy of making up their own version of events, with all the gruesome violence and gothic horror such an age gloried within. Nothing yet as to the identity of the attacker, but Collins knew that it was only a matter of time. For Jane Bennet had retrieved the lawyer from the river, the same woman to whom he had first made his threat of wishing violence upon Bingley, all those weeks ago.

Not once did his mind believe that Jane would keep her silence. The estate of doubt still resided within him, acquiring more and more acreage to its name as he continued to think and rethink over the act, and what he should have done, as opposed to what he did do.
If I had hit him more from behind he would not have seen me, he realised silently, his hand hovering over the board, chalk poised to write out the next sum. If I had finished the job before throwing him in the river, he would not hover between life and death as he does now. Even now, he grinds me down. Even now, she ruins me along with him.

"Sir? Sir?" A boy called him out of the dark thoughts and back to the classroom. Silently he turned round to attend to his inquiry.
Chapter 29

Part 29:

Several days passed before news of the attack would reach Jane's family members. As soon as she had the strength, she had written to Mr Fitzwilliam, who came to be with her and his friend as soon as he received the note. Richard had been devastated and shocked by the news, and at the desperate state of his friend's condition. Although he knew immediately who was responsible for this heinous crime, it did not prevent him from placing some guilt within himself, for not accompanying his friend on his journey to find Miss Bennet, or not counselling him more successfully, by persuading him to remain in London, make his peace with the schoolmaster and thus perhaps preventing this terrible violence from taking place.

All too easily did he recall the mornings he had spent wandering back and forth from his room to his friend's, hoping to see Bingley asleep in his bed only to be confronted with the then ominous reality of undisturbed sheets and an empty lodgings. Why had he not begun a search on the first morning that he noticed such a state of affairs? He was a lawyer and by no means inexperienced in these matters. Why did he adopted the manner of delaying and inactivity, the same one that he always reproached his friend for doing? It was not as if he could have wasted time searching, after all his supposition as to where his friend was likely to be proved to be the case.

With this blame and guilt in his heart did he take himself to Derbyshire and into Lambton, where such emotions only increased as he first set eyes on his friend. The physician was just leaving as he entered, and the good man delayed his departure in order to warn the lawyer that it would not be long before his friend began a journey of his own. Richard took in the sorry news as he stared at the patient, lying unresponsive in his bed, and the young woman beside it for whom his friend had risked his life to find.

There was guilt to be felt regarding her as well, for had he not promised the Reynolds's that she would be protected from the danger which sent her here in the first place? Inwardly and not for the first time, he doubted his career choice. So little had he succeeded at what was required of him by the few clients he could claim to work for.

"Miss Bennet," he began, as the young woman turned to face him. But before he could attempt to speak of his repentance, she rose from her seat to come before him and speak of her own, assuaging his altogether.

"You did nothing wrong, Mr Fitzwilliam," Jane uttered, quietly so as not to disturb the sleeping gentleman behind them. "If you need someone to blame, lay the charge at my door. It was I after all who was first warned of the violence threatened against Mr Bingley. I thought that by leaving London I would protect him, but clearly I should have stayed behind and allowed Society's natural barriers to keep his attacker at bay. My disappearance only inflamed the dangerous passionate mind of his attacker."

Richard shook his head, as the truth entered his mind at last. "No, Miss Bennet, if I am not to blame, then neither are you. How do we know what would have happened if you had chosen to remain in London? Mr Collins knew where we lodged, he had warned Charles long before left town. The only person to whom we can assign blame, is the schoolmaster and he will be brought forth to account for this." He took a breath, then focused his gaze on her. "Now, is there anything that you need for your present relief?"

Jane shook her head, but Richard could clearly descry some reluctance within the motion. He
reached for her hand to press his point. "Please, Miss Bennet, you must attend to yourself as well as Charles. He will be comforted to know that you are not alone."

"I have no wish to make you leave when you have only just arrived," Jane replied.

"Ah," Richard nodded. "It is your sister, yes?" he waited for her nod, then smiled. "Then the sooner I go, the sooner I can return. In truth I should have thought to bring her with me in the first place."

Jane thanked him, then parted from his kind support to write a note for her sister, before sending him on his way once again. Richard took advantage of the age of steam, and found himself back in London within no time at all. It was almost dusk when he came upon the pretty little cottage in Blackheath and knocked for admittance.

Elizabeth Hurst frowned curiously at her visitor as she opened her door. "Mr Fitzwilliam, what brings you here to see me?"

"Pardon me, Mrs Hurst." Richard handed her the note. "You must believe me when I say that this note is from Jane."

Elizabeth glanced at the piece of paper. There was just one line and written very ill, barely recognisable as her sister's hand. Yet the words contained therein were unmistakable. *Come to the Gardiners at once, I need you so, my dear sister. "It is very short."*

"There was no time to make it longer," Richard replied sadly. "My dear friend, Charles Bingley is dying. He is dying at some distance from here, from injuries received at the hands of a villain who attacked him in the dark."

Elizabeth clutched her hand to where her clothes covered her heart, the letter creasing in her palm. "She is with him?"

"Yes, yes, she's there," Richard confirmed. "I've come straight from his bedside."

"Poor Jane," Elizabeth murmured softly. "Oh my poor Jane."

Richard gazed at her sadly. "Please come. She asked me to fetch you. We have long been much more than brothers. I know well the comfort received by the support of a sibling."

"Of course, I'll come," Elizabeth replied. "I just need a moment to write my own note, to my husband."

Her own note was just as short, yet she took care to make it as legible as she could. Leaving it somewhere William would find it, she grabbed what necessaries she might need for the journey, then joined the lawyer outside.

The ride to Derbyshire was quiet, full of deep thoughts. Richard handed her a newspaper which contained the most accurate report of the attack, and Elizabeth spent most of the carriage journey trying hard not to imagine the worse. She hadn't seen Jane since her visit to Pemberley, when she spoke of the resolve to keep herself away from Bingley, to protect him. She could only speculate as to what had changed; Bingley some how managing to discover her location, travelling up river to talk to her. Had he managed to before he was attacked? And had Collins attacked him?

The newspaper only detailed the serious extent of the injuries, nothing about who was responsible. From what little Mr Fitzwilliam had said, his friend was too near death to even contemplate identifying his attacker. And as much as she felt sorry for him, she felt far more for her sister, who was about to lose the man she loved. It would be like if Darcy had never drowned and come back to
claim her and his father's fortune, parting her and William Hurst forever. She did not know how she would deal with the loss, let alone how Jane would be if the worse happened.

It was late evening when the carriage stopped outside the local Arms in Lambton. Richard helped her down from the vehicle, then they entered the pub and took the flight of stairs up towards the room.

As she pushed open the door and caught sight of Jane by Bingley's bedside, Elizabeth felt a sigh of relief come over her.

"He's still alive," she heard herself whisper.

"If he were gone, she would still be sitting by him," Fitzwilliam replied.

Jane looked up at that moment, and with a muted cry rushed to embrace her sister, leaving her travelling companion to take her place by his friend's bedside. Richard felt as if something heavy suddenly appeared to weight itself across his shoulders as he sank into the chair and took one of Charles' hands in his.

Proximity did nothing to improve the pitiful sight. Every inch of his friend's features seemed to be covered in bruises and what little skin that threatened to show past the vivid lurid colours was devoid of the proper pallor. Richard supposed that he should be grateful that his friend had yet wake and become aware as to the desperate state of his condition. But he also knew that if Charles did not wake soon then it was entirely probable that he would not wake again.

Elizabeth meanwhile, after directing one sad glance at the two gentlemen, led her sister outside for a bit of air, knowing that the sick room often caused the sensation of suffocation if not left by those who are well for brief times. "Jane, what happened before this terrible deed took place?"

Her sister took a breath to calm herself before she relayed the events of that day when she had suddenly encountered Mr Bingley in the village, and been asked to meet with him alone for a conversation. "When I heard the splash, I knew immediately that something had happened to him, Elizabeth. I do not know how I knew, I cannot explain it. Since then I have thought over that meeting so many times, wondering if I could have somehow prevented what followed."

"Jane, you must not blame yourself for this," Elizabeth uttered as she tightened her comforting embrace around her sister. "No one could have foreseen this violence."

"But I could have, Lizzy," Jane argued. "You and I swore we would follow our hearts when it came to whom we loved. You chose to do so, and I did not. I thought too much of what society would think."

"You thought to protect Mr Bingley," Elizabeth reminded her. "Jane, there is nothing wrong in what you did. Only the man who attacked Mr Bingley is blame for this. I hope he is suffering under a conscience at last, but I fear that a man who knows how to deliver violence such as this, cannot possess one."

In London, though the city was too far from the village of Lambton for the guilty party to hear such a speech, the schoolmaster was still discovering the truth in Mrs Hurst's words. Almost from the first moment after the deed was done did he begin to suffer under a conscience. He was an educated man, he knew well the price of murder, even attempted murder for the courts paid little heed to semantics.

It was only recently however that he began to discover the price that your own mind would set upon you while you waited for the offices of justice to come to your door. Not knowing if he was to be called to account for his actions was an ignorance far more likened to hell than bliss. He had little in
his life to derive a measure of happiness from, and the future promised no relief, save death.

He wondered if he would find it easier to live if he knew that the lawyer would not, or that he would soon endure the price of his crimes. As the days passed, their hours shortening in daylight as was the custom when autumn turned to winter, a part of him began to hope that his violence would remain unpunished.

That he would be able to return to his life without suffering justice dealt by anyone except his own mind. Scholastic conscience he was accustomed to, it was something he was used to enduring. But if the words of others decided to intervene, he knew not what he might be driven to.

Abruptly the door to his classroom opened, and another master entered, disturbing him from his thoughts. Mr Collins looked up and could find nothing but pleasure from the welcome intrusion. The young man before him had prospered well since their parting, passing his exams with distinction and transferring into a school to become a master himself. Collins could not help but feel a small measure of pride at seeing such a product of his tuition establishing himself so successfully.

"Come in, Philips, come in," he beckoned, emerging from where he stood behind his desk to greet his former pupil. "Well, how is your new position?"

"Mr Collins, haven't you heard the news?" Philips asked him, brushing aside any attempts at civilities.

"What news?" Mr Collins inquired, moving to stand before his board, his hand reaching to retrieve the cleaning rag, so that he may erase the previous lesson and replace it with the one to come.

"The news about that fellow, Charles Bingley," Charlie replied, managing even now to convey the name with a sneer, and using the word fellow as if to imply that he had not ever encountered the gentleman before. "That he is killed."

Mr Collins's hand froze before the black board where previously he had been washing away the remnants of chalk. "He's dead then," he remarked before adding somewhat hurriedly, as if to counter the suspicion which might arise from his reply, "I mean, I'd heard about the outrage but I had not heard the end of it."

"Where were you when it was done?" Charlie asked. His former teacher made a gesture as if to answer, but he forestalled him. "No, stop! Don't answer that! Don't tell me! If you force your confidence upon me, Mr Collins, I'll give you up. I will. I'll have nothing to do with you!" He cried. "If your selfishness- passionate, violent and ungovernable selfishness -had any part in this attack, you've done me an injury that's never to be forgiven! By pursuing the ends of your own violent temper, you've laid me open to suspicion." He paused before querying, "is that your gratitude to me?"

Mr Collins turned from the board to face him, inwardly wondering what sort of gratitude did Philips think he was owed. Surely it was the other way round, as only one of them had profited from their meetings and it was not he. "You've no idea how long its taken me to reach this position. I did not have your natural abilities." He paused then added, "your cousin was something....."

"I've done with my cousin!" Charlie cried, cutting him off. "And I've done with you! My prospects are very good. I intend to follow them alone. Whatever happens, I hope you'll see the justice of keeping wide and clear of me. And I hope that you might think how respectable you might've been yourself," He turned and opened the door, uttering one final epithet before leaving. "And will contemplate your slighted existence!"
Collins remained still long after his former pupil had departed. He found himself disappointed by the young man's outburst. Arrogance had always been Philips' one real failing, and it was a shame that the fault had only worsened since he last saw him. But it was not his arrogance which called him to ponder on Philips' visit long after he was gone, but the words, particularly the critique on his nature, which were too true be denied.

At the local Arms in Lambton, the deathbed patient stirred from his slumbers to call out to his friend. Days had passed since his injuries were inflicted, time which Bingley could not comprehend, having been unconscious for most of them.

When he did struggle to rouse himself from that state, his labouring could only sustain him for a short burst, causing him to learn the necessity of making his words and actions count. For a man who abhorred any activity which required energy, he now wished for such a strength to exist within himself daily. "Richard..... I must.... Jane?"

Fitzwilliam immediately looked up from his novel where he had been keeping post by his friend's bedside, although in truth the leather bound volume had held little of his attention from the moment he first opened it. "I'll fetch her. She's always nearby."

Charles shook his head, the motion only causing a further strain upon his suffering, yet the seemingly incomprehensible motion was immediately understandable in the eyes of his friend. A request that what he was about to say must not be spoken in her presence. "No.... she.... this attack... Richard, this murder."

"You and I both suspect someone," Richard sought to confirm, whilst his thoughts tried desperately not to fix on the charge his friend had laid at the guilty party's door.

"He must never be brought to justice!" Charles cried in a sudden fit of energy.

Richard sighed at the adamant protest, before attempting to dissuade his friend from the refusal to seek justice for the violence visited upon him. "Charles...."

"She would be punished," his friend added before he could utter another word. "Her innocent reputation. I've injured her enough. I would have injured her more, believe me. You must not avenge me at her expense." He reached out to clutch at Richard's hand, the previously limp body part possessing some sudden strength within its muscle. "Listen to me! It was not the schoolmaster Bradley Collins. Promise me!"

Fitzwilliam gazed into his friend's eyes, and seeing that he was in earnest, reluctantly agreed to obey.

In the Reynolds's house, the good lady of that name waited at the dining table with another young woman, Mrs Wickham, while their husbands attended to a meeting concerning a business proposition. After allowing several days to pass without witnessing a return of the secretary and the ward, the couple felt that the time was right to assume the positions they had scandalised their rivals out of.

Caroline and Mr Wickham presented themselves at the house in time for nuncheon, having spent some hours outside in the carriage, checking for a final time that the Reynolds's would be alone when they visited. The vehicle also acted as a useful hiding place from the debt collectors who had begun to ask for the bills of payment for the lavish lifestyle of which the couple were fast reaching their untimely demise.
When their card was presented to the footman and they were granted admittance, the couple determined to separate their host from their hostess, and Mr Wickham was soon closeted with Mr Reynolds in his private study to present their business proposition. Caroline meanwhile took to entertain Mrs Reynolds in the breakfast parlour, imagining inwardly many a morning spent thus in this finely decorated room.

"It is true that both my secretary and my ward have proved ungrateful enough to leave me and Mrs Reynolds stranded here in this grand house all alone," Mr Reynolds asserted as he and Mr Wickham entered the parlour, considerably earlier than either Caroline or Mr Wickham had planned for them to do so.

"Edmund, my dear...." Mrs Reynolds began, nervously, glancing back and forth between her husband and their guests, torn for feeling sorry for the former as well as the latter, disappointed at the Wickham's seemingly self-serving motives, as well as being forced to go along with such a scheme in order to help the Hursts.

"Oh, now look here, I'm afraid the old lady is a little uncomfortable," Mr Reynolds observed. Caroline Wickham made to rise from her chair, whilst her husband began to remove his supporting hand from her shoulder in the direction of their hostess, but Mr Reynolds forestalled them both. "No, no, no. You see it really won't do. She doesn't care to lead you on. Either of you. And I suppose it is safe for me to assume that you were hoping to fill these vacancies in our household? You and your wife have done me and the old lady great service. We mean to reward you. We think a hundred guineas should do it." He paused to take an envelope out of his jacket pocket and placed it on the table before the couple. "Now as for your filling any position in this house I'm afraid it won't do."

Caroline would have liked to found herself surprised by this somewhat kind refusal, but she could not find herself so. She had suspected as much when she and her husband were shown into the parlour earlier. Mrs Reynolds had done nothing but glance at her sympathetically, just as the housekeeper at her father's house used to do whenever her father decided to refuse her or her siblings, or her mother something it was not in his power to give. As her husband made move to protest, she felt the weight of their debts slowly piling themselves about her shoulders. "But, Mr Reynolds...."

Mr Reynolds shook his head. "No it really won't do at all," he repeated and Caroline was struck by something in his tone. For a moment she wondered if he had seen through their attempt to gain money from them. His expression and the odd note in his voice reminded her so much of when her father had suspected her own schemes to gain money when she carelessly run dry of funds before she abandoned his household in quest to gain one of her own, preferably more grander and richer than he could ever hope to possess.

Her husband tightened his grasp upon her shoulder, and silently she reached up with her hand to touch his fingers, preventing him from making a further protest. They had exhausted the scheme, there was nothing more they could do to persuade Mr and Mrs Reynolds otherwise. Understanding her motion, he delivered their farewells, before she rose from her chair and they departed from the house.

Although like his father and ancestors in many respects with regards to possessing the vengeful desire to take some of the Darcy fortune for himself, this George Wickham at least had the awareness if not perhaps the sense to realise when he was defeated. However he was not above adding a spiteful epithet or two upon the conclusion of the matter as he and his wife walked through the open gates that granted admittance on to the public streets.

"Let the old fool fend for himself," he remarked somewhat arrogantly. "There'll be plenty more
At the Lambton local Arms one evening, the patient woke from his slumbering once more, to find the room bathed in candlelight, his friend reading and Jane sewing nearby. Several days had passed since he had been graced with such company, during which time his father had visited but once, complaining at the conditions of his accommodation for his excuse to return to London, rather than fearing to face the probable death of his son. The Gardiners too had visited, as well as Jane’s sister Elizabeth, whom could stay only a night or so before returning to the capital to be with her own beloved.

For Charles himself, he was glad that Jane was by his side, just as he was glad that he found it easier to return to the world of living than he had during the first days of his injuries. However, was also tired, so very very tired of not possessing the energy to do the most simplest of activities. He who had once bemoaned his lack of vigour for life now realised how much strength he had used to live in the first place.

Bruising from his injuries weighed heavily upon his body, the mind stressed by the prodigious amount of time spent unconscious. Charles feared and yet welcomed the end of his suffering, for although he would like to face a time free of his injuries, he could not help but feel that such a freedom required the sacrifice of the company of the woman who attended him so faithfully.

He had come here in order to gain her, and now that he had her, he was afraid to lose her, yet equally aware that he did not deserve her. Summoning what little remained of his strength for thought, he recalled the moments when he woke to see her in the chair by his bed, where his friend sat now.

Keeping herself occupied, she would sew while he slept, or read to him when he did not, and he would savour the sound of her sweet voice uttering the power of the written word. When he did not despair of his end, he would dream of many a day spent employed thus, with her by his side. It was an idyll he could not imagine being easily bored of, and it was with this in mind that he roused himself to speak to his friend.

"How long will this last, Richard?" He asked, pondering the very real possibility that the physician might have visited while he slept and perhaps noted a change in his condition, whether for the good or the worse.

Fitzwilliam closed his book of law, although the attempt to focus his mind on work had been just as successful as the attempt to involve himself in a novel, and leaned over to look into Charles’s eyes, observing the fire of the living still within their dark depths. "You’re no worse than you were."

"I pray I shall last long enough for you to do me one last service," Charles remarked, his voice inflamed with that same element.

"Tell me what it is you want me to do, Charles," Richard remarked. "Try to be calm," he added, as he saw his friend abruptly grow short of breath.

"You may leave me...." Charles said, between breaths, feeling quite nervous and somewhat embarrassed at what he was about to ask his friend to do, a task he wished he had the strength to do himself. "Leave me and ask her...."

"What is it you want me to do Charles?" Richard asked, only to receive deep, wavering breaths in reply. Watching as his friend’s eyes moved to gaze at the other figure upon attendance in the sickroom, he began to comprehend what kind of service his friend was asking of him.
"Charles, listen to me. Were you about to ask me if I would speak to Jane? Were you about to ask me if I would entreat her to be your wife?"

A relieved sigh passed through his friend's mouth, followed by whispered words of profound gratitude. "God bless you, Richard."

"Trust it to me, Charles," he assured his friend, before rising from the chair and walking the short distance to the hearth, beside which Jane was situated.

He found her looking up from her needlework, her face flush not just from the heat of the fire, but from having overheard the assurance to his question regarding her hand, her eyes and features radiant.

"You have no need to ask, Richard. The answer is yes."
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

The Latin wedding ceremony is carefully taken from the Sandy Welch adaptation; I am no Latin expert so I haven't the faintest idea of what a lot of it means. Fortunately, a lovely reader from the boards at Austen.com does. Sammie is her name and she has provided a translation in her feedback to his part, which I have included at the end for you all to see. She stresses that it comes from the American standard bible, so it might not be precise, but its good enough for me.

Part 30:

Weddings do not allow for the haste that a sick bed can sometimes demand, requiring such necessaries as licenses, witnesses and a man of the cloth to preside over the entire affair, as well as the blessing of the families involved. Nevertheless, Richard attempted to ensure that the arrangements were sorted as soon as was reasonably possible.

He sought a moment of time with Lambton's parish priest, who was luckily an old friend of his family and therefore perfectly amenable to performing a service for two not born in the parish, then took off to London to accomplish the rest of the tasks. Securing the license was no difficulty thanks to his profession, nor was the visit to Bingley's father, as he was well acquainted with the man thanks to his friendship with Charles. And his manners granted him the same speed when he visited Holloway Street to acquire the blessings of the bride's family.

Although Mrs Bennet had been forced to give up many of her comforts in the removal from Longbourn to London, her desire to see her daughters marry well remained one held dear to her heart. While Mr Bingley was not the ideal that she demanded for her eldest daughter, - as he was dependent on his father for his wealth, - she gathered enough assurance from his friend to hope that Jane would not suffer in any event, and with that she was content. Mr Bennet required only an verbal surety that his daughter would be looked after if the worse occurred, thus leaving Richard free to carry out the last task required; that of securing witnesses.

Jane had requested him to ask her younger sister and husband, causing him to pay a visit once more to the Hurst's cottage in Blackheath. Elizabeth was sewing at the table in the kitchen when her maid let him in, fresh from his travelling to and fro all over the city.

"Mr Fitzwilliam," she greeted eagerly, rising from her chair, hoping from the apparent good humoured expression upon his face that he brought news of his friend's condition seeing a little improvement.

He bowed at her briefly. "Forgive the hour, Mrs Hurst, but I have come from Jane with the earnest hope that you'll come back with me to see her married."

"Then Mr Bingley is recovering!" Elizabeth cried joyfully.

Richard shook his head sadly, his expression immediately losing the joviality he had summoned for the call. "No, no, he's dying. Time is of the essence, Mrs Hurst."
Elizabeth nodded and put aside her needlework, just as the sound of the front door opening and closing echoed down the hall through the open entrance to the kitchen disturbed them, causing her to rise from her chair. "There is my husband. Take some refreshment, Mr Fitzwilliam. And then we'll all go down together."

Taking a candle from a nearby shelf, Elizabeth joined her husband in the hall. "We have a surprise visitor, my love. I fear Mr Fitzwilliam is much fatigued."

William froze as he heard the name of their guest, having to rapidly school his features into an expression which did not reveal the sudden panic that seized his heart when he heard the name of their visitor. "Mr Fitzwilliam?" He queried, seeking to confirm. When she nodded, he placed his jacket on the stair post, took hold of his wife's free hand and without another word led her into the privacy of their parlour.

Elizabeth frowned at his rather strange behaviour. "William, what is it? You will come with me to see Jane married, will you not?"

Her husband shook his head reluctantly. As much as he wished to attend the event with her, he knew that if he consented, the meeting and the consequences which would inevitably follow said meeting, that he had been avoiding since that terrible night when he came face to face with his attacker, would inevitably occur. "No, I cannot."

"Am I to go alone?" Elizabeth asked him, her frown deepening, confused by his refusal, for she had never learned of the peculiar request he made to Mr Reynolds concerning dealings with Richard Fitzwilliam.

"No you will go with Mr Fitzwilliam," he replied. "You must go. But I'm afraid I must ask you to excuse me to him altogether."

Elizabeth no was further enlightened by his request. "But he already knows you're home. I've told him so."

"Well that's a little unfortunate, my dear, but I'm afraid I cannot see him," William informed her somewhat reproachfully.

His wife shook her head, unable to foresee a reason as to why he would wish to avoid a man who had been so very kind to her and her family since she had first come to make his acquaintance at the Reynolds' soiree. Unlike their once kind benefactors, she had never been informed of his particular condition upon employment. "William, don't be so mysterious. What harm do you know of Mr Fitzwilliam?"

William sighed, clasping her hand almost sadly. "None my love." His hand went her cheek, the fingers etching a loving caress across that soft skin as he realised that the time for further mysteries, as she had called them, had long since past. She was his wife, and he loved her. That was all that mattered. He could delay telling her no longer. She would have to know his secret, as soon as this event was over.

"Forgive me, I will come." He paused as her features brightened, unable to resist kissing her briefly. When he broke back, he was unable to refrain from warning her if indirectly. "Elizabeth, my life! Don't you remember telling me you felt you were being tested in some way? Well I think the time may be coming when you will be tested. But for now, trust me, please."

Elizabeth nodded, brushing aside her curiosity, in favour of relieving the vulnerable shadow that her husband's handsome features seemed to have acquired since she informed him of Mr Fitzwilliam's
visit. She had no desire to upset him, not when she had gained his agreement to accompany her to an event he was initially reluctant to attend. "I trust you, my love. Now, I will go and inform our guest."

"And I will wait for you outside," he replied. Silently he watched her depart from the room, following her with an uncertain step into the hall, then with an equally dubious glance as her beautiful form disappeared into the kitchen to inform their guest that they were ready to leave. He had feared this encounter for so long, even though he knew that it would one day be inevitable, if he was to have any hope of ending this secret.

He remembered his cousin of old, the days when they played on his grandfather's estate, the last truly happy, innocent days of his childhood before his father moved him and his sister to London. Those memories held an idyll he often found too impossible to gain once more, so many tragedies heaped upon his shoulders by his father and then his return from the continent. He hoped Richard would remember those innocent days too, and not hold this deception against him.

Lifting his jacket from the newel post he placed the garment about himself once more, his hand absentely slipping into one of the pockets to retrieve the last reminder of his secret that he had received from Mr Reynolds only this morning. A letter from his sister, long delayed by travelling across continents, full of eagerness to see her native country once more, and the wife her brother had found himself. Unable to bear the idea of lying to a sister that looked up to him and loved him so, he took the courage to tell her everything that had occurred from the moment he returned to England.

Georgiana's reply had been all that he had dared to hope for and more. Four pages was not enough to contain her raptures of learning that he had fallen in love and gained the woman their father willed his fortune on, along with the earnest wish that he tell her sister in law everything soon. With a wisdom that both astonished and pleased him did Georgiana advise him to be as honest with Elizabeth as he had been with her, to trust in their love, and by doing so all would be well.

And now that hour of telling was soon to come upon him it seemed. As his sister has written in her letter, 'one cannot always depend upon events proceeding as exactly as one desires them to.' William took a deep breath, secured the outer garments needed for a long journey to Derbyshire, then sought the privacy which the darkened porch of the cottage afforded him to prepare himself for the denouement.

Richard's first acquaintance with Mr Hurst was made in the dark, as they shook hands while Elizabeth collected some wildflowers from the garden, knowing Jane would not have the time to think of a bouquet, let alone any other adornment to signify the day.

"It is strange that you and I have not met earlier, Mr Hurst," Richard remarked to man who had yet to emerge from the privacy of the front porch, "for you and I have often been engaged in the same business, on Mr and or Mrs Reynolds's commission."

"Indeed, sir," Hurst answered, just as his wife rejoined them.

They mounted the carriage, Richard tapped his stick upon the roof, and they were off. In the darkness of the interior, it took some time before his eyes adjusted to be able to distinguish the features of his companions. Elizabeth's he knew well from his time at the Reynolds's, but her husband was a mystery, for he never once dealt with the gentleman, only with his former employer.

Even now the former secretary was a enigma, keeping himself silent throughout the journey, his features all but buried in the confines of his clothes. One hand held that of his wife's, while the other he buried deep in his coat, his gaze either directed toward Elizabeth, or the towns and eventually rural villages and countryside which the carriage drove by.
It took some time before Richard figured out that there was a reason for the man's continued preoccupation with those two views, and it was not due to a desire for deep introspection. Rather it appeared to be a deliberate and studied avoidance of meeting Richard's curious gaze, or even acknowledging the lawyer's interest.

Which only deepened the fascination. Desperate for anything to distract his mind rather than contemplating whether his friend would still be in the land of the living by the time they reached Lambton, Richard recalled the explanation Mr Reynolds had given him for choosing to deal with the legal business of his estate management rather than passing such work on to his secretary. At the time he had not given the comment much thought, but now, when he had the figure before him, a man whom he realised now had done his best to avoid him whenever he could, the explanation appeared dubious in the extreme.

There had to be something else behind his avoidance, a private secretary could not have a reason not to meet with him. Richard could think of only one, which was that they had dealings before, dealings which made it difficult for the secretary to meet with him now. Yet, when he looked at Hurst, he could not remember when that was, if indeed it ever happened. But what else was there that could explain the avoidance?

As the journey continued, in between the brief pauses demanded upon them by having to change from horse and carriage to that of train and then back again, Richard carried on studying the mysterious Mr Hurst, searching his memory as he waited for some spark, or word, or glance to bring forth recognition. Starting from his earliest recollections, he tried to de-age his mysterious companion, focusing on the dark hair and dark eyes, attempting to imagine them upon a somewhat more youthful face and figure, then gradually reversing the process until he restored the man to his present appearance.

By the time the coach reached Lambton, he was still none the wiser as to the man's supposed connection with himself. His attempt to find a resemblance dating from his youth ended in frustration, for it was the first time he had ever attempted such technique, making the conclusions somewhat sketchy. As the vehicle halted outside the local Arms, forcing his mind away from the subject, he returned to that of his friend, as he escorted Charles' soon to be sister and brother in law out of the carriage into the bedroom of the local arms where the parish priest, bride and groom were waiting for them.

Though the ceremony was conducted in unusual circumstances, and the overwhelming symbolism of the bed in which his dying friend lay seemed to hung over the words that the Reverend uttered, Richard did not feel the haunting presence that he always felt hovering over the threshold of the room, waiting for some sign with which to launch inward and take his friend from this life into the next. His mind and his heart tried not to raise his hopes to take that as a sign of his friend's recovery, but the attempt was half hearted at best.

"Inluminet vultum summ super nos et misereatur nostri," the holy man recited the words of the ceremony devoutly and tenderly, his voice low but sincere, as though he were all too aware of how far Jane and Charles had travelled to come to this moment between them, what trials they had faced along the way. Indeed he was an compassionate man, of long standing in his parish, and well liked by all his congregation.

Within moments of meeting the couple he was about to join in matrimony, he had comprehended the grave conditions and adapted his ceremony accordingly. "Ut cognoscamus in terra viam tuam, in omnibus gentibus salutare tuum. Confiteantur tibi populi, Deus, confiteantur tibi populi omnes. Laetentur et exultent gentes, quoniam iudicas populos in aequitate et gentes in terra diriges. Confiteantur tibi populis Deus, confiteantur tibi populi omnes. Terra dedit fructum suum benedicat
Jane retrieved the ring which rested upon the priest's bible for Charles had not the strength to place it upon her hand in the usual manner, slipping the thin circle of silver around her finger. She then smiled at her husband, before offering her hand to Richard, then to Mr Hurst, who both gave their blessing with their lips upon the soft slender skin. They retreated and Elizabeth rose from her chair to hug her sister, before all three of them quietly left the newlyweds alone to savour the moment.

"I bless the day," Charles murmured as Jane came to his side, taking the liberty to sit on the bed, for now she was his wife, all the propriety of a chair could be forgotten.

"I bless the day," Jane echoed, dealing a kiss to the hand she now clasped, followed by one to his forehead, which for once displayed little evidence of injury, being cool instead of flushed or deathly pale, nor hot with fever.

"You have made a poor marriage, Jane," Charles sighed, feeling a little guilty at having accomplished what he had so long desired. "A shattered, graceless fellow, and next to nothing to leave you when you're a young widow."

Jane continued to bestow kisses upon him, an unusual reproach for his words, but a gesture he was gratified to receive all the same. "I have made the marriage I would've given all the world for."

"You've thrown your heart away," he persisted.

"No, I have given it to you most freely," Jane assured him, turning so her eyes met his gaze, allowing him to descry the emotion contained therein, "most happily."

Charles stared at her for a moment, then uttered, "if you should see me wandering, Jane, call my name, and I think I shall come back." He blinked as his mind wandered over the path that they travelled to bring them to today. "How can I repay all that I owe you?"

"Don't be ashamed of me," Jane began, "and you will repay all...." her voice failed as his eyes slowly closed. Fearfully, she cried, "Charles not so soon! Come back!"

It could only have been a moment, but it seemed a very long moment for both of them before his eyelids parted and he was gazing at her once more. "You see... you call me back from the dead."

"Live for me, Charles," she pleaded. "Live to see how hard I try to improve myself."

"You cannot be improved upon, my darling," he returned, gazing wondrously into her eyes as he attempted to obey her plea. "Impossible. On the contrary, I was thinking that dying is about the best thing I could do."

"And leave me with a broken heart?" she countered.

From somewhere he managed to summon the strength to smile at her protest. "You seem to think quite well of me."

"Heaven knows I love you dearly," Jane avowed.

"Heaven knows I prize it," he replied. "If I were to live you might find me out."

"I should find that my husband has a mind of purpose and energy which I know he will put to the best account," Jane answered assuredly.
Her husband sighed. "I wish I could think so. But how can I look at such a wasted youth as mine and believe it? I'm afraid if I were to live I should disappoint you."

Jane shook her head, bent forward and kissed him, driving such thoughts from his mind, almost forever.

The ride back to Blackheath was a quiet one, with all three of the carriage's occupants reluctant to break the silence. As the vehicle rolled past the gradually brightened countryside, the early morning changing into a brightly sunny afternoon, their minds were stationed some distance behind them, with the couple they had left behind. William and Elizabeth were remembering their own wedding conducted not many months ago, on a bright sunny morning such as this, with cares that seemed light when compared to what Jane and Charles faced.

Richard’s thoughts were deeply introspective, as he travelled back with them, having promised his friend and Jane that he would see the Hursts safely home. He could not help but think of the schoolmaster, the man ultimately responsible for causing this ceremony to take place now, as opposed to when, if at all.

If Mr Collins had never struck Charles, would this ever have occurred, he wondered. As a lawyer who dealt rarely with the courts of criminal rather than chancery, he was not used to dealing in the hypothetical, but he did believe that without Mr Collins interference, there was a strong possibility that Jane and Charles might never have been united as they were mere hours ago.

Where was that schoolmaster now, he mused wordlessly, picturing the darkly passionate man stalking an classroom, delivering a lesson to the innocent youthful poor of the Philips's borough. Did the crime he committed haunt his mind as much as it haunted the victims, or did he no longer bother his conscience with such an act? If there was any feeling which the schoolmaster was capable of experiencing, then surely his suffering must be greater now, knowing that his violence had brought about the one thing he desired the most not to occur between Jane and Charles.

The carriage stopped outside the little redbrick cottage in Blackheath, and Richard descended from the vehicle first to help his companions out. As he stepped round in time to witness Mr Hurst assisting his wife out of the compartment, he saw the man properly in the full light of day. For a moment he paused, waiting for a chord of recognition to strike within him, but to no avail.

Choosing to bid them farewell at the gate of their house, he brushed the puzzle away from his mind and shook hands with them both. "Thank you for coming, Mr and Mrs Hurst."

"How could we not?" Elizabeth remarked. She squeezed his hand in sympathy. "Mr Bingley seemed a little better this morning," she ventured.

Richard nodded, his heart gladdened by her observation. "We may hope," he replied, before raising her hand to his lips. "Goodbye."

He walked away, his mind already half way to Derbyshire, when he noticed the something within the coach. Bending down, he retrieved the articles and returned to house, whereupon all suddenly came clear to him.

"You forgot these, Mrs Hurst," he uttered, before all thought left him, as the memory of how he and the man standing there under the porch met emerged from the depths of his recent memory.

It had been a dark night, with the moisture from the docks whipping through their hair, assisted by the cold wind, mounting a chill upon their bodies despite the protection afforded by the material of
their travelling cloaks and evening wear. His companion, no friend of his as he remarked to the Inspector, stuck to the shadows, until the sight of the body in the Limehouse parish mortuary took his legs out from under him. Even now, Richard recalled the tone in his voice as he commented upon the horrible sight of the victim.

The victim. William Darcy. Suddenly Richard found himself chilled to the bone as deeply as he had been that night in the mortuary, when the Inspector commented on murdering needing no apprenticeship. He remembered that man of the law asking the stranger to give his name, then ordering a constable to follow him when the stranger hurried out of the mortuary. His mouth opened and he stared at that stranger whom stood beside the woman that in another life would never have been his wife at all.

Mr Hurst had the power to speak and explain before he could. "Mr Fitzwilliam and I have met before, my dear," he remarked to his wife, who was puzzling over their exchanged expressions of shock. "When Mr Fitzwilliam saw me my name was Frederick Denny."

"Frederick Denny," Elizabeth repeated with a frown, bewildered as to why her husband had taken a false name. "Surely not?"

"It was at the time of William Darcy's drowning," Richard added, knowing that Elizabeth had no idea of the significance of that first encounter. "He came with us to view my cousin's body. I took great pains to seek him out after the Inspector lost sight of him."

"Quite true," Hurst remarked, acknowledging and confirming the events quite calmly, to the surprise of the lawyer, "but it was not my object or interest to be found out."

Richard glanced from the man to the wife, his mind now removed from Derbyshire, and very firmly fixed in the dark matter that was his cousin's demise. "My position is a painful one. I hope that no complicity in this very dark matter may be attached to you, but you must know that your extraordinary conduct has laid you open to the deepest suspicion."

Mr Hurst nodded solemnly. "Mr Fitzwilliam, you know where I live. I know you have urgent demands on your time. You have my word I will not disappear again." He offered his hand once more to the lawyer, who took it hesitantly. "I hope hereafter we'll be better acquainted. Good day."

With that speech and a simple shake of hands, Richard was abruptly reminded of everything that had happened since that encounter. Nodding in acknowledgement, he bid them both farewell, returning to his carriage. Once within the confines of the vehicle he made a mental note to visit the Inspector of the Limehouse Borough before he returned to Lambton. For the Inspector had the means and resources to conduct an investigation, and, as Mr Hurst had pointed out, was not demanded to return elsewhere by the illness of a friend.

Elizabeth turned from watching the carriage carrying Mr Fitzwilliam away from their house to her husband, a countless number of questions upon her lips. William merely kissed the hand that he clasped, then parted from her to go inside, remarking that he had some work to do before he left for the China House.

She longed to confront him, but her mind felt unusually fearful of broaching the subject. His casual confession that he had taken a false name, been to see the body of the man that would have been her husband was confusing to her now troubled mind. She could not understand why he had been to see the body, or why he had given a false name to the Inspector and Mr Fitzwilliam. Or why he had taken care to assure that Mr Fitzwilliam never saw him again.
It was not that she feared to ask him anything, but that she feared what the answer might be. Her own speculation could only conclude that he had in some way been involved with Mr Darcy, or the circumstances surrounding his death. But if so, why did Mr and Mrs Reynolds not inform her of this? Or were they as much in the dark as Mr Fitzwilliam had been until he left their house just now?

She loved her husband, and she feared that his answer might cause them to be parted from one another, with little hope of reunion. She remembered what William had said to her earlier, that she was about to be tested as she had once jokingly supposed. That trial was no longer something she looked forward to enduring.

William did not return from the China House until she was in bed, slipping quietly beneath the sheets to sleep beside her, unaware that sleep was far from her mind. She spent the night tossing and turning, her mind pondering one dark conclusion after another, interspersed with memories of Jane's wedding and her own, the recollections overlapping each other, with the presence of William Darcy's drowned body floating in the river, looming over everything in her life, like a dark omen. Suddenly the image of his face, transformed into another she had long come to hold dearly, causing her to rush up from the pillows in terror.

"William Darcy is dead," she murmured, reminding herself that he was not some phantom come from the afterlife to claim her husband.

Unseen behind her, William Hurst blinked as he woke, hearing the words and the fearful tone with which she used to utter them. "What is it, my dear?" He asked when he had the courage to broach the subject.

Elizabeth turned to him, and he saw, almost with relief, that she simply wanted nothing more than his comfort, than his assurance that nothing was going to part them now that they had found and bonded with each other. "William Darcy is drowned."

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The Latin actually comes from Psalm 66/67 (66 in the Vulgate, 67 in some modern translations). Obviously chapter numbers and verse numbers were not in the original texts and are up to the translators.

PSALMUS 66
1 in finem in hymnis psalmus cantici
2 Deus misereatur nostrorum benedictus nobis inluminet vultum suum super nos et misereatur nostri diapsalma
3 ut cognoscamus in terra viam tuam in omnibus gentibus salutare tuum
4 confiteantur tibi populi Deus confiteantur tibi populi omnes
5 laetentur et exultent gentes quoniam iudicas populos in aequitate et gentes in terra diriges diapsalma
6 confiteantur tibi populi Deus confiteantur tibi populi omnes
7 terra dedit fructum suum benedicat nos Deus Deus noster
8 benedicat nos Deus et metuant eum omnes fines terrae

Psalms 67
CHORAL DIRECTIONS (1) For the choir director; with stringed instruments. A Psalm. A Song
1. (2) God be gracious to us and bless us, And cause His face to shine upon us-- Selah.
2. (3) That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation among all nations.
3. (4) Let the peoples praise You, O God; Let all the peoples praise You.
4. (5) Let the nations be glad and sing for joy; For You will judge the peoples with uprightness And guide the nations on the earth. Selah.
5. (6) Let the peoples praise You, O God; Let all the peoples praise You.
6. (7) The earth has yielded its produce; God, our God, blesses us.
7. (8) God blesses us, That all the ends of the earth may fear Him.
Part 31:

Contrary to appearances, William Hurst did not sleep well either that night. Until dawn it was a mostly successful enterprise of thinking while his eyes were closed, with an intermission where he did his best to assure his wife that he was not going to be parted from her because of the visit they had yesterday. However, as he held her in his arms, the words which she uttered that had aroused the need for assurance, preyed heavily upon his mind.

When he married her without telling her the true nature behind the events which brought them together, he had forgotten that there was more than the symbolism of changing his name behind the matter. Not for the first time did he find himself resenting what his father had done, not just to him, but to her as well. Catching sight of a little girl playing the park with her father and deciding that someday she would be the perfect wife for his son, carried a certain aroma which he found distinctly unpalatable, not to mention disturbing.

Elizabeth had been right when she talked to him during that night when he first confessed to having a profound interest in her. Until then his thoughts had not once considered how she might be feeling about the conditions his father's will had enforced upon her. For many years an only child, all but abused and neglected by his father, he had no one but himself to consider until he and then his sister banished themselves to the Cape.

Plans were being made between him and Mr Reynolds to bring Georgiana home, but he was a little reluctant to do so until he told Elizabeth the truth, as well as being aware that he was dragging his sister away from a life she found pleasant and comfortable, and one in which she seemed settled, almost contented.

After that night when Elizabeth was made aware of how he felt and how she felt then, he had come to realise how harshly his father had treated them both, as nothing but pawns in his dusty legacy. Resigning himself, if only for a brief time, to a life without her, he had tried to make sure she had everything his father had denied her, the choice to marry whom she loved.

When she declared her love for him, he had been so scared of losing it, that the concealment seemed the only way to keep it. At the time it had appeared a simple matter of avoiding all connections with their past, it had not occurred to him until the evening before last night, when Richard Fitzwilliam sat waiting in their kitchen, that the secret would come to an end before he was prepared for it.

Now, he had to tell Elizabeth everything. Not only Elizabeth, but her family, and his family, such as it was. His cousin would doubtlessly tell the police inspector over in the Limehouse parish about last night before he returned to Derbyshire, and the police inspector had been nothing but thorough in his dealings with the Darcy case.

William recalled how he made sure to evade the young constable who tailed him that night he left the mortuary for his alleged lodgings at Exchequer Coffee House, Palace Yard, Westminster. Indeed, it was incredible that he had managed to remember the lodging place his attacker told him they would be staying at while he was on the boat. That inspector would soon be paying him and Elizabeth a visit, one which he was sure would entail him going to the station and telling them the truth behind his concealment. And from there the legal process of recognising him would take over.

Setting all that aside, the one thing William still remained uncertain about was how Elizabeth would take the truth. Since their marriage, the subject of William Darcy had never come up, not even
remotely. In conjunction with this silence, were the words she uttered last night. To him it seemed that there was a strong possibility to him that she might justifiably hate him after he confessed. Yet he could not leave her stranded in this limbo any longer. His hand been forced and there was no going back.

He watched her as they had breakfast together in the kitchen, the small, simple movements of her slender hands as she buttered a piece of toast, then applied some marmalade or preserve upon it before putting the food before her mouth and taking a bite, was somehow comforting and endearing to him. As yet she not broached the subject of her dreams last night, or his surprising revelation, and a part of him had hoped that he would at least have some forewarning of her reaction before he began.

"You don't ask me, my dear, why I took a false name," he uttered, filling his hands with the paperwork from last night, so his nerves would not show through their shaking, shuffling the papers into a pile that he could put into his brief case before he left, making the question appear almost innocent.

"No William, love," Elizabeth replied, her tone seemingly normal, as though she was not concerned in the slightest. "I should dearly like to know, of course. I should not like you to think that I'm not interested."

Looking up from his work, he saw an expression about her eyes that made him realise her worries from last night were still present. Abruptly, he dropped to his knees before her, taking his hand in his. "My darling, I stand in no danger."

Elizabeth laid her toast aside to meet his gaze. "Are you sure of that, William?"

He nodded, his dark handsome gaze never leaving her fine eyes. "Moreover, I've done no wrong, or injured no man. Shall I swear it?"

"No," she uttered softly. "No, never to me."

If ever he was to begin, now would be the time. Bowing his head, he studied the floral pattern on her dress as he searched for his opening words. "You realise, the dark matter that Mr Fitzwilliam spoke of....."

She touched his hands firmly. "No. I don't want to hear. Besides, I have something to tell you," she added, causing him to raise his eyes in puzzlement. "You're not the only one with a secret. Only I'm ready to tell you mine."

In one movement she rose from her chair, took his left hand and placed it upon the front of her waist. William glanced at her eyes to seem them glistening brightly, a nervous but pleased expression on her face. Confused, he glanced down at their hands again, until he realised what he had noticed last night and observed now as the senses in his fingers compared her roundness from when they married to now.

The revelation startled him, driving all other thought from his mind. A smile flew across his face, and before he knew it she was in his arms and he was laughing and crying all at once.

At the dust yard in Maiden Lane, Mr Reynolds was just crossing the entrance with Mr Younge. In front of the them the yard was alive with activity, as people carefully sorted through the mounds, sifting the dust until it was ready to be carted away. Like an island, his old, ramshackle bower stood in the midst of this scene, and he was sure if he squinted hard enough, he would see Wickham
staring murderously at him out of one of the windows.

Which brought him back to why he was visiting today. Hurst had come to him that morning with the news that the truth would soon be out in the open, meaning that not only would Elizabeth and Society come to know of William Darcy, but the other, darker matter that involved the crippled, old squaddie and his machinations, would have to come to a head, in order to be dealt with at a time of their choosing, rather than in a court room, where no one would win but the journalists writing about the affair.

"Do you think Wickham's likely to drop down on me today, Younge?" He asked his companion whom he had visited before coming to Maiden Lane.

"I think it very likely, sir," Mr Younge replied.

They neared the house and the old squaddie within exited his rooms, hobbled down the stair case, then stepped outside to welcome them. "Reynolds, you're quite a stranger."

"Nothing wrong, Wickham?" Reynolds asked, trying his best to appear as if he was not aware of the machinations the old soldier had planned to launch on him.

Wickham shook his head as he led them inside. "No, nothing wrong. Quite the contrary. So my friend and partner, Mr Younge, gives me to understand that you are aware of our power over you."

Mr Reynolds nodded, remembering the plan he and Hurst laid out before he and Mr Younge left for Maiden Lane. Above all, this meeting had to go as Wickham intended, so they knew how much 'power' the old soldier believed he held over them before they proceeded further with the matter.

"First of all I'm calling you Reynolds," Wickham continued in a growling voice. "No mister and definitely no sir."

"Well since you say it is to be so, I suppose it must be," Mr Reynolds replied, doing his best to sound unprepared and scared of what the former soldier had planned.

"I suppose it must be," Wickham echoed before unveiling. "You are aware that you are in possession of property to which you have no right?"

"Yes," Mr Reynolds answered, though Wickham could have no conception of how aware he was. Not only that, but the soldier's understanding of the word, when compared to his own definition, were separated by a impassable river.

"And you are desirous of coming to terms?" Wickham asked.

Edmund nodded, as though he was reluctant to even voice a decision to which he was forced into making.

"You'll throw in your mound, with a generous stake and divide the lot into three!" Wickham began gleefully.

"I shall be ruined," Edmund murmured quietly.

"You'll leave me in sole custody of these mounds," Wickham continued as though he hadn't spoken. "When the mounds are cleared away, to the last shoveful that's when the final division shall be made."

Mr Reynolds put a hand to face, almost as if he was trying to conceal his humiliation and despair. "I
must keep this from the old lady. She must not know."

"Why should she not know?!!" Wickham countered. "She's was a dustman's wife once! she can become one again!"

"Eh?" Mr Reynolds queried.

Suddenly Wickham put his crutch to Reynolds' face, pressing the crook in the wood firmly against his nose. "Nose to the grindstone, Reynolds! Get to it! Get to it!"

As Wickham Senior plotted and schemed, he was thinking only of himself. No thought whatsoever crossed his mind, that his son, who had abandoned him in disgust as soon as he was old enough to possess such intellect and self-regard to do so, would be in need of the some of the funds that he was so avariciously blackmailing for.

George Wickham esquire, stood with his wife upon a train platform. To any outsider their appearance was both dignified, and pitiable. Dressed in what was left of their finest travelling attire, they waited for the transport which they had yet to acquire a booking for. His wife held a large bird cage in her hand, in which resided a canary bird, who seemed oblivious to the dire circumstances that its owner now found herself in.

Misfortune followed this family, stalking the bloodlines for generations. It had begun with the death of the only prosperous Wickham; a steward of one of the most prestigious estates in Derbyshire; Pemberley. Leaving behind a son, his master had little choice but to provide for his godson;- for the father left a legacy of debts from a life spent constantly trying to live ahead of his means for the express pleasure of his wife, -endowing him with funds and an education.

He had desired him to enter the church, and for a time, it had been the son's dearest wish to enter into that profession. But temptation foiled such noble schemes, as the all the advantages and privileges of an easy living at Cambridge were laid open to him. A life of idleness and dissipation followed, with a brief interlude of an attempted marriage to an heiress of thirty thousand pounds, foiled by her perceptive older brother, then another elopement with a young girl that, had he been sober, he would never have even considered marriageable.

Naturally, bitterness and disappointment followed, ending in a rather ignominious death upon the fields of Alma, an old, embittered Captain. Those emotions were a powerful legacy for a son who was unfortunate enough to become a veteran of that war, returning home with a lost limb serving as his only memento of that campaign.

For the second George Wickham, crippled, aged beyond his true years, orphaned by his son and widowed by his wife, it was not hard to desire revenge upon the family who wronged not just him but his father and grandfather before him. Nor was it entirely easy for his son to escape the same legacy, especially the circles he desired to move in were the same ones which this family had also moved in.

If George Wickham the third had been in a philosophising state, he would have reflected upon the irony that the family he had done his best to avoid, were in the end the same ones he turned to in the hope that they would rescue him from his plight. As he should have expected, the scheme was utterly unsuccessful. He had no one but himself to blame for the state of affairs in which he found himself now, and as usual, he was doing his best to convince his mind and conscience, that he had nothing to do with it.

He and Caroline could only imagine what Society was saying of them now.
"The boat train!" Lady Catherine de Bourgh cried, with all the shock and horror the widow of a knight of the realm could reasonably be allowed to convey in her voice, as she reported the scandal she had recently discovered. "The Wickhams have been exiled to Europe! Forced to live like leeches off the scraps of continental society!"

"What disgrace!" Lady Lucas, once best friend of the Wickhams, now doing her best to deny that she had ever been in such intimate acquaintance with them, opined.

Her husband snorted. "They deserve it for trying to live beyond their means. What do you think, Mr Harrington?"

Mr Harrington, was a rather unusual gentlemen. The cousin of a baron and a well connected one at that, he had the unfortunate position of being referred to as everybody's friend, no matter what amount of acquaintance he could claim with that person. He also possessed a nervous disposition that caused him anxiously worry whenever such a position was called into doubt. "No a gentleman does not need...."

"Don't ask Mr Harrington!" Lady Catherine cried, cutting the man off. "He can never be made to say a word on the misfortunes of others whatever the scandal!"

"Outrageous scandal!" Lucas commented, as his friend Harrington now began to worry that he was no longer Lady Catherine's most intimate friend, and knight errant. "I never heard anything more disgraceful!"

"I have something worse to tell you," Lady Catherine continued, "and Mr Harrington will not say anything to us about this either! Charles Bingley has disgraced his family by marrying a female boat person!"

There was a shocked silence as the ears and minds of Society digested this shocking, scandalous piece of nuptials. None of them knew or even perhaps cared of Mr Bennet's once position as a landed gentleman. Past was something only the elite of Society valued. Meanwhile Mr Harrington worried if he was also no longer the most intimate friend of Sir William and Lady Lucas as well.

"A woman of lower class!?" Lady Lucas cried, shocked. "Makes me feel..."

"Such a scandal," Colonel Forster, Sir William's business partner, bemoaned.

"His father has cut him off without a penny!" Lady Catherine declared. In truth, she had heard nothing of the sort, but it was only natural to imagine what Mr Bingley would do upon hearing such news from his son.

"His mother cries," Lady Lucas informed the others, suddenly an expert and intimate of that noble empire building family as well.

"This social experiment is doomed to failure!" Lady Catherine declared.

Mr Harrington meanwhile, worried that perhaps he should visit his most intimate friend Mr Bingley Senior and ask him if he was still considered as such after this news.

At the station, the Wickhams rose from their misfortune to survey those who would be accompanying them on this voyage to another life. It was possible after all that news of their current poverty had not yet reached all corners of the Society in which they lived, thus perhaps enabling them to attach themselves another wealthy couple, who were gullible enough to be only too helpful
and generous to the Wickhams while they settled into a new life in continental society.

Within moments, they found who they were looking for. A young couple evidently comfortably well off by the cut of their clothes and the generous amount of luggage they were taking with them, as well as, judging by their behaviour, not long married. Beside them a member of the boat train's crew seemed only too pleased to given the task of loading their luggage into the cargo section of the vehicle, and, judging by the time he was taking, liable to be well paid for the endeavour, by a couple who did not know how long such a process should be expected to take.

Caroline glanced at her husband with an evil smile, a expression which exactly matched his own. "Do you smell a little money, George?"

He nodded and together they made their way over to the them. Within minutes, their passage and their accommodation and food were all catered for by the charming victims who were only too eager to meet the nice Mr and Mrs Wickham, relieved that they would have some friendly acquaintances with whom to spend time with abroad. As for the Wickhams themselves, they revelled in the new found friendship, hoping that this latest alliance would prove to be far more profitable than any of their previous attempts to become rich off the backs of others fortunes.

In the Limehouse Mortuary and police station, for the wealth of the borough was such that it only allowed for one building to house both, Richard Fitzwilliam had just arrived for his appointed meeting with the Inspector. The officer greeted him with all the eagerness of a man who desired to tie up the remaining loose ends of a case which had been troubling him.

"So, Mr Fitzwilliam," the Inspector remarked as they sat by his desk, "you say you have some information concerning the murder of Mr William Darcy. But now the mystery is you seem reluctant to divulge it."

Richard bowed his head. It is true, he was reluctant to divulge the revelation which had been bothering him from the moment he recognised William Hurst. He was concerned for Elizabeth. She seemed so happy and contented in her life, that it seemed wrong to cause her husband into a dark matter that he probably had little connection to, other than a simple case of mistaken identity.

Especially as Elizabeth was now the sister of his dearest friend, who was still gravely ill, miles away from here. Yet it was his duty as a lawyer and as a cousin to discover the truth behind this concealment, for the man that was her husband must have had a reason to give a false name and then studiously avoid meeting with him so he would not be recognised. "It is concerning Mr Frederick Denny."

"Oh yes," the Inspector remarked, pausing in order to sort through his files and find the notes pertaining to such a fellow. "Mr Frederick Denny was followed from this very police station to his lodgings at Westminster where he seems to have evaded my man and disappeared." The Inspector looked up at his guest. "Have you caught sight of him, Mr Fitzwilliam?"

"I fear so," Richard replied.

It was the evening when they arrived at the door of the cottage in Blackheath, the Inspector and two of his men, just in case the man who they wished to question proved resistant to answering their inquiries, the urgent nature of their case overriding the inappropriateness of the hour at which they were calling.

William Hurst had been waiting for this moment all day, from the morning he parted from his wife to
go work, having learned that he was soon to be a father, then at the Reynolds's townhouse where he and Mr Reynolds discussed what was to be done concerning the old squaddie Wickham's schemes in light of this secret being uncovered. Now he was home with Elizabeth, feeling cowardly for being unable to come to the point of confession, so much so that the knock on the door was a relief, causing him to rise and answer it quite promptly, knowing who he would find waiting for him.

"Do you recognise me?" the Inspector asked him, and he nodded, as the full horror of that night when he had first encountered the officer, in the curved roof of the Limehouse Mortuary and police station, crystallised in his mind's eyes once more. "And I recognise you most certainly, Mr Frederick Denny."

"William," he heard, as his wife came out from the parlour to join them in the hall, frowning at the sight of a policeman standing in their porch. "What's happening?"

He turned to her, hearing the slight fear in her voice, and felt the guilt of putting her through this deception keenly. Clasping her arm most tenderly, he turned from the Inspector and fixed his gaze upon her fine eyes. "Nothing can harm us, remember."

"Can I have a private word with you, Mr Denny?" The Inspector continued, appearing to possess little compunction about what anxiety he was causing to his suspect's female companion, whose uncertain stare wandered back and forth between him and the man he wished to question.

William turned to face the policeman, finding himself somewhat irritated by the officer's seemingly lack of compassion, and his persistence in using his first false name. He knew it was a deliberate act, designed to unsettle him, and thus he was also annoyed that it had the power to do so, even though he was aware of it. "Mrs Hurst, knows she can have no reason for being alarmed, whatever the business," he replied, emphasising his wife's name.

The Inspector frowned, as he countered that assertion with all the authority of his office behind him, an almost sarcastic scepticism being conveyed through his voice in his apparently smug reply. "Really, is that so?"

William took a deep breath to calm himself, and then all but threw the authority back in the officer's face. "Are you going to charge me with a crime?"

"I charge you with being in some way connected with the murder of William Darcy," the Inspector declared, growing annoyed himself now with the daring of this man.

Beside him Elizabeth gasped, as her dreams of the man that was to be her husband came back to her, along with the fear that she felt of the man standing next to her now, the man she loved, being parted from her. She was an intelligent woman, she knew full well what the Inspector was implying, that her husband was not just connected with the murder of William Darcy, but possibly responsible for the act himself. It was inconceivable to her that anyone could think that her husband was capable of murder. "No sir, you cannot!"

William sighed, upon hearing the Inspector's declaration, knowing that he could no longer just stand here and deny the charges. Not without telling the officer the truth behind the entire matter, and he had no desire for Elizabeth to be informed in this manner. Turning, he took his coat from the newel post nearby. "I will come with you."

Elizabeth heard the capitulation in his voice and a fear took hold of her, that she would not see her husband ever again if he went with the officer now. "No, William, you don't have to go!" she cried, holding on to him.
He tenderly freed himself from her hands shaking grip on his arm, and clasped them both above her elbows for a moment in an attempt to calm her. "No, I choose to go. Don't distress yourself. I'll be back by morning."

Kissing her lips, a chaste but clear sign of his love for her, William stepped away, and shut the door before turning to face the Inspector, who continued to regard him with the greatest of scepticism.

"You know, Mr Denny," the officer said, "that you had no right to make that kind of promise, when it is highly likely that you will not be returning home tomorrow."

"On the contrary, sir," William replied, "I was speaking the absolute truth. And in time, you will come to realise that too."
Chapter 32

Part 32:

George Wickham Senior entered Younge's shop of curiosities in Clerkenwell and found a difference within the establishment, when compared to the manner of visits he conducted before. In the beginning when he had first visited the shop to buy back the bone of the limb he had lost on the fields of Alma, there had been a dull, downcast air, which seemed to hang over the interior, as though the souls of the strange, anatomical, departed works of art that Younge specialised in, had come to haunt their resting place.

Mr Younge's confession that he was lost in mourning due to unrequited love did nothing to dispel the uneasiness which Wickham could not but help experiencing whenever he entered the shop, and his gaze accidentally turned to the last anatomical exhibits. There was something quite unnerving about the hollow eye sockets of skeletons, such as the French gentleman that Younge often referred to. Wickham could not help but feel that they, along with the stuffed animals like the alligator and the mice, rendered creepy by their seemingly innocent human poses, were watching his every move, as an enemy would in battle, waiting to strike.

Now, however, a warm glow seemed to be cast over the shop's interior. There were three ostrich eggs in the window display, instead of the usual macabre animal pantomimes that darkened those glassy panes. The French Gentleman was in his usual stand opposite the fireplace, but he appeared to be the only exhibit not shrouded in the comforting evening shade which hung over the interior of the establishment. This reassuring atmosphere was also enhanced by the smell of lemon and darjeeling, infused together in the proprietor's usual welcoming tipple.

"Why it smells rather comfortable in here," Wickham observed to Mr Younge when the proprietor himself came into view, a contented smile upon his face.

"I am rather comfortable sir," Mr Younge replied with a quiet, happy sigh, before ushering his visitor to a chair.

"Don't use lemons in your business, do you?" Wickham queried as he sniffed the air, inhaling such a fruity scent once more.

"No," Mr Younge replied, before indicating with his hand the slices of the fruit lying upon a saucer by the tea crockery. "Will you partake, sir?"

"Will I partake?" Wickham echoed grumpily, the comfortable surroundings reminding him of his own lack of comforts at his residence in Maiden Lane, with all the now usual, daily disturbances. "Of course I'll partake. Will a man partake who's been tormented by dust carts heaving to and fro twenty-four hours a day?"

"Don't let it put you out, Wickham," Mr Younge commented lightly, before making his tone acquire a more sympathetic air. "You don't seem in your usual spirits," he observed.

"If it comes to that, you don't seem in your usual spirits," Wickham countered somewhat enviously. "You seem getting on for lively. And you've had your hair cut and you've fattened up."

Mr Younge paid the bitter tone in the observations no mind as he took up his saucer and tea, placing the china cup below his mouth to take sip before he remarked upon a few observations which he had made himself. "Well, Mr Wickham, I can see you're being whittled very low. One might fancy
you've come to see the French gentleman rather than me!" he chuckled, with a eye to the skeleton proudly displayed across from them.

Wickham turned in the direction, inwardly shuddering as he caught sight of the hollow eye sockets which seemed to stare at him as though he were something to be haunted, and then noticed another difference about the shop. "Why, you've had the place cleaned up."

"Yes," Mr Younge remarked, and seeing the anxiety in the old squaddie's demeanour, decided to reveal the source behind these changes. "By the hand of an adorable woman."

"I presume the next thing you're gonna do is get married," Wickham groused, witnessing the transformation of his friend as he revealed the source and finding himself even more miffed when Mr Younge nodded. "To the old party?"

With a glance directed to the back room, where the woman was presently situated, to make sure she had not heard the insult, Mr Younge turned back to his companion with a reproach in his response. "The lady in question is not an old party."

Noticing her presence for the first time, surprised to notice that she was a young, pretty woman, diligent in her housekeeping, for she was presently occupied in the task of cleaning the rest of the china, the old squaddie obligingly dropped his voice to a whisper as he further enquired about her. "Then the lady's objections have been met?"

"The objections have been met by the kind interference of a new friend of mine," Mr Younge revealed in the same lowered tone, but with the added emotion of joy at his love now being returned. "He waited on the lady, and made the point that if I would, after marriage, confine myself to the articulation of men, children and the lower animals only, it might help relieve the lady's mind of her feeling respecting being regarded in a bony light." Mr Younge smiled at the memory of the moment that Pleasant Jenkinson told him this as she accepted his affections. "It was a happy thought, sir, which took root."

"You seem flush with friends at the moment, Younge," Wickham mused despondently, saddened that his companion no longer possessed the bitter feeling required for going through with their scheme to blackmail Mr Reynolds. "Still you may spend your fortune how you wish. I mean to travel. The tough job is ended, the mounds laid low. The hour is come for Reynolds to stump up."

In the cottage at Blackheath, Elizabeth regarded her husband a fresh this morning, having woken to find him sleeping by her side in the usual manner, as though the visit to the police station the night before never took place. She had not heard him come home, for her worries over what he might be going through at the police station eventually tired her out as the hours passed and his absence continued.

Now, back at home once more, he appeared to have not a care in the world as he partook of his morning meal, his movements unhurried, even sedentary. She knew not what to make of it. Last night, standing before the Inspector, he had seemed as worried as she was by the accusations which the officer made. This morning however, he was calm, and composed, leaving her uncertain as to how to broach the subject which last evening, was so disgusting for them.

"You're going to be late for the china house if you're not careful," she ventured at last, after a glance at the timepiece on the wall nearby descried the time when he had usually left for work gone past fifteen minutes ago.

William paused, laying his cup down in the saucer with a great deal of care before he spoke,
ensuring that his tone was casual and unaffected. "The fact is my dear, I have left the china house and I'm in another way of business." He reached across the table and took her unoccupied hand in his own. "And I must ask you this, Elizabeth. You've become fond of this cottage?"

She smiled at him, half wondering if he was to begin his usual ritual of asking if all was well with their married life. "Of course I have, it is our life together."

"I'm afraid we have to leave, my dear," William informed her. "My new position has a dwelling house attached rent-free."

Elizabeth glanced at him astonished. To her mind that appeared an unusual situation to acquire, unless he had become a member of someone's household. The thought of narrow back stairs and small living quarters depressed her, for she had no reason to expect a repetition of the generous space which Mr and Mrs Reynolds had given him for just a study while he lived in her father's rented lodgings in Holloway.

"William...." she uttered as he continued to gaze at her with a searching but seemingly content expression about this new position, "do you consider this a gain my dear?"

"Yes I do," William assured her in the most composed tone he could manage, though inwardly he was just as concerned as she, but for entirely different reasons.

"And what about the baby?" she asked him, hoping that the inquiry would make him reveal the nature of his move and perhaps more information as to what his new position would entail of them all. "Will there be room in the house for the baby?"

"There will I'm sure be room enough for us all," he answered her. "But why should you take this on trust? We will go and look at it this morning."

She watched him as he finished his coffee and then rose from the chair to fetch their coats, not knowing quite what to make of him. All of a sudden it seemed that man she married had been reverted into the man he was before, the mysterious, reticent secretary, who always attended upon her, staring, studying her silently, judging her. As she had said to him only days ago, she could not help but feel that she was being tested, yet for what and for whom? The babe growing inside her, waiting to become a part of their lives? In pay for all her avaricious schemes and thoughts that she felt before she fell in love and married that mysterious secretary?

Whatever the reason was, she reasoned with herself that she was not going to discover it sitting in her kitchen. Elizabeth rose from her chair and joined her husband in the hall, where he helped her into her coat and opened the door. They walked towards the gate at the end of the garden, then William helped her inside the waiting carriage.

Throughout the journey she stared out of the parting above the door, while he held her hands in a tight comforting clasp, watching the houses and citizens of London tumble by, from the comfortable, simple living of their neighbourhood to the more affluent suburbs which society deigned to reside. Her mind froze as she the carriage slowed outside a very familiar looking house. A residence from which she had last quitted, in a fit of righteous anger, with the firm resolve never to step foot inside the house again.

William said nothing when she turned her amazed and confused features upon him, continuing in his silence as he helped her down from the carriage, up the grand steps and through the impressive door frame, into the large chequered hallway to the reception rooms which lay beyond. Her mind spun with the possibilities and fears so much, that by the time she entered the drawing room, to find Mr and Mrs Reynolds rising from their places on a nearby sofa, greeting her with nothing but smiles and
pleasant expressions, she could do naught but pass out.

She came to in her husband's arms, resting upon the sofa that their hosts had recently vacated, with Mrs Reynolds smellings salts underneath her nose, William's anxious gaze as he held her, ready to lend his support should she faint again, and Mr Reynolds crouching before them all, waiting for her to come round.

"There, there my dear," Mr Reynolds uttered kindly, before stepping forward to help William as they assisted her rise from lying down into a seated position. "Let's lift you up. There," he pronounced before turning to his wife and addressing her with his usual, somewhat unflattering term of endearment, but always received as a sign of his affection for her nonetheless. "Old lady, if you don't begin a telling of the tale, someone else will."

Mrs Reynolds smiled at her husband before directing the warm expression upon their guests as she replied. "I'm going to begin, Edmund dear. It isn't easy to know where to begin when a person's in this state of happiness!" She took a deep breath, then patted William's hands, still clasping those of his wife's as she uttered the following. "Elizabeth my dear, tell me who this is."

Elizabeth looked towards the man she was directed to, finding William regarding her with a nervous gaze. Though she was confused, she had no reason as yet to answer the question with anything but truth. "Why my husband, of course."

Her hostess chuckled lightly at the reply. "Oh my!" she exclaimed before persisting in her efforts to bring forth a more satisfactory response. "His name, dearie."

Elizabeth blinked in puzzlement as she answered, uncertain as to why Mrs Reynolds felt a need to be reminded of such a title. "Hurst."

Mrs Reynolds shook her head, smiling at her even more now that she had received the response she desired. "No it ain't. Not a bit of it."

An slight inclination of what might lay behind her hostess's questioning began to penetrate Elizabeth's mind, but she had another possible answer to the inquiry which needed to be ruled out first. "Well, Denny, then."

"No it ain't," Mrs Reynolds repeated, still smiling. "Not a bit of it."

Elizabeth half frowned, half laughed, not knowing what to make of the expressions directed to her from her husband or from their hosts. "Well, his name is William?" She asked hopefully, as another part of the mystery slowly began to unravel within her mind.

Mrs Reynolds nodded as she patted hers and William's clasped hands once more. "I should hope so, dearie. Many's the time I've called him William. Guess my pretty."

Elizabeth shook her head. As much as she realised what the answer had to be within her mind, the reasons for concealing such a name continued to escape her, for surely he had nothing to gain in doing so. "I can't guess," she replied.

Her hostess pressed her gloved palm on her and William's clasped hands once more, before resuming her tale. "I could. I found him out one night all in a flash, didn't I Edmund dear?" She paused to turn her gaze on to her husband for a brief moment, then back to the beautiful young woman before them.

"It was on a particular night when he'd had a disappointment about a certain young lady," she explained, with a knowing glance directed to both William and Elizabeth, as they realised that she must be referring to the night when William proposed to her and she refused. "Too many's the time
I'd seen him sitting so lonely like that as a child. I just cried out, 'William, its you!' And he catches me as I fall down in his arms."

Elizabeth stilled, startled at having her suspicions confirmed, then glanced at her husband almost in wonder, her response somewhat quietened of its usual brightness when she took in his uncertain, almost pleading expression for her to understand and not be angered by his deception. "William Darcy? But that's not possible. He is drowned."

"Now my dear," Mrs Reynolds remarked, patting the joined hands of the young couple once more, "let me finish telling. So I says to Edmund, lord be thankful! Here is our William Darcy come home again to us. And we both fall down, crying for joy!"

William smiled at her now, although the attempt was half-hearted at best, as he was still nervous of receiving her anger. "Do you see my darling? Can you understand? These two, who I came to life to dispossess and disappoint, they cry for joy."

"Oh don't you mind him," Mrs Reynolds half admonished the man whom she had practically raised, with all the authority that a fond second mother might be supposed to reasonably possess. "So, William tells us about his disappointment with a certain young person and how he's going to leave London and let us keep our wrongful inheritance." Mrs Reynolds glanced at her husband whose own eyes met her gaze briefly before glancing down at the floor at the memory of his actions. "And my Edmund, well you should've seen him. To think that he'd come to the property wrongfully, turned him whiter than chalk."

She directed a smile of reassurance at him before turning her gaze back to the couple sitting before them. "So we came to our confabulation about a certain young lady. Edmund says, 'she's a little spoilt but that's only on the surface. She's true golden at heart.' And then William says 'oh if I could but prove so.' And then we says 'what would content you? If she was to stand up for you when you were slighted? If she was to be true to you when you were poorest and friendless? And all this against any interest. How would that do? 'Do?' he says, 'it would raise me to the skies.' And we says 'make your preparations for it is our firm belief that up will you go.' Edmund says 'Elizabeth was a little frightened of me at first. She thought me a dusty and brown old bear!'"

Elizabeth blushed, half ashamed of her first impressions, tempered as they were now and before by her continued observation of their kind manners and affable nature, as well as their constant generosity. "Well I...."

Mrs Reynolds brushed away her attempt at denial. "You did, my dear. He says 'what if I was to become that old bear she thought me once?' 'William' he says 'prepare to be slighted and oppressed.' And he began. Lord, how he began. And you proved yourself true as we knew you would. And William wouldn't let us tell you though that was the plan. He says 'she's so selfless and contented. I can't afford to be rich yet.' And so we go on. Now the baby's on the way. He's says 'I can't tell her now.' And I said 'if you don't tell her as soon as you can so she can come into her rightful home, then I will.'"

Elizabeth found herself smiling as she turned from Mrs Reynolds, to her husband, and then to their host, whose head was bowed nervously, awaiting her anger. She found she had none left to give. In fact none existed in the first place. For as she listened to Mrs Reynolds's account of the deception performed, she realised her husband's motive for doing so was not one born out of a selfish desire to change her ways, but a heart that yearned for her to love him as much as he had come to love her. As for Mr and Mrs Reynolds, they had only done what any good friends would do in their position.

"Now, come sir, and meet my gaze," she uttered to Mr Reynolds, who nervously looked up from the floor, to find her parting from her husband's clasp to rise from the sofa and stand before him. "Come
"Well I did hope it might hint at caution, my dear," Mr Reynolds admitted. "And I assure you that on that celebrated day when I which has since been agreed upon, to be my greatest demonstration, I allude to crying, 'money,' and William stares at me as if I've gone a little strange, then flinty words hit my old lady so hard on my account I had to hold her hard and stop her from running after you, and telling you I was playing a part!"

Later, when their former host and hostess left them to take their air in the grounds, Elizabeth stood before the prospect where she could observe them, musing over all she had learned this morning. It was almost too incredible to believe. She had gained a fortune she always wished for, and now hardly seemed to matter. Her husband, whom she had feared after last night's excursion would be parted from her forever, was alive and well, and master of that grand fortune, laying open before her. She had been deceived, even up to the point of signing her name on the register for their marriage, only signing her first, as William took over the rest, but the deception did not make her angry, not as perhaps it once might have done.

She could understand why he might be driven to doing it, why she might have done such a thing if it had been her travelling back to England, to face a husband and a life she had never known, or cared for, courtesy of one embittered father. She could count herself blessed that her own was such a contrast, and wished that her husband had been dealt the same hand.

Speaking of husband, she mused as William wrapped his arms around her waist, his hands caressing her through the fabric of her dress, is dear face nestled upon her shoulder, his dear voice close and tender in her ear. After Mrs Reynolds had given her account, he had spoken of his own, giving her to understand everything which had taken place from the earliest moments of his childhood that he could remember, the innocent, carefree days passed in Derbyshire, before the times of sadness spent in Maiden Lane, until he and his sister exiled themselves to the Cape, to the moment he had learned of his father's death, and returned to England. He spoke to her as much as he had spoken to their hosts the night after she had refused his first proposal, and her reaction was more than he could ever have hoped for.

"Forgive me, my darling," he uttered lovingly now, his voice warm and soft by her ear as he rested his head against her dark hair. "I was drowned, or as good as. And as I lay by that river gasping for air, I thought I might as well be. I had nothing left to live for. And when you have nothing, you are very bold. I had nothing to lose by trying you out. And when I did, I found I had the best of friends and the most worthy of wives."

He pressed a kiss to those dark elaborately pinned tresses before he continued. "And then you told me of this new life growing within you. So it was then I realised that I did miraculously have everything I hoped for, I was so afraid to lose it and determined to hold fast to it. I couldn't risk telling you until I had one more signal of your love, and then yet more and more." He searched her eyes for understanding as she turned her face to gaze into his own, receiving it much to his surprise and relief. "Can you forgive me? We might still be in Blackheath had it not been for Mrs Reynolds and our friend, the Inspector."

Elizabeth clasped his hands which rested upon her waist, above where the child grew inside her and nuzzled his face with her own in reassurance. "There is nothing to forgive, my love. I am too ashamed of my own conduct back then to give credence to be angry at yours. We shall not quarrel for the greater share of blame annexed to that evening when you first declared your affections, and were soundly, rudely rebuffed, nor for what my injured pride all but forced you into following
through. You must learn some of my philosophy; think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure.” Her gaze turned back to Mr and Mrs Reynolds outside. “I hope we do not have to part with them again.”

“We never shall, my love, on that I swear,” he remarked.
They had only been standing together in front of the window for a few minutes before they were disturbed by the dogs barking outside, signalling the unexpected arrival of a visitor to their property. Turning they surveyed prospect of the pebbled driveway to the grand front door, where they saw a middle aged man with a wooden leg hobbling towards the house, in the company of another middle aged gentleman.

"And now for the other denouement," William murmured, and with a final kiss to his wife's slender neck, he took Elizabeth by the hand and led her into the dining room, where they were soon joined by the Reynolds's, a footman, who announced the identity of their visitors as Misters Younge and Wickham.

"Reynolds," the man with the wooden leg, who answered to the latter name, remarked in a growling tone, directing his gaze at William and his wife, "I thought you said that you'd dismissed this fellow."

"No fellows here," Darcy remarked, leaving his wife's side to confront the squaddie head on, "or I'll throw you out of the window, you wretch!"

Wickham sneered at the secretary, scoffing at the mere idea of the man proposing this form of action, let alone carrying it out, for he was still ignorant as to secretary's real identity, and turned to the gentleman he was blackmailing. "Reynolds, lets get down to business. I want the room cleared of this scum."

Mr Reynolds shook his head whilst his companions failed to obey the growled directive as well. "That's not going to be done, Wickham."

Wickham turned to his companion. "Mr Younge, will you be so good as to hand me over that document?"

Mr Younge produced the Will from his pocket and handed it over. "And now sir," he uttered, directing the title to Mr Reynolds, "having parted with it, I wish to make one small observation. Not that it is necessary, but it is a comfort to my mind. George Wickham, you are a precious old rascal."

His friend blinked in astonishment, too surprised by the insult to utter a word in reprisal, only able to stand startled as he received it.

Mr Younge continued. "George Wickham, note, that I took the liberty of telling Mr Reynolds about our enterprise at quite an early stage. Though my hands were not, for a few hours, quite as clean as I could wish, I hope I have made full amends."

"Certainly Mr Younge, certainly," Mr Reynolds assured him.

"Thank you sir," Mr Younge replied with a bow. "I'm much obliged for good opinion and for the influence so kindly brought to bear on a certain lady both by yourself and Mr William Darcy," he added, with a bow to the secretary, causing Wickham to gasp as he realised the true identity of gentleman, and how it changed matters regarding his schemes to profit from this malicious plan. "Everything else between you and me is now at an end, but I beg leave to repeat that you are a
precious old rascal."

Wickham had time to collect himself by this point, and realised that although the victim had changed names, it was one which he preferred to have under his power, as there was still a profit to be made from this venture, and the reward would be all the greater for losing his comrade in the scheme, as well as receiving the satisfaction of being able to accomplish what none of his forefathers had managed in his place. "You're a fool, you may go and be welcome." He turned his gaze on his first victim, who was regarding him with a composed expression, quite unlike the ones which he offered previously. "Now Reynolds, I'm here to be brought off! Now, buy me or leave me."

Mr Reynolds smiled. "I think I'll have to leave you, Wickham."

The squaddie scowled, but not with as half as much dissatisfaction as he might have previously entertained. "I see how this goes. You can afford to be so bold now you have so much less to lose!" He turned to the former secretary, the scowl turning into a malicious, almost gleeful grin. "But Mr Darcy here, ask him if he knows what this piece of paper is."

"It is a will of father's," William answered quite calmly, "of a later date than the one formally recognised, leaving the entire estate to the Crown."

"Right you are! So what is it worth to yer?" Wickham cried.

"Absolutely nothing," Darcy answered. Suddenly he left his wife's side and strode forward, whereupon he grabbed the soldier by his collar of his ragged clothing, and shoved the man against the ornate flourishing of the fireplace behind them. "You scoundrel."

"You're knocking my head against the wall!" Wickham cried, stunned by the sudden and somewhat violent manoeuvre.

"I mean to!" Darcy all but growled back, his grip tightening as he pressed the face of his blackmailer against the sculpted mantelpiece. "I'd give a thousand pounds to be able to smash your brains out!" He took a deep breath, pressing the man even further, while his voice acquired a extra amount of steel. "Let me show you something."

Leaving the unfortunate wretch where he stood, Darcy went to Mr Reynolds who gave him another piece of parchment, which he thrust up in front of Wickham's face. "This is the last Will of many made by my unhappy father. And it leaves the entire estate to Mr Reynolds, excluding me altogether. Mr Reynolds found it and it disturbed him beyond measure, so he buried it in the mounds, his intention being that it should never come to light. When he told me of this, I urged him to recover it and have it legally established." Darcy paused to he could grab the other Will in Wickham's hand, wrenching the precious document from his avariciously hungered grasp. "So you see that this, pathetic, piece of paper, has no value whatsoever."

Tossing both documents aside, he seized the man by his collar once more, pressing his firmly against the mantelpiece. "Now, you will listen to me! We knew enough about you and your family, to lead you on to the last possible moment so that your disappointment might be the heaviest possible. And believe this, I only possess my inheritance through Mr Reynolds, who insisted that I should have my fortune and he his small inheritance and no more. I owe everything I possess to the kindness and tenderness of Mr and Mrs Reynolds, and when I see a roundworm like you presume to rise up against these noble souls, the wonder is I don't twist your head off and throw it out of the window!"

With that last epithet, Darcy all but spat upon Wickham's face before he relinquished his grip of the man's collar to return to his wife's side, leaving Mr Reynolds to put an to the whole affair. Mr Reynolds handed Wickham his crutches. "I'm sorry, Wickham, that me and Mrs Reynolds can't have
a higher opinion of you, but I shouldn't like to leave you worse off in life than when I found you, so what'll it cost to set you up in another stall?"

Wickham's mind, despite having been knocked about bit by first the disappointment of his scheming and then the violence of Mr Darcy's motions against his head, was still quick enough to comprehend what Mr Reynolds was offering and to seize upon this opportunity for some profit out of the failed venture. He remembered now his stall that he used to con people out of their well earned money, the occupation which had caused him to encounter Mr Reynolds in the first place, as he had set it up deliberately before the entry to the road upon which the Darcy townhouse resided. "Well sir, when I first made your acquaintance, I had got together a collection of ballads which was I may say above price."

"Well, then they can't be paid for, and you'd better not try!" Darcy cried from his place by his wife. "There was a pair of trestles, umbrella, clothes horse." Wickham recollected, trying to speak as he had not even heard Mr Darcy's threat. But when he raised his eyes and saw that the gentleman was serious in his intention to carry it out, paused and surrendered the final haggle. "I leave the sum to you sir."

Mr Reynolds handed him some coins, a small fortune which Wickham did not earn as far as Darcy was concerned, but comparatively less than what the old squaddie had hoped to receive when he first entered the house earlier. "Come, here's couple of pound. And now," he added, beckoning the footmen and butler to come within from where they had been waiting out in the entrance hall, "in my final duties as host of this house, I shall see to it that you never darken the premises ever again."

With all the trouble that Wickham had attempted to inflict being resolved, events after those two denouements went much more smoothly. Elizabeth and Darcy celebrated their first dinner with Mr and Mrs Reynolds after Mr Younge left, during which the household were informed of the news that the Darcy heir had been found alive after all. Not having seen the young gentleman since he was a child and some even not at all, the servants were quite astonished to discover that the man whom they had known as Mr Hurst was in fact their master, Mr Darcy.

By degrees, all came to hear some of the details regarding his desire to conceal his name, and the idea of him wanting to fall in love with his wife and for his wife to fall in love with him appealed to the romantic in all of them, ensuring their approval and respect for the new master and mistress.

The next day Richard Fitzwilliam paid a much happier visit to the Darcy townhouse than the one he had conducted to the police station in Limehouse borough after the Inspector had been informed of the truth behind Mr Denny's disappearance. Overjoyed as he had been to learn that his cousin was alive after all this time, he was also happy to forget the deception that caused him sorrow earlier. He brought with him news of welcome from his parents, who were delighted to learn that their nephew was alive and married, and soon to be a father, as well as the necessary legal documents that would outline the proper ownership of the Darcy estates under William's control.

A visit was soon undertaken to the Fitzwilliam's townhouse, where another celebration was held to welcome William and his wife. Lord and Lady Matlock were delighted with their nephew and his wife, caring not a jot about the somewhat colourful background both of them now came from. A similar celebration was also held in Holloway a day later when the Bennets were informed of the extraordinary news.

Upon first hearing it, Mrs Bennet sat quite still, and unable to utter a syllable. Nor was it under many minutes, that she could comprehend what she had heard; though not in general backward to credit what was to the advantage of her family, or that came in the shape of a lover to any of them. She
began at length to recover, to fidget about in her chair, get up, sit down again, wonder and bless herself. As for her husband, Mr Bennet took great pleasure in declaring himself to be a party to the secret shortly after his son in law had asked for his consent to marry Elizabeth, and informed his favourite daughter that since then William had risen every hour in his esteem.

News of Jane's marriage to Mr Bingley had also just reached them on the day of this celebratory dinner, causing much conversation and wonderment as her sister's revelation had. At first Mrs Bennet was disappointed that her eldest had only managed to secure herself a lawyer, but upon hearing that his father was a rich landed gentleman, her approval became as equally overflowing for her eldest daughter as it had for her second. Mr Bennet declared that he was also content with Bingley as a son in law, for the reputation of his father as one of Society's cavalier eccentrics was renowned throughout London.

When the familial celebrations were over, another was performed in the part of a soiree at the Darcy townhouse for Society. Much as Darcy and Elizabeth wished to keep themselves from that circle of rich judges, they were aware of the burden placed upon them by the reputation of the Darcy name, and that their children would should have every advantage open to them, including all that Society offered, so they did not endure as much hardship as their parents had. Having made the most of the previous events such as the strange case of the Darcy Will and all that it entailed, Society was content to talk and observe the young couple for many days to come, although after the soiree, both past times were limited to being in houses owned by everyone except the couple who were at the centre of such converse and observation.

Elizabeth and Darcy chose not to give up the cottage at Blackheath, keeping the property instead as a quiet residence for themselves and their family when they desired to get away from everything and just be themselves. They had spent so many months of their early married life there and their fortune granted them the opportunity to keep it without having to worry that the property would be a drain on the family resources. Returning to it after the last of the celebrations, they helped their new household staff pack what they wished to take with them back to the Darcy townhouse, then made sure the house was safely shut up until it was needed.

Richard Fitzwilliam then returned to their side, as he helped arrange for his younger and, as he joked, much prettier, cousin to return from the estate in the Cape and join her brother and his wife in London. Georgiana was delighted to be reunited with her brother and her cousins, and equally happy to meet her sister. Although a little shy, due to her youth and the relatively sheltered life she and William had spent aboard, she was anxious to become acquainted with Elizabeth, having heard much of her from her brother's many letters.

Elizabeth was pleased to meet with Georgiana also, finding her manners perfectly unassuming and gentle. She was tall, and on a larger scale than Elizabeth, and though little more than sixteen, her figure was formed, and her appearance womanly and graceful. She likewise entertained a warm opinion of the Fitzwilliam family also, and was relieved that after all the trials they had endured to reach this moment, no one seemed to begrudge her or William's place in Society now that the truth was public.

After the cousins had spent some time together catching up on all each had missed due to their many years of separation, Richard left the Darcys for Derbyshire, carrying with him a letter from Elizabeth to her sister, containing a detailed account of all that had occurred since she last saw Jane, upon the occasion of her wedding. He was also anxious to see his friend, for he had not visited the couple since the day of their nuptials either.

He hoped to be a witness to the much improved condition of his friend, however, the sight of Charles seated in a chair, attired in a warm lose smoking gown, trousers and shirt, with a pale yet healthy
glow displayed across his features was more than he had ever expected to be greeted with.

Jane smiled happily at seeing his serious expression brighten into something approaching hopeful joy and rose up to greet him before offering him a chair. "Don't let him get overexcited, Richard. Visitors bring up his spirits."

Charles laughed softly as she left them both to attend to her cousins who now her husband was recovering, took up some of her time once more. Richard handed her Elizabeth's letter as she left, then grinned as he took the empty chair and took in his friend's recovery. "Charles, I am overjoyed to see you looking so well. If this is what marriage does to a man I might be tempted to undertake the state myself one day. Now, what have I missed?"

"My father paid us a visit up here, up the river," Charles informed him. "Objected to his hotel of course," he added, causing a pause as Richard chuckled, remembering the last time he had met Mr Bingley Senior, and hearing the same objection regarding his accommodation then. His friend's father was a fellow of discerning and exacting tastes, possessing a quixotic nature that while dictated that his children should earn the wealth they were to inherit, demanded that he, as current owner of the wealth, be provided with nothing but the vest best of what that wealth could offer him.

"As you know he's a much younger cavalier than me," Charles continued, emphasising the word, though it must be noted that the description was ironic, though few would realise this when they met the gentleman, for he possessed a youthful countenance, "and an admirer of beauty, was so affable as to suggest that Jane should have her portrait painted, which for him is like a paternal benediction with gushing tears! So our marriage being so solemnly recognised, I have no fears on that score. And you are handling my puny financial affairs so adeptly that what little I have to call my own, may be more than I ever had."

Richard nodded, then took time to inform him of his own news regarding his cousin's return from the dead. He observed his friend while he relayed the details of the matter, pleased to find that much of his appearance was not an illusion of health, but a real indication of his gradual recovery to that balanced and humoured state. Noting that his friend was well able to withstand the vivid tale of the scheme which Mr Wickham had tried and failed to involve the Darcy family in, he ventured to broach a more serious matter between them, that of the culprit responsible for his friend's current convalescence. "Charles, the schoolmaster."

In sudden, grave concern, Charles paled alittle, and reached out to clutch his arm across the small table that resided between where they sat. "He's not suspected?"

"No, rest easy," Richard assured him, giving the hand a comforting gentle clasp before elaborating on his answer. "I have made sure that the police have lost scent of him. I promise, Charles. But he still lives and he did you dreadful injury. And I cannot help but feel he should be punished."

Charles shook his head, a smile forming upon his features once more. "No, Richard, he does not live. And he did me a favour."

Richard frowned, unable to comprehend how stalking his friend to Derbyshire, then violently attacking him before dumping in a river and leaving for dead constituted as being declared such a deed of benevolence. "A favour?"

"Yes," Charles confirmed. "Consider this; had he not attacked me, I do not know what I would have done. How I would have injured her with my reckless passion." His friend made move to protest, causing him to pause and take his hand once more before he continued to state his case. "Richard, listen, listen. I would have lost her respect. Any possibility of our love would have been gone forever. Consider that, and consider what I have now. And then tell me whether the schoolmaster"
lives. If not as some ghost between here and hell, knowing as he does that he brought us together. You think he does not have punishment enough?"

Richard recollected his last sighting of the schoolmaster, as something of a spectre, haunting the lodgings he and Charles resided in near the Chancery. At the time he had found appearance of Mr Collins quite terrifying, along with the knowledge that he had been stalking Charles ever since Jane disappeared from London. As much as he disapproved of such actions, he had also disliked his friend’s casual acceptance of them, and his decision to use the surveillance to his own morbid amusement, by goading the schoolmaster into madness. Looking back on the man now, Richard realised the pitiful nature that could now be applied to that haunting figure. His friend was correct. Mr Collins had punishment enough.

While it was the opinion of these two gentlemen of the bar that nothing needed to be done regarding the actions of Mr Collins, it was not the opinion held by the other authority who had involved himself in the case. Though the lawyers could rest easy in the knowledge that the police had indeed lost sight of the schoolmaster as being a suspect for this crime, one other person had kept note of Mr Collins’s comings and goings all this time, and was now ready to confront the man with the evidence he had retrieved; the one piece of evidence that if presented to the authorities, could implicate the schoolmaster beyond all reasonable doubt.

It was not the fault of Richard or Charles that this person’s interest in the matter had escaped their notice, for they had not the slightest knowledge that the person in question was involved in the dark violence in the first place. For they had not known where the schoolmaster spent his night before attacking Charles, or where he had returned to in order to recover and wash the evidence of the violence away from his person. No, only one man had known this, and that man did his best to ensure that the lawyers and police never learned this particular piece of information.

So, it came to pass on a winter’s morning, that the person involved made his way to Mr Collins’ school. This respected establishment was crowded with pupils and masters of varying ages and degrees of education, this day being the start of a new term. Such an event was no inconvenience to the person, for he wanted witnesses for this first meeting between him and the schoolmaster, and a new classroom of pupils would be the best unbiased witnesses that the world could provide him.

As for Mr Collins, he greeted this morning with the same grave, controlled demeanour with which he welcomed every day now. Since the night of the attack, he had been suffering from the weight of a guilty conscience, not in the knowledge that he had committed a sin, but in the worry that his sin had not accomplished what he desired it to; the end of his rival, and the return of his love to his side and hand.

When he had passionately declared to Jane that he hoped he may never kill Charles Bingley, he never imagined his hope being granted in quite this manner. As the days continued to bring news of the lawyer’s recovery, along with the announcement of his marriage to Jane, so did Mr Collins suffering increase as he endured the punishment which his own actions had merited.

Until, one winters morning, after many sleepless nights spent in reflecting over the act and changing it till it brought forth the desired result, he turned round from his blackboard, where he had written his name so his new pupils might learn it, to find the man sitting amongst these innocent poor souls in his classroom.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but where might I be?" Jenkinson asked, affecting the behaviour of an ignorantly lost man about the borough.

Mr Collins did his best to sound and appear calm and collected, even though he was greatly
discomposed by the man's presence. "Well, this a school, sir."

"And who might teach at this school?" Jenkinson asked, persisting in his ignorance.

"I do," Mr Collins informed him, though he had the sense that Jenkinson was already aware of what his answer would be.

Jenkinson paused in affected astonishment. "What, you're the master?"

Mr Collins wished he could glare at the man and order him out of the room, but that would alert and students immediately as to the strangeness of the encounter, and he feared what actions Jenkinson might take if he decided to. "Yes, I am the master."

"And a lovely thing it must be," Jenkinson mused in his same affected manner, casting his gaze about the curious boys who were watching the proceedings, "to teach young children like these what's right and to know that they learned what's right by your example. Might I ask a question of these lambs of yours?"

"If it is educational yes," Mr Collins allowed, inwardly fearful and suspicious as what sort of question Jenkinson had in mind, but reluctant to refuse, knowing such a response would only increase the curiosity of his pupils.

"Oh it is that," Jenkinson replied before grinning at the boys. "Tell me, young sirs, what sorts of water do we find on land?"

There was a pause as the boys thought upon the matter, then they recited the answers which they had been taught, listing all the sorts of water, as their master collected his breath and tried to ascertain what Jenkinson was attempting to learn.

"And, my lambs," Jenkinson continued, still smiling at the pupils, "what is it that they catch in these lakes and rivers and ponds?"

"Fish?" Ventured a lad hesitantly.

"Yes," Jenkinson answered, "but what else?"

"Weeds," proposed another.

"Yes," Jenkinson acknowledged, "but I'll have to tell you what else. I bet you won't guess." He reached down beside him and placed on the desk a large bundle of clothes which the schoolmaster knew very well.

Mr Collins froze as he caught sight of the garments, realising only this moment that Jenkinson had followed him after he left the cottage by the Lock, watched and waited while he washed himself clean, then discarded his blood stained clothing. The revelation that Jenkinson had retrieved the very garments which were meant to cast suspicion on him was disturbing to say the least.

"It is a bundle of clothes!" Jenkinson remarked gleefully, as the boys reacted with astonishment to such piece of news. "Bless me if I didn't catch this one in a river by me. You see it had been sunk there by a man who wore them..."

"How do you know that?" Mr Collins interrupted him hurriedly, horrified for a moment that the man would dare to relate an account of his violent attack to his pupils.

"Because I was watching him and I saw him," Jenkinson replied, looking at Mr Collins for the first
time. Though his demeanour had not lost the grin which he wore whilst he had been quizzing the boys, it now acquired something of a devilish gleam. "And do you know for some reason I think that man fetched up in this school."

Mr Collins turned away from Jenkinson and slowly began to wipe his name off the blackboard. Though the action was by no meaning as soothing as he had hoped, it did allow him to regain a little of his composure as he answered. "Yes, I believe I know him."

"Beg that you may tell that man that I wish to see him at my lock upriver," Jenkinson remarked, his affected demeanour all but dropped now, as he went about the real reason for his unexpected visit.

"Yes I'll tell him," Mr Collins replied, still facing the blackboard, the hand which held the wet cloth that wiped away his name beginning to crush the rag into his fist.

"Do you think he'll come?" Jenkinson inquired, with a grave yet gleeful tone.

"I'm sure he'll come," Mr Collins answered, a desperate resolution forming within his tormented soul.

"Be seeing you, my lambs," Jenkinson remarked before he rose from the stool and left the classroom.

Mr Collins did not turn round until he had heard the door close behind his unwanted visitor. Securing the interest of his pupils once more was an easy endeavour, more due to his many years of training than to the composition of his mind. For the rest of the day he attempted to teach as he usually did, trying to pretend to teachers and students alike that all was well with him. But it was not an easy deception, as his mind was already travelling up river, to the cottage beside the Lock that lay before the village of Lambton, wondering what fate awaited him.

It was night by the time Collins arrived at the lock outside the village of Lambton. He took a train with what money he could spare, then walked the rest of the way, down the companion path beside the water's edge. A thick covering of snow had settled over the ground, and it was so cold that the river had frozen. But the schoolmaster remained unaware of the severe weather, for a coldness had settled over his body ever since Jenkinson appeared in his classroom, even before.

From the moment the lock keeper informed him of the news that the body of Bingley had been retrieved from the river by Jane Bennet, Collins became insensible to anything but his own wretchedness. The weight settled upon his heart, increasing in size day by day as the full state of how low he had brought himself was slowly revealed to him.

He could not escape hearing reports of the attack, for Society loved nothing more than a good, sensational story, and the drowning of a lawyer, son of a prominent man, rescued by a woman was the most sensational story since the Darcy inheritance.

When it emerged that the female rescuer was the sister of the woman promised as a bride in the Darcy inheritance, Society became even more consumed by the story. Journalists began to write daily accounts of the event, each one more gruesome, more vivid and more fantastical than the one before, sustaining but never quite sating the appetite.

As the story spread into other broad sheets and local papers, it brought accounts from noted men and women all over the country, criticising the levels of violence in the county. Ultimately the reports were nothing more than a general moan, but they kept people talking about the attack and Collins kept hearing them.

Eventually the accounts revealed new information, reports of how the lawyer was steadily recovering, that he had married his rescuer. He came to realise how much his violent actions
condemned him, by achieving the very thing he tried to prevent. Along with these reports of the lawyer's continued survival, he waited for the moment when policemen came to his classroom to arrest him.

But they never did, no matter how much he wished or dreaded their coming, his days continued to be filled with the normality of routine. When he planned this violence, he had done what he could to ensure that afterwards he would escape retribution, by implicating another man.

He had not consciously chosen Jenkinson, at least, that is what he tried to tell himself. Jenkinson just happened to be the model for the clothes he wore to commit the act. Throwing those clothes in the river was a motion designed to confound the police, to force them to give up their investigation. He had never imagined that the law would not bother to find him, but the criminal would instead.

Collins could not understand why Jenkinson decided to find him. Evidently he possessed a motive by bringing the bundle of clothes to the school, but what it was Collins could not begin to determine. He had nothing that Jenkinson could want. But not meeting him, even though he could easily defend himself against the word of a vagrant, imprisoned for one crime before, was something he could ill avoid, unless he wished to see the man appear in his class room everyday.

"So I'm here," Collins answered as he entered the lock keeper's cottage to find Jenkinson in a chair, smoking his pipe as he waited for him. "Who is to begin?"

Jenkinson got up from his chair, crossing the short distance between them, and without warning, searched the schoolmaster's pockets, frowning at what little he found in the way of monetary value. "Well, where's your watch?"

"I left it behind," Collins replied. His timepiece was something it had cost him many years of wages to earn, and he had no desire to lose it to the pickpockets who loitered about the stations or along the roads to Lambton.

"I want it," Jenkinson growled, and not for the first time, Collins' noticed the hungry gleam his expression acquired whenever money was in his hand. He had seen that look when he first encountered the man in London, and given him five shillings after obtaining the information about Jane Bennet and the lawyer Bingley. "I mean to have it."

William Collins laughed as he at last realised the motive behind Jenkinson's attempt to blackmail him. "Is that what you want from me?"

"Look here, schoolmaster," Jenkinson remarked, irritated by the cold contempt he had just received, "you could've dealt with Bingley without my care having a curse. But when you copy my clothes, my neckerchief, shake blood on me, you make as if to throw the whole crime on me. You'll pay me and you'll pay me heavy, you sly devil! I was playing your game long ago, before you tried your clumsy hand in it. When you stole away, I steals after you, and when I sees you throw these bloody clothes away, I sees here then is proof. And I'll be paid for it, till I've drained you dry!"

Collins looked at him solemnly as he saw the flaw in this plan. He felt that he held an odd kind of power over the lock keeper, even though he knew that this scheme of Jenkinson's would condemn him to a slavery of sorts for the rest of his life. "Well you can't get out of me what is not in me. You've had more than two guineas off me already. Do you know how long it takes me to earn such a sum?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Jenkinson replied grimly, unperturbed by the schoolmaster's resistance. "You'll have to pawn every stick you own, beg and borrow every penny you can. I'll keep you company wherever you go till I'm satisfied."
Abruptly that vision of slavery turned into a hell. He recalled the madness which he had been driven to when he stalked Bingley only that summer. How the lawyer had turned the scare tactic on its head by wearing him down, leading him in false trails all over the city. Often he had blamed the lawyer for causing the violence to be visited on him in the first place by goading his attacker into madness. Silently he realised that he had to try and persuade the man to give up the scheme.

Gesturing to the money that Jenkinson already held in his hand, Collins uttered, "this is all the money I have. Say I give you this, and my watch, and every quarter when I draw my salary I give you a portion and..."

Jenkinson shook his head, dismissing the paltry sum, and at the notion that he could trust the schoolmaster to make such regular donations. "You got away from me once. I won't take a chance again."

"I am a man with absolutely no resources but myself," Collins informed him. "I have absolutely no friends."

"That's no matter to me," Jenkinson replied. "I don't care how you get the money. Whether you beg, steal, borrow, or marry it, I want what's owed me." He rose from his chair to repose himself on the bed which was resting nearby. "I'll give you grace till the morning, t'otherest, then partners you and I shall become."

Collins woke in the morning with no recollection of how he managed to fall asleep after the events of the night before. He had spent most of the hours in turmoil, wrestling with the knowledge that he would never be free of his crime, even when Jenkinson died, presuming the rogue died before him that is, freeing him of this malicious scheme, he would still remained tormented by the united happiness of the two people his violence was meant to divide forever.

He was a prisoner of his crime, bringing misfortune upon misfortune to rest about his shoulders, diving him down to plunge the lowest depths of society forever. There was nothing but torture left for him in this life, he would never find freedom from his demons, nor happiness ever again.

Despairingly he let his eyes slowly accustomed themselves to the slight light of dawn drifting through the small windows of the lock keeper's cottage. A wind swept through the gap between the front door and the floor, though the harshness of such extreme cold weather, made worse by the ice upon the river and the snow upon the ground, did little to cool the blood pounding within him.

He caught sight of Jenkinson, his gaoler, stretched out upon the bed, apparently still asleep. Collins had half suspected to be confronted with the man's Midas gleam when he came to that morning. Asleep however, granted him a rare chance to choose his own destiny.

Jenkinson opened his eyes as he heard the front door close and darted up from his bed to exit the cottage in hot pursuit of his fleeing quarry. In the bright light of the frost covered snowy grass, he could see the footprints of prey, and within a few paces he found the school master walking down the tow path. His own step was harsh upon the ground, cracking the compressed half frozen snow, the sound awfully loud in the stillness of the Derbyshire countryside.

Collins heard his gaoler begin to dog him, desperation and despair overwhelming his heart. For a moment he was determined to defy the rogue, to continue down the tow path, but the futility of it all eventually defeated him. Abruptly he halted, turned round, and retraced his steps, walking straight past the temporarily startled keeper.

Jenkinson watched him turn and pass him, so surprised by the sudden motion that he let the
schoolmaster roam free for quite a distance before resuming his pursuit. "Come come, t'otherest, you can't be rid of me," he shouted, gleefully, cognisant of the power he held over the man. "I'm a going along with you wherever you go."

The return to the gates of the lock, with his gaoler still hot upon his heels, caused Collins to pause before the river, eyeing the dark icy depths that were akin to the emotions inside his heart and mind. *This would be a bad pit for a man to fall into with his hands tied*, he recalled saying once, when his mind was full of murderous plots, such a phrasing seeming now both apt and ironic to his tormented mind.

"It is no use, schoolmaster," Jenkinson uttered as the lock keeper came to stand behind him, like an executioner beside a condemned man. "You'll never be free of me."

Suddenly Collins turned round and grabbed Jenkinson about the waist, pulling the struggling rogue closely to his chest.

"Let go, I'll get my knife!" The lock keeper cried, but to no avail.

A terror settled over the rogue as his eyes caught sight of his captor dragging both of them towards the river's edge. "It is no use! You can't drown me! I told you. A man that's been brought back out of drowning cannot be drowned again!"

"But I can be!" Collins cried as he turned to face him. "And I'm resolved to be. And I'll hold you living and I'll hold you dead!"

There was a loud crack, the sound of the ice breaking under the impact, followed by the sinister simmering, as the river endured a sudden rise in temperature. Bubbles rippled through the narrow unfrozen surface, as the splashes slowly subsided.

Later two bodies, locked together in a torment of their own devising, could be seen floating beneath the new icy plane of the river.

**Chapter End Notes**

*1) Overend, Gurney & Company was a London wholesale discount bank, known as "the bankers' bank", which collapsed in 1866, around the time when Charles Dickens set *Our Mutual Friend* and *I have set Along the River*, owing about 11 million pounds, equivalent to £981 million at 2008 prices. Until events at Northern Rock in September 2007, it was the last run on a British bank. For more information, visit a well known online encyclopedia.*
Chapter 34

Part 34:

Although Elizabeth often vowed to herself that her courage always rises at any attempt to intimidate her, she could not deny that she approached the second visit to Pemberley without experiencing a mild trepidation at the prospect. During her first visit her mind possessed nothing more than curiosity for the grand estate of which, had not a man drowned, she might have been mistress.

Even as she grew to admire the elegant interiors, that were pleasing in their simplicity as opposed to being overly fine or outrageous in their rich furnishings, and the surrounding grounds that nature could not have done more for, beyond a slight pity that she was not able to enjoy many a pleasant ramble within the ten mile round park, her heart had remained untouched.

Now however she could ramble as much as she chose, admire where she wished, give lose to her every fancy and indulge her imagination in every possible flight, supposing herself mistress of all that she surveys, for such a state was true.

Thanks to the generosity of her husband's relatives and friends, she and Darcy would soon take up permanent residence in Pemberley's halls and parks. Their true state had been announced to Society, their acceptance assured by their fortune and patronage.

As she and her husband witnessed the overtures of many a gentleman and lady who only a few months ago had been more than pleased to drop her acquaintance upon hearing that she had all but eloped with a secretary, Elizabeth experienced some significant regret concerning how her own behaviour had been just as shallow when she was socialising in such circles.

There was no denying that she had spent her first months as the ward of Mr and Mrs Reynolds in a dreadful bitterness of spirit, too concerned with the grief over her loss of a sacrifice that would have ensured her family's future. She had been fortunate that Mr Darcy, or Mr Hurst as she had known him then, had been able to see through such self pity to love the real woman who hid herself beneath it, in a effort to protect a heart too broken by the many loses it had endured in close succession.

Indulging in many a ramble within the grounds of Pemberley would be a delight, but it was not that over which Elizabeth was experiencing trepidation. It was the knowledge that she was now mistress of this estate, and expected to run a household of servants, see after their care and that of the tenants, as well as becoming hostess to events in the surrounding villages, to soirees and balls at the estate.

Even when her father owned Longbourn, and she and Jane assisted him and their mother in running the estate, it was only in a tiny capacity, Longbourn being but a fraction of the size of Pemberley.

"My love, we are both new at this," William reminded her as the carriage and horses covered the remaining distance to the entrance of the country house. "We shall figure things out together, and receive help from many sources."

His words proved true soon after they settled, as Mr and Mrs Reynolds happily assumed their previous duties of steward and housekeeper, which had occupied them until his later father had taken them with him to the dust yard in Maiden Lane.

Within a few weeks they helped the new master and mistress learn the ropes of managing such a large and prosperous estate, so that by the time the master's sister returned home from the Cape, they were able to welcome her and the surrounding neighbourhood with all the style and gentility that the
Darcys had been known for.

Georgiana was delighted to return home, to see an estate she remembered through only fleeting glimpses of her childhood when it was her grandfather's domain. Though the woods and hills were not immediately familiar to her, or the halls and parlours, they soon became as infinitely dear to her as that of her brother and sister in law.

In the Cape she had led a relatively sheltered life, the small quantity of English Society large enough to build her confidence, but not so large as to be overwhelming. Under her brother's watchful eye she had flourished into a beautifully accomplished young lady, who played and sang all day long. There had been nothing but the memory of their father's miserly treatment to damage her innocence, no rakes nor scoundrels had threatened her heart.

A small, intimate family party came to Pemberley to welcome her home, consisting of the Bingleys and Richard Fitzwilliam. Charles was improving day by day and although he would never be quite the same man he was before he was attacked, in terms of mind this he believed was an improvement, though not in terms of strength.

He was considered well enough now to be moved from the Lambton Local Arms for the short five mile journey to Pemberley, where he was destined to reside during the rest of his recovery. During this time, he made the proper acquaintance of his brother in law, previously only seen during vague moments of awareness through his wedding ceremony.

Despite such disparate characters, the two relations by marriage soon grew close, Darcy appreciating Bingley's easiness, openness, the ductility of his temper, though no disposition could offer a greater contrast to his own, and though with his own he never appeared dissatisfied.

Bingley found much to like in Darcy also, coming to value his judgement, steadfastness, quiet reserved fastidiousness and his superior understanding. He was by no means deficient through his education and attainment of the bar, and it was through that skill he recognised intelligence when he made their acquaintance.

When Georgiana arrived home, she found the three gentlemen to be the closest of friends, loyal to her and, in the case of Darcy, Bingley and Mr Reynolds, to their wives, as well as to each other. The eight soon bounded together against what personages of Society dared to darken the environs of the ten mile round estate, as all slowly recovered from the effects which the last year had dealt upon all of them.

Naturally one recovery was of a much longer duration than the rest, but he soon came to possess the energy he could summon before, giving him the confidence, if not alittle trepidation as well, for such is always felt when one returns to pastimes after a long absence, to attempt some exercise.

The first of these was a leisurely occupation, requiring only courage and conversation on the part of the gentlemen involved, for the pastime was fraught with the dangers of nature. It involved a boat, which Darcy would row gently across the large lake which was situated in front of Pemberley House, whilst Fitzwilliam would talk and Bingley also, when he had conquered the reminders of what happened to him the last time he was near a natural source of water.

"Now that I have the energy, Richard, I've been thinking about the future," Charles informed him and Darcy, who sat passively rowing between them, content to listen. "I've had the idea of taking Jane to one of the colonies, working at my vocation there."

"I shall be lost without you," Richard remarked, knowing that he would not be the only one, for his cousin's wife would miss her sister dearly too, as would Darcy, who had become close to both of his
relations since their removal to Derbyshire.

But then Richard considered the other factor which might sway his friend's mind, one largely ignored since their retirement in the country, but one which would have been faced and endured sooner rather than later. "Maybe you're right," he conceded.

"No, I would not be right," Charles replied quietly, but with a firmness which indicated that his blood was up, a rare occurrence from such a mild disposition as he was known to possess. "Makes me angry to think I could turn coward on Jane, sneak away with her as if I were ashamed of her. Where would your friend's part in this world be, Richard, if she had turned coward against me and on immeasurably better occasion?"

"That's well said of course, Charles," Richard acknowledged, for he not considered such vocation to be attributed to such ignoble behaviour. Nevertheless, he felt must proffer his own opinion on the subject, for he sensed that was what his friend desired by his manner of venturing to declare such a proposition. "But are you sure that for her sake, you might not feel some slight coldness towards her on the part of s..... society?"

Charles laughed, startling both gentlemen, for it was an expression of amusement that lacked none of the energy which usually accompanied such emotion, a sure sign of their brother in law and friend's return to strength.

"Yes you may well stumble on that word, Richard!" he cried. "Now listen to me. My wife is somewhat nearer to my heart than society is. I owe her a little more than I owe Society, and I am prouder of her than I ever was of Society. Therefore, I will fight it out to the last gasp, with her and for her, here, in the open field. So if I should ever think to hide her away, then you, who I love next best in all the world, will tell me what I shall most righteously deserve to be told:- that she would have done better that night I lay bleeding to death, to turn me over with her foot and spit in my face."

He spoke with such an energy upon the subject that a glow, provided by the sun on a warm spring day, so irradiated his features that he looked, for the time, as though he had never been mutilated. His youthful countenance struck his relatives and friends speechless for a time, just as it would have his wife, were she near enough to hear him.

But that was not possible, for the boat was nearing the middle of the large lake, far from the bank where Mrs Bingley sat, along with her sister Mrs Darcy, their sister in law Georgiana, and Mr and Mrs Reynolds. Only able to see the gentlemen in the boat were they, and then but at intervals, for another occupied their attention, a bundle held gently in Mrs Darcy's arms, the son and heir to the great estate in which they all currently resided.

"Go and find out what society thinks of me, my dear fellow," Charles added, "if it will make you feel any better. As for myself, come hell or damnation, I really couldn't care less."

His friend's judgement lingered long in Richard's mind, the impact and import of his words lasting through his return to town, causing him to accept an invitation to dinner from Sir William and Lady Lucas, who had been, as usual, indefatigably dealing dinner cards to Society, and whoever desires to take a hand, had best be quick about it, for the House of Overend, Gurney, was due to make a resounding smash next week, the wreckage casting about all those who once invested in its wake.*

Of these the Lucases would suffer the worst, having found out the clue to that great mystery of how people could contrive to live beyond their means, to make corrupt deals or accept bribes, to the limit and beyond the means of their resources. Next week, it shall come to pass, that Sir William will be obliged by the discovery of these nefarious methods of acquiring wealth, to accept the post of the
Chiltern Hundreds, a meaningless sovereign stewardship requiring him to resign from the House of Commons and retire to Calais, surviving on the living provided by on Lady Lucas's diamonds.

It shall likewise come to pass, at as nearly as possible the same period, that Society will discover that it always did despise Lucas, and distrust Lucas, and that when it went to Lucas's dinners, it always had misgivings - though very secretly at the time, it would seem, and in a perfectly private and confidential manner.

The next week not yet arrived however, there is the usual rush to the residence of Sir William and Lady Lucas, of the people who go to their house to dine with one another and not with them. There is Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mr King and his daughter, Mr Forster and his wife, Lady Metcalfe, Miss Morris-Pope and Mr Harrington, whose presence is almost always forgot, that gentleman so reserved and fearful of expressing his opinion in the company of those he was anxious to keep as friends.

And there is Richard Fitzwilliam, who comes to observe these representatives of the Voice of Society, to reflect upon their judgement when it is expressed, how it relates of that of his cousin and his friend, and if he can find it within himself to possess the same opinion as his friend, of 'not caring less.'

The size of the dinner party was such that it made the room usually assigned to such an occasion heated and crushed, causing the host and hostess to move the dinner outside, or rather, for the servants of the host and hostess to make the arrangements just so. Lucas Lodge, as Sir William and his wife affected to call their salubrious residence, for it lodged beside the river, boasted a fine expanse of garden at the rear which led down to that source of water, along with a dock for steamers to float by.

When the meal gave way to brandy and cigars, Richard had been the first to escape the group, as his presence had ignited a rigorous, though hardly sound, debate on the merits of marriages which crossed the boundaries of Society. For a time he had recalled his friend's words, and staunchly stood his ground amongst them, but their opinion soon gave rise to his disgust, causing him to abandon the dining table for one which carried the remains of the courses which had been sampled this evening.

His freedom however, was not to last.

"Really, Richard, as you refuse to join our debate, we've had to bring it to you!" Lady Catherine declared, the first amongst the persons present to breech his reprieve, bringing most of the party within her ordered wake.

"A debate," Richard remarked, with it must be said some degree of sarcasm and tiredness from having listened to much of it already, "on such a pleasant evening?"

His Aunt ignored his ill-humoured reply in favour of continuing with her own discussion. "Our debating question was, does a young man of very fair family, heir to a fortune, possessing a good appearance and some talent, make a fool or a wise man of himself by marrying a female waterman turned nursery maid?"

Lady Catherine made no mention of names, for she was very aware of the fact that her family was connected to the gentleman and female in question, but it was perfectly obvious to Richard and the rest of the persons present who she was referring to.

"That is hardly the question," Richard replied, determined to defend his friend, disgusted beyond keeping silence, as he had been enduring such derision for most of the evening since he arrived. "Which is I believe, whether the man who you describe does right or wrong in marrying a brave
"Excuse me," Sir William cried, the decibel of his tone serving to silence the rest of those present, so all might hear his response and the judgement of the lawyer. "Was this young woman ever a female waterman?"

"Never. But she might sometimes have rowed in boat with her Uncle," Richard answered, for indeed such was the case, as it had been the task of Philips to discover and collect the bodies, while his niece guided their vehicle along the river behind them.

"Has the young woman got any money?" Mr Foster asked in much the same manner as his business partner, although, if next week were here, such a state would not be the case, and emphatically denied as ever having been the case.

Fitzwilliam could not deny possessing some amusement knowing that his reply would do naught but vex them exceedingly. "Absolutely nothing!"

"Well then my gorge rises against such a marriage!" Sir William remarked, it being well known that he had married his wife on the strength of her diamonds, and she accepted him on the strength of his knighthood. "It offends and disgusts me! Why, it makes me sick."

Lady Lucas, eager to lend her support to her husband, sniffed delicately, as if she had caught the pungent smell of effluence, foul and cloying from the river behind them. "There must be equality in station," she observed. "A man accustomed to society must look out for a woman accustomed to society."

"And what if the man does not care for society?" Richard countered, all but stating the opinion of his friend, though his style was in the same vein as the debate had been conducted, in a certain hypothetical manner.

"Does not care for Society!" Lady Catherine echoed incredulously, as though the very affection was one which she had never heard existing before. "Really, nephew! What an absurd opinion." She scoffed at the notion, having been brought up, as the eldest daughter of an Earl, to regard Society as the kingdom in which she reigned, when the sovereign was absent of course.

There was a brief hush after her disbelief was expressed, causing her to wonder for a moment if any cared to agree with her. Casting about the group for one who could be relied upon to voice their support, she continued. "Mr Harrington, you are so small, I had forgotten you. You never say a word, always silent as a mouse. Come now, speak up and tell us what you think!"

Mr Harrington was cautious in the nature of his response, but nonetheless when he did open his mouth, it was not to the satisfaction of his damsel. "I am disposed to think that this is a question of the feelings of a gentleman."

"A gentleman who contracts such a marriage has no feelings!" Sir William declared emphatically, causing all to join him in a murmur of support, although when next week is upon them, such a gesture will be just as steadfastly denied as to ever having taken place.

"Pardon me sir, but I don't agree," Mr Harrington replied. "If this gentleman's feelings of gratitude, of respect, of admiration, and of affection, induce him to marry this lady."

Sir William was outraged by such an epithet being used. "Lady?" He queried incredulously for one would hardly describe a female waterman turned nursery maid as someone belonging to such a noble station.
"Why, yes, sir," Mr Harrington continued. "For what else would you call her, if the gentleman were present?"

It must be said at this moment that Sir William had the grace to look chagrined in despite of himself, a state which, when next week is upon us, Society will attribute as to him possessing some foresight of the smash which was to come.

"I say again," Mr Harrington continued, "that if this gentleman's feelings induced him to marry this lady, then he is the greater gentleman for the action, and she is the greater lady."

This opinion having silenced the committee, not perhaps in agreement with the judgement, but in shock at such a normally reserved gentleman as Mr Harrington being known to voice it, the speaker walked away from the committee, to the railings of the dock, at the edge of the garden.

And thither also went Mr Fitzwilliam, pausing to fetch two glasses of brandy and a couple of Sir William's excellent cigars on his way, before joining the gentleman whom he had gained a new respect for, as a result of this evening's debate, as well as a great regard for, as he had spoken justly of his friend and his lady.

"Time for one more before we go back," he remarked, offering one of the brandies and cigars to Mr Harrington, who took it with a quiet smile, before resting his arms in a similar fashion upon the railings before them.

Below them the gentle waves of the river flowed and ebbed, as the night descended, and the party faded from existence.

THE END.

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