Summary

Several years after the end of Pride and Prejudice, we drop in on Mrs Reynolds as she stands by the window, watching for the arrival of the Christmas guests to Pemberley.

Notes

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A thousand thanks to my betas Dragonfly and frozen_delight

She had known it was snowing the moment she opened her eyes, and went directly to the window to look out over the grounds. The young chambermaids who’d been up for hours told her it had started just before sunrise, and the footmen came in for their breakfast shaking wet hair and stomping wet boots and laughing, giddy as schoolchildren.

Now, Mrs Reynolds stood by the window in her room, her hands resting on the sill, as evening stole over the countryside. The fading glow of wintry twilight showed her the delicate flakes swirling down like stars come to rest on the lawn and in the treetops, the final Christmas ornamentation settling lightly to earth. Pemberley lay like a jewel in a cupped hand, glittering brightly as snow drifted down over hill and wood and frozen river.

It was unlike her, this moment of lingering, watching, stillness. She told herself she was watching for the carriage that would bring Mr and Mrs Bingley and the children and usher in the beginning of the Christmas gaiety, but the view to the road was not good from this window, not with the
snow and the gathering dark, and after another minute she smiled, admitting that she was simply enjoying the last moment of idleness left to her until well into the new year. The arrival of their guests tonight was only the beginning; if snow did not make an enemy of the road Pemberley house would be full to bursting for many weeks to come. The Bingleys would be the first to arrive and, most likely, the last to leave as Mrs Bingley was anticipated to remain well into March, to stay with her sister through her lying-in.

A memory turned her thoughts away from the snow and the road and Mrs Reynolds’s smile grew brighter. Just that morning, Mrs Darcy had sought her out in the servants’ hall, bringing the morning letters, as she sometimes did on the occasions when she was too full of high spirits or restless impatience to wait for Mrs Reynolds, more properly, to come to her. Over the years since their master had brought her home to be mistress of Pemberley, her occasional appearance in the servants’ hall had ceased to be a source of gossip or surprise, but the first time she’d been seen braving the narrow back stairs in her condition she had garnered more than a few admonishments, most notably from cook, whose fierce attachment to their new mistress was as vociferous as the housekeeper’s was understated. But Mrs Reynolds was not among the rebukers. She had seen too many children brought into this world to doubt the strength of a mother’s will. Especially the will of such a mother-to-be as her mistress.

Mrs Darcy’s eyes had sparkled as she came into the room that morning, the delightful smile playing about her mouth speaking of merriment just waiting to burst forth. She told Mrs Reynolds without delay that Lady Catherine de Bourgh, making as excuse her disinclination for travel in the winter, would not be joining them at Pemberley for Christmas after all. And although Mrs Reynolds would never speak a spiteful word concerning any relative of her master, neither could she feign sorrow that Lady Catherine would not be descending upon them this year. Not when she was apt to bring her scrawny little lady’s maid who was forever poking her overlong nose into the business of Mrs Reynolds’s household. Spying on them was what Lady Catherine and her maid got up to, and, though God help her she would never give voice to her indignation, Mrs Reynolds had had her fill of it. Ever since Lady Anne passed away, her more imperious sister had acted as though she had a proprietary right to Pemberley. They had all borne it stoically through the years so she made no attempt to silence the titter of holiday cheer that passed around the servants’ table when Mrs Reynolds gave them the news over dinner.

But Mrs Darcy’s liveliness over the matter of Lady Catherine was not quite sufficient to let her overlook the unhappy news another letter brought. The Gardiners’ youngest daughter was still ill, and they were so far from wanting to expose Elizabeth to the dangers of the fever that the whole family would be staying in Gracechurch Street for Christmas. Mrs Reynolds had condoled with her over the loss to their party. Their absence would be felt, she knew; all the household owed Mr and Mrs Gardiner a debt, and held them in the highest esteem, for being the first to bring Miss Elizabeth Bennet to Pemberley.

Looking at her that morning, sitting below stairs and filling the humble room with a glow that could not be denied, Mrs Reynolds remembered her words to the young woman, foolish as they seemed now, the first day she met her. "I do not know when my master might marry - I do not know who would be good enough for him. Miss Elizabeth had been good enough. She had become a better mistress than Mrs Reynolds had ever dared hope for, and her son would be just like her. Just like them both. Mrs Reynolds thought with a swell of the deepest pride that she had known the child’s father when he was just four years old, and, God willing, she would live to see
his son at that same age.

The sound of quick feet on the stairs woke her from her reverie just as she realised what she had been looking at for the past several minutes - the barest flicker of light to the west, just where the road would be. She turned in time to see little Anna catch herself on the doorframe and call out, all breathless, that Mr Bingley’s carriage had been sighted down the road and now Mr Jansen was calling for her and cook was all in a dither because Betsy let the second stove go cold. The girl was away again before Mrs Reynolds could do more than nod her understanding, leaving her once more alone.

Alone, but no longer idle. Mrs Reynolds lifted her hands to adjust her cap, then to smooth down her apron. Stepping calmly to the door, she glanced back once more to the tall window and the drifting snow. Despite Betsy and cook, despite the Gardiner’s absence and Lady Catherine’s rudeness, despite the weather that would slow their guests and turn the halls into drafty caverns, despite all this it was Christmas, it was lovely, and all would be well.

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