The Christian Effect

by Shem

Summary

After the marriages of her sisters, Mary is determined to use her time in London wisely and find a publisher for her improving tracts. Unfortunately her plans go awry, but she does meet a handsome young man.

Notes

This is the third part of the Effect Series and is Mary’s story. It is probably even less edited than the others because I am pretty sure I wrote it while drugged to the gills (I had a bad flu). It is a one shot.

The Christian Effect

Mary wished she had worn a veil. She had not done so because she had no wish to conceal her actions; she was doing nothing wrong. But now that she was standing in front of the nondescript building, without the support of a chaperone, she wondered if it was indeed right that she come to a publishing house alone and in secret.

It had been simple enough to elude her maid, or rather the maid employed by her sister to tend to her. Ashbourne House was rather in a state of some agitation in the mornings. Kitty was not well but she always recovered by lunchtime, and this had lead to much whispering amongst the staff and concerned hovering by Lord Ashbourne. Mary had not yet been told anything, but she hoped very much the good news they waited for would be confirmed in time. If Kitty presented her husband with an heir at the earliest possible date, then Mary rather thought the shallow judgmental
parts of society would accept the new Lady Ashbourne, despite her 'unfortunate' family circumstances. Those circumstances were of course unfortunate only if you were shallow and judgmental; Mary hardly considered herself an unfortunate.

She knew she did her sister no credit at ton parties. Mary could only contribute the latest doctrinal discussions, or quote other learned men and women like Hannah More and Fordyce. The fashionable that thronged London did not care for such things.

It was that thought that spurred Mary into knocking on the door and she was ushered into the rooms held by the publishers. It seemed to be a son and father operation. She wondered which was 'A. Hemsworthy' which was the nominal name of the publishers. Mary had seen their stamp on the back of her pamphlets.

"I have written some improving pamphlets which I think will complement your current series." Mary handed over her carefully tied stack of paper.

Mr Hemsworthy the elder passed the stack to Mr Hemsworthy the junior. "And may I inquire as to your name, young lady?"

"Miss Swinbourne. Miss Calpurnia Swinbourne." Mary did not hesitate at her deception. She might not find her actions disgraceful, but she would not injure her sisters for all the world by exposing them to the gossip of having an improving pamphlet writer as a sister.

"Miss Swinbourne, you have made a study of our pamphlets?"

"Yes, and I have made some notes on those pamphlets and some errors I have discovered." Mary handed over that sheet of paper. She had deliberately kept that sheet back in case the gentlemen would not take her seriously.

She should not have worried. Mr Hemsworthy senior and herself had a long and respectful conversation. She could not have told you how long it was before Hemsworthy junior rejoined them and showed his father several sections of her papers. They had a whispered conversation which Mary could not hear properly; they seemed to be arguing about whether they should publish some of her improving tracts.

"Miss Swinbourne, some of these works are entirely the type of work we are looking for. Are you of age?" said Hemsworthy junior.

"Yes," replied Mary. Her father would not care what she did, especially under the guise of Miss Calpurnia Swinbourne, which was a very good name for someone writing about the proper humble feminine response to flirtation.

The next little while was discussing a great deal of contracts and such like and payment. She signed her false name, and cursed herself for not at least giving herself the same initials. It was not until she was standing on the pavement, with her remaining papers and ten pounds (ten pounds! and the promise of more!) in her reticule, that she realised she had not asked which of her pamphlets they intended to publish.

Mary was hesitating whether she should go back and inquire, and in her confusion she spun around and collided with a gentleman. Her papers went everywhere, and the gentleman (he was blonde and wore a green coat, Mary was not Lydia's sister for nothing) ran about and picked them all up.

"My apologies, sir," said Mary with a stiff curtsey and held out her hand, but he did not return her papers. Instead he leafed through them carelessly. "Return my papers, sir!"
"How do you know I'm a sir?" he replied. "We have not been introduced."

Mary stood waiting for him to mention his name but when he did not she curtsied. "Miss Calpurnia Swinbourne."

"Sir Christian Montgomery." He bowed. "You do not look like a Calpurnia; are you sure that is your name?"

"Yes," replied Mary shortly, "My papers."

"Are you sure it is not Mary?"

"I am quite certain."

"Then I cannot return these papers to you."

"Why ever not?" Mary looked around hoping that no one was seeing their highly improper conversation in the middle of the street.

"Well, these appear to be the improving works of a young lady called Mary."

"A nickname, some people find Calpurnia difficult, I had forgot my friends had written that."

"And is Swinbourne also very difficult? For your friends, I mean."

"Why should it be?" Mary wondered if Sir Christian was a little slow.

"Because that might explain why they have also written 'Bennet' on the bottom of some of these pages."

If Mary was in the habit of cursing she would have taken that opportunity to curse. She hoped that she had not autographed the works currently in the offices of A. Hemsworthy

"If you would like to know, Miss Calpurnia Swinbourne is my non de plume. I find it more suitable to the types of work I author." Mary doubted she would ever see Sir Christian again, his appearance seemed in some disarray so he was doubtless not one of Lord Ashbourne's friends. He also looked as if he had risen, or rather not risen, that morning from the gaming parlour so Mr Darcy would hardly deign to acknowledge him. Mr Bingley would just be led by Mr Darcy. So Mary felt reckless. "You will soon see my pamphlets published by A. Hemsworthy. I think it would do you some good to read them."

"I shall certainly look out for them. But I should tell you I should have picked something like Frederica Forsyth, more alliterative, you see."

"Well, next time I become an authoress I shall keep you in mind, now my papers."

Sir Christian stepped very close; it was certainly closer than necessary to hand her a bundle of papers. "I shall look for your work, Miss Bennet, now keep hold of these." He took her hands and placed the papers into them. For some unaccountable reason she found it difficult to breathe.

The papers however were no sooner secured than they almost went flying again, and Sir Christian was pulled from her.

"Desist from importuning my sister."

It was Mr Darcy. Mary shoved the papers into her reticule as best she could.
"I was not importuning the lady, Mr Darcy, I was assisting."

"She does not need your assistance, do you take my meaning, Sir Christian?"

Sir Christian smiled, and Mary could not help notice his blue eyes, they were almost translucent, and the disarray of her hair. She did not know what had come over her, Mary Bennet did not notice such things. He bowed to her and walked away. Mary might have watched him walk away if she had not been steered by Mr Darcy.

"Miss Bennet, Mary, I cannot..." Mr Darcy seemed to find it hard to modulate his speech. "Sir Christian Montgomery is not a gentleman that lends any lady distinction. May I ask why you were standing in a public street alone?"

"I went for a walk, and Sir Christian assisted me when I dropped my reticule," replied Mary.

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Mr Darcy accepted Mary's explanation which grated at Mary. She could not explain it, it was after all almost the truth. However, the fact Mr Darcy believed almost at once that Sir Christian could have had no improper designs on Mary annoyed her. It should not, because Mary did not want to be importuned by Sir Christian or any man, she had a calling - to be a writer.

Mr Darcy lectured her on their return to Ashbourne House on the unsuitability of Sir Christian. Being Mr Darcy he was vague but Mary could not believe that the gentleman she had just met could truly be the scourge of all proper young ladies, the all-knowing denizen of gambling dens and the drinker of all the gin in London.

Her brother-in-law also showed his officiousness by shepherding Mary into Lord Ashbourne's study.

"Ash, were you aware that Mary had no chaperone on her walk today?"

Mary stood up a little straighter and felt some outrage that they should discuss her as if she was not present. Lord Ashbourne however did address her, if one counted a raised eyebrow as an address.

"There was no need. I am perfectly capable of attending to myself. I do not have those attractions that limit other young ladies." The ladies and gentlemen of Meryton had been quite determined to ensure Mary understood this about herself.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Darcy." It was a dismissal but Mr Darcy would not go.

"I discovered her with Sir Christian."

"I had dropped my reticule, he picked it up. There was nothing improper." Except for how close he had stood, but that had surely been accidental on his part.

Mr Darcy had now entirely said his piece and left Mary and Lord Ashbourne alone.

"He should worry about how Lydia comports herself. She is his responsibility while in town," sniffed Mary.

"And you are my responsibility. I do hate to contradict you, Mary, but you have every attraction owing to your female sex in the eyes of any gentleman wishing to importune you. Do you take my meaning?"
Mary blushed.

"You will not upset your sister by going out alone again, will you?"

Mary wanted to glare at him; he knew very well that she would not wish to upset Kitty, and he knew very well that she would know that he would not stand for anything upsetting Kitty.

"No, my lord."

"So formal?" He smiled at her. "I knew you realised your error. Now let us not speak of it any further, except I must ask - how did you find Sir Christian?"

"I would, before this interview, have said that I found him to be the most aggravating, and interfering gentleman." She left out his handsomeness or his eyes.

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Kitty was lying on a day lounge still looking a little wan. "Oh Mary, I am such bad company. You had better go to Jane's."

The idea of staying with the Hursts, for Bingley did not have his own townhouse, and Miss Bingley revolted Mary, even if she had found Ashbourne House tedious.

"What is this self pity? If you can lie down with your eyes open you can read, and if you can sit up then you can embroider or sew."

In this way she bullied Kitty for a little while before Kitty thought to ask her where she had been. Mary stuck to her tale of a walk. She wanted very badly to confide in her younger sister, but she would not put Kitty in the position of having to keep a secret from her husband. She doubted Kitty could keep a secret from Lord Ashbourne, and while that gentleman was permissive she did not doubt he would have many things to say about a sister-in-law who published tracts.

There was no more time for private sisterly conversation as Lady Upton descended upon them. Mary found herself liking her ladyship more than she should. A young countess who was always dressed exquisitely, knew herself to be so, and who was of the highest fashion. But Mary saw in her also a ruthlessness that could be harnessed, except Belle had so far not succumbed to Mary's designs.

"Oh no, Mary, I am sure you write very well about the decline of femininity, but I am so very cross with Miles that you should be doing irreparable damage to my marriage if I should read about the wickedness of men."

"I do not - " But Mary was interrupted.

"What has Miles done?"

That was exactly what Belle was hoping Kitty would ask her, and she fell upon her sister-in-law and poured out all her woes.

Belle was followed by Jane, and then by Lizzy, who brought complaints of Lydia.

"I do not know any dukes!"

"She had better go to Jane's," said Kitty placidly.

"You wish all your sisters to go to Jane's!" retorted Mary.
"I have no faith that Lydia would heed either Jane or Bingley, particularly since she has become less awed of Darcy than I should like. I had hoped his looming would bring her into a proper frame of mind."

"I should not mind having both my sisters here," began Kitty, but while it was certain that Lord Ashbourne would be able to have some modicum of influence over Lydia neither Mary nor Lizzy wished to see Lydia removed to Ashbourne House. "I am not an invalid!" was Kitty's protest.

"I do not wish Lydia to think that she might manipulate us into doing as she wishes. You know she thinks you know more eligible men than I do, and you'd be more likely to introduce her."

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In the end it was several days before Mary could see to her papers and ensure they were ordered after their mishap.

She spread them all over her bedroom floor and set to work. It took at least an hour and as the hour passed she felt an increasingly leaden weight settle in her stomach.

All her work was present. All of her critiques of femininity, of morals and of the ideals held by good honest folk.

What were not present were the silly works she had written for Kitty. Her sister was indeed much better now and it had been confirmed her illness was one that had plagued women since the dawn of time. However in those early weeks she had been much indisposed. Mary had attempted to amuse her by reading her pamphlets and Kitty bore it as her punishment for making Mary chaperone her all those weeks.

In the end Mary had succumbed to her sisters' wan little face and cursed her weakness. She had spent most of her life holding herself apart from sisterly balm in order to increase her knowledge of important matters. It seemed most unfair now that she had access to almost everything a woman could desire, that she found herself unable to deny her sister's imploring looks.

That and Lord Ashbourne had sat with them, called her pamphlets drivel and then argued with her. She would not deign to share her work with someone so ill equipped to understand them.

That she knew was unfair, in the end she'd had to agree with several of his lordships argument's and it was hardly his fault regarding the rest of his objections. He was after all a man.

Instead she'd amused Kitty with little stories about highwaymen and damsels and the like. They were nonsense and she'd based many of the what Mary saw as flat lifeless characters on people that they had known, and situations they had encountered, not just in Meryton, but since they had come to London. Mary had always found being left to sit on the side of a ballroom allowed her much scope to assess human frailty.

Mary had not meant to write them down, but Kitty's flattery had done its work on her, so she'd committed them to paper.

And now the highly scandalous, most likely highly libellous little stories were in the hands of a publisher.

She should immediately confess to her sister, and that was her first thought, but she did not wish to expose her stupidity to Lord Ashbourne or cause her sister any distress.

But the only other person who had any idea of her fledgling career was one Sir Christian
Montgomery.

She'd seen him the previous evening at a ball. He'd made no sign of ever having seen her before, but since they were never closer than a room's width perhaps he was short-sighted. After all, something physically had to be wrong with the man. She'd gathered from Mr Darcy's outrage, and then various mutterings from her sisters' and their families, that he was a rake, and a wastrel. He was no doubt at the ball wasting time before the more exciting events of London town began.

The more she thought about it, the more Mary became convinced he would be the perfect assistant. No one would believe him if he thought to expose her, and he surely needed ten pounds.

So she wrote him a note and found it very easy to sneak into the street and find a small child who knew who Sir Christian was, or had the means to discover it, and was happy to deliver a message.

It was only after the boy had run off that she realised she had not asked him to wait for a response. Sir Christian could hardly write to her directly!

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"Are you quite well, Mary?" Kitty looked concerned. "Did you wish for more toast?" Kitty had taken all of the toast and honey. Mary was astonished that her sister had taken so much and then had actually managed to consume it. From the look over the corner of his newspaper, his lordship was equal parts bemused and impressed.

"Not at all, I think I am a little fatigued after the evening." It was a stupid thing to say as Mary had not danced one dance. She'd been asked, the sister of Lady Ashbourne would of course be asked to dance, but she'd refused. Now she'd allowed herself to open the conversation to an argument she'd already had several times before. Mary had no intention of befriending anybody in London.

She was saved by the arrival of the post and a letter for herself in a feminine hand. At least the envelope was feminine, the contents of the note were certainly not written by a lady.

   My dearest Calpurnia,

   I leave it to you to invent some fictitious female who does you the honour of writing. Next time you begin a clandestine correspondence, ask your messenger to wait for a response.

   Of course I will act as your friend and breach the walls of the offices of Hemsworthy, even if you do not confide in me the reasons for your sudden reversal of sentiments. I had thought you determined to be an authoress.

   Please respond via a messenger as I am sure that you will understand that my own direction will be recognised.

   Yours sincerely,
   Christian

   P.S I have determined not to be insulted by your offer of ten pounds. A better recompense would be a kiss.

Mary felt her face flush at his postscript and she was not sure whether he was insulted by the lowness of her offer or her offer at all.

"Mary?"
She was recollected to her surrounds, "It is Miss Swinbourne, I met her at the ball. A retiring female who enjoys Hannah More."

Neither of her breakfast companions looked as if they wanted to hear anything more about Miss Swinbourne, however Kitty was delighted that Mary had made a friend.

"I should go and respond to her kind letter."

"If you should wish to invite her to visit..." added Kitty. Mary pretended not to hear her.

Sir Christian,

I will ignore the impropriety of your postscript. A gentleman should not write such things to a lady, as I am sure you are well aware.

I only require you, as I am a lady and unable at least in the eyes of society to act for myself, to ensure that my works will not be published. I do not have to explain myself to you. If you have to reimburse them immediately I shall of course forward you the ten pounds.

I hope you understand this is of some urgency.

Regards,
Mary Bennet.

P.S I do not wish to inquire what kind of female penned the direction.

She had wondered whether she should offer her other works to the Hemsworthys but then she remembered they had seen the works and only chosen the shocking ones. Such a publisher was not for her.

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Mary had to wait for the following day for a response, and to hope that no one noticed that she had not added a letter to Miss Swinbourne to the pile of letters in the hall.

Darling Calpurnia,

I am devastated to inform you of my failure. No one is more surprised than myself. I had thought it the work of a moment to convince the Messrs Hemsworthy that one more pamphlet on the defects of femininity would be one pamphlet too many.

However, those gentleman are, unfortunately for you, very up to snuff. They have already copied out your work and sent it to a prominent Ladies’ magazine for publication.

My astonishment was greatly lessened, after all, I have, you recollect, my darling, read parts of your work, when they handed me your papers.

I have entirely underestimated you, ma chérie; the breadth of your talent is immense. I do hope, for your sake, that your admiration for your noble brother-in-law’s attributes is not widely known, at least before publication, when the entirety of London shall certainly be made aware.

Yours affectionately,
Christian.
P.S I do have some quibbles with the way you have written of the ease of climbing up a trellis. I assure you it is not quite so easy and I would be happy to show you.

P.P.S My housekeeper, an admirable woman in advanced years, has been addressing the envelopes. My mistress being of course out of town.

Mary let out an undignified squawk and all eyes were on her. "Miss Swinbourne and I disagree violently over a passage in Fordyce's sermons. I must write to contradict her at once."

In her haste Mary almost upended an entire bottle of ink over her writing desk.

Sir Christian,

Desist in addressing me in such a familiar way. If you have read my nonsense, you must have seen that it was written for the private diversion of my sister. I do not have any admiration for any of my brother-in-laws that is not sisterly. Of course I am not blind, but there is no improper feeling.

I no longer require your assistance in my difficulties and if you mean to imply that you should climb to my window on a trellis I must beg to inform you that I have no trellis.

Not in any way affectionately,
Miss Mary Bennet

P.S I am uninterested in your housekeeper or your mistress.

The response came by the afternoon post.

Darling Mary,

Do I sense some pique? I was quite lying about having a mistress.

Christian

P.S Have you forgotten about your scandalous works?

Her response was swift and gave him to understand she had been grossly mislead as to his level of intelligence and she was placing her problem in the hands of someone who understood responsibility and courtesy.

Mary had always agreed with their mother that they had a large social circle, but that was nothing to a London season. That evening they had a card party, and the next day there was a picnic and those were only the invitations Kitty had accepted. Her sister had accepted as many invitations as she could out of a love of parties but also a desire not to offend anybody.

As she did not play cards, Mary retired to a sofa to watch the proceedings. Normally she would be storing up events and snatches of conversation with which to amuse her sister the next morning but the gloss had faded from that activity. She might have told Sir Christian she had found a solution to her problem but she had not. She should tell Mr Darcy or Mr Bingley or Lord Ashbourne, but she shied from it. She had no faith in Mr Bingley's being able to do more than Sir Christian. She did not know Mr Darcy, and to Lord Ashbourne she did not wish to expose her folly. She would trust that he was too blinded by Kitty to see anything was amiss with his houseguest.
"My dear Miss Bennet, who on earth would have told you I possess any intelligence?"

Sir Christian took a seat on the sofa, but not next to her, and she was sure it would not look at all as if he was speaking to her. Mary kept her lips firmly fastened.

"You shall not speak to me at all, Calpurnia? I am saddened, particularly since I have discovered to which Ladies’ magazine your stories were sold."

That did get Mary's attention. "And?"

"You should have told me what kind of stories you had written before I blundered into Hemsworthy's. Now they and the Ladies’ magazine are convinced these are not the writings of a unconnected little mouse."

"They wish me to pay them not to publish my stories," said Mary.

Sir Christian looked at her with admiration. "Indeed, Calpurnia. I did try to convince them that you were my mistress and not, as they have decided, some tonnish young miss. I was not successful."

"They have met me," replied Mary flatly. She expected any young woman unfortunate enough to be caught in Sir Christian's snares would be beautiful.

"Play piquet with me, we may talk with less speculation."

Mary rather thought playing piquet with him would raise more speculation than less, but she was tired of talking out of the corner of her mouth.

"I think, Mary, you may have autographed your work and any person worth their salt knows of the Bennet sisters."

"You make us sound like an act for Astley's," Mary sniffed. She had been forced to attend Astley's with several of the Gardiner children.

"Mr Bingley, Mr Darcy and Lord Ashbourne, you should be glad society does not think of you as a coven."

"How much money do they wish to not publish? It is entirely illegal for them to publish, but as they have my papers, and they would know that I should not wish for the case to get about..."

"You should write about law reform, not the frailty of morals, and I believe a hundred pounds were mentioned."

"A hundred pounds!" Mary could not keep her voice low. "I do not have a hundred pounds."

"Lord Ashbourne has a hundred pounds, I dare say Mr Darcy or Mr Bingley have a hundred pounds."

"No. Every feeling revolts." To give in to the sin of blackmail and to involve any of her brothers-in-law - Never!

"Then what do you suggest?"

Mary did not answer him and instead paid attention to her cards.
The answer struck her later than evening. She would steal back her papers. They had copied them, but surely they had not sent them to the printers yet, not if they were hoping for a hundred pounds.

First she had to ensure that Sir Christian had the original papers - she would deal with those later - and then she had to discover the address of the magazine.

She was in the mews before it was barely light with a note addressed to Sir Christian. The response was brought in to the breakfast table.

*Dearest Mary,*

*I do hope the gentleman acting for you knows what he is doing. I enclose the card of the proprietor.*

*Christian.*

Kitty was becoming increasingly suspicious as to why she had not met Miss Swinbourne, so Mary was forced to distract her with fashion and suggest a trip to a modiste with their sisters.

"You may need to measure me again, Madame," said Kitty with a blush to the dressmaker.

Lizzy bit her lip. She had been expecting a child but it had come to nothing. Mary had not known what to say to her sister, Jane and Kitty were better at such things. She had drafted a rough character portrait which had amused Lizzy greatly and Kitty had assured Mary that such things were just as important.

Except remembering that now, it would not just be Kitty who recognised Mary's work if it were ever published. That thought drove Mary on.

"Oh, Mary," said Jane when she saw what bolt of cloth Mary had picked.

"Has someone died?" said Lydia, staring at her.

"I think black is a most becoming colour, indeed Hannah More says ..." Mary knew invoking Hannah More would mean her sisters would lose interest.

"It is very severe, Mary," said Lizzy, when Mary had chosen her pattern. "I do not think it becomes you to dress so severely. I know that Hannah More and Fordyce speak of internal goodness but you are allowed to think of other things as well. No one will judge you for a ribbon or two."

"You are not entirely ugly, Mary," was Lydia's unhelpful contribution. "I mean you played piquet with a rake!"

Mary saw Lizzy look at Jane in a speaking way and then how Jane leaned forward - "You do not have to lecture me, Jane. I am fully cognizant of the type of man Sir Christian is, and I am fully cognizant of my own attractions. He no doubt wished to have a quiet evening and a plain female suited his purposes."

"I do not think Sir Christian found you plain, Mary," replied Kitty. "He was quite fixated on your bosom."

Mary immediately found a pattern with a higher neckline.

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She convinced Kitty that a ride about the city would be beneficial and she planned their excursion to take her past the warehouse where the magazine had offices and its printing press. Mary noticed with some annoyance that it looked difficult to break into, and seemed to be guarded by dogs.

It took Mary some time to plan the next step, but she had to wait for her new dress to be delivered, so she had some leisure.

In the end she decided she would have to involve Sir Christian. He no doubt had some experience breaking and entering, and would keep a pistol. He would have to be a handy shot as well. Were not husbands very quick to propose duels?

": Christian,

I do find myself in need of your services.

Please wear dark clothes of a plain nature. A pistol will no doubt be necessary. One for myself as well.

Regards,
Mary.

She had to hastily reopen the note to give a time and place.

Close to the appointed time, Mary snuck out of the townhouse and was about to go in search of a hackney when she was accosted.

"Calpurnia!" the figure exclaimed.

"Let me go, Sir Christian, we were to meet at the warehouse. Cannot you read?"

"I cannot in good conscience allow you travel by hackney alone."

"Are you sure you are a disreputable rake?" Surely one should not be so concerned about propriety.

"I have it on good authority, my dear," he replied before handing her into the hackney. "Now what are we doing?"

"Robbing the printing press," replied Mary. "You shall of course have to do the breaking, I shall enter and discover my work."

Sir Christian stared at her. "I beg your pardon."

"Are you deaf?"

"No, but I cannot have understood you correctly."

"What else could my note have meant, sir?"

The look on his face told her everything and strangely she did not find herself shocked. "Do you normally rendezvous with pistols?"

"It is not typical, but you should understand I am game to try anything once."

"Have you broken into a printing press before?"

"No."
"Well there you are then." Mary settled back into the seat.

"Dash it - " He began to protest but she took no notice of him.

The main event began promisingly enough, despite Sir Christian thinking of an increasing list of problems, and it pleased Mary to find answers to all of them. She also firmly told him she did not believe in his infirmity as she had heard many stories about his climbing prowess, and indeed had he not himself offered to demonstrate it to her? Here was his chance.

However the problem of suddenly seeing Lord Ashbourne, Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley and Lord Upton walking towards them was not one Mary felt up to solving.

Sir Christian solved it by pulling her into an alley way and pressing her against the brickwork.

"They are foxed, they shall not take much notice," reassured Sir Christian, explaining there had been a bout - Mary assumed he meant of boxing - close by which explained the presence of so many men about the town.

As their voices grew nearer, Mary grew increasingly agitated. If they by chance looked this way would they not wonder what the shadowy figures were doing?

Upon reflection that agitation went some way to explaining her next action, which was to take Sir Christian by the lapels and haul him even closer to her and then kiss him. He remained somewhat startled until the gentlemen passed and Mary released him.

"I understand that must have been repulsive - " Mary was not allowed to finish her sentence before it was she who was ruthlessly kissed. She had wondered what all the fuss was about, but had not wished to ask her married sisters. Now she quite understood. No wonder so much was said about feminine frailty, it was quite difficult to remain ordered under such conditions. Mary found herself very glad for the highness of her neckline.

There was no question of being able to break into the warehouse once Sir Christian released her because they had gained the attention of a watchman.

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It was only in the morning that Mary realised that she still did not know how she was to prevent the publishing. He had not offered, but perhaps Sir Christian could loan her the money?

"He is very handsome," said Kitty looking across the park.

Mary had not been paying attention; she had assumed that Kitty was talking about her husband but the tone was not quite right.

"All dangerous men are attractive," said Lizzy in a dark tone.

Mary looked in the direction they were looking and saw Sir Christian on horseback and felt her whole body flush.

"Not a penny to rub together no doubt," continued Lizzy. "Darcy says he gambles."

"Ash gambles," said Kitty. "And I have seen Darcy lay a wager, and Bingley too."

"Not in the same way, Kitty," said Lizzy. "They would not waste their inheritance."

Mary took in Sir Christian’s clothes and horse, and indeed even the quality of his paper, and
wondered at it.

"It should not be possible to live upon credit, I think it ruinous," finished Lizzy and Mary was put out that her position as the moralising sister should be usurped.

"I have met him in company, and Mary too, and he does not seem so very dangerous," said Kitty.

"Darcy has told me of his vices."

"I am surprised your husband exposed you to such viciousness," said Mary surprising herself with her vehemence. Sir Christian had indeed been very free with her, but she could not deny he had attempted to assist her, even against his better judgment. The fact he had such judgment surely should count in his stead. At least her sisters gossip had made it clear she could not ask Sir Christian for the money, although perhaps she could win it?

Christian,

I require tutelage at cards.

Mary.

My dearest Calpurnia,

Have you not heard the rumours that all I do is lose?

Faithfully,
Christian

Christian,

The rudiments is all that I require. I shall attend you.

Mary

As Kitty was over the difficult stage, and no longer unwell in the mornings, Mary found herself more able to leave Kitty to her own devices. She told her sister than Jane had asked her to attend her, and then told Jane she was needed at Lizzy's and told Lizzy that Mrs Gardiner had asked for her. It was a complicated tale and Mary was sure they would all give up before trying to puzzle it out.

This time she wore a veil and presented herself at Sir Christian’s townhouse. The butler gaped at her, which Mary thought was unfair; surely many women presented themselves at this doorstep! Her lack of beauty should not allow him to be so surprised. Perhaps Sir Christian had run out of women?

Sir Christian goggled at her as she was introduced as Calpurnia Swinbourne.

"What?" He shut the door behind them.

"I said I would attend you."

"But!"

Mary sat down and pulled out a fresh pack of cards. She did not trust him with his own set of cards.

"I do know how to play, but I have only ever played to make up numbers. If you spend all of your
nights playing deep then surely you must have some advice for me?"

Sir Christian choked, "playing deep?"

"Is that not what it is called?"

He gave her a smile. "That is one way of calling it, my dear." He moved towards her.

"I seek no repetition of the other night, I only wish to play cards. If you really are an appalling gamester then do tell me at once."

Afterwards Mary realised she had not thanked him, as he had been quite patient with her, and sent him a note.

    Dearest Mary,

    A repetition of that night, perhaps without the lace running interference, is all that I require in thanks.

    Yours,
    Christian.

Mary folded his note over; perhaps she might be persuaded to indulge him if she won a hundred pounds. After all she did not intend to ever marry, a husband would put an end to her writing, so why not take pleasure in one more kiss?

She began her campaign at the next soiree. Mr Bingley attempted to steer her towards a table where several elderly ladies seemed to be playing for almonds. Mary resisted her brother-in-law and sat herself down with several gentlemen who were most certainly not playing for almonds.

Mary staked what was remaining of the money that her father had given her to come to London. Several hands in and she was not disgracing herself but she would very much have to raise the stakes if she was going to win a hundred pounds in this lifetime.

"Come, take my place." Mr SomebodyOrOther Mary had not bothered to attend to his name, had depleted his resources, or all that he was willing to stake and gave up his chair to another person.

Mary was too busy doing sums in her head to notice who it was until she heard her name. "Miss Bennet."

Sir Christian smiled at her and her evening went downhill. At the end of it, Sir Christian smiled at her sadly as he raked in his winnings. "I did try to tell you they were just rumours."

That meant nothing to either of the other gentlemen at their table, but Mary stood up and stalked away.

Her ire had not evaporated by the next morning and she found herself sending Sir Christian a letter condemning his betrayal of her. His response was not swift but it was to the point.

    Darling Calpurnia,

    I have acted in your best interests. I would live in fear of your descending into a gambling hell, if I thought you had a feather to fly with.

    You asked me to assist you in this matter and I will ...and I shall ask almost nothing in return.
Faithfully,
Christian.

Mary had never felt any overwhelming emotion for a gentleman before, but she had a sudden urge to stab him with a butter knife; at the same time she wanted to just allow him to solve all of her problems and ask him whether almost nothing would be another kiss. It was extraordinarily conflicting and confusing.

"Mary, I see Miss Swinbourne has written to you again." Lord Ashbourne loomed in the parlour.

Mary turned startled and looked down at her papers. She had collected all of Sir Christian's notes together. Why had she wished to keep them? She should have burned them. Suddenly the impropriety of the last couple of weeks descended upon Mary.

She had exchanged letters, under her own name (and Calpurnia's but that was no disguise) with a man who was no gentleman. At least in the eyes of society; Mary was not so sure that Sir Christian did not have his own moral code.

"Yes, we are still arguing over Fordyce," replied Mary after too long of a pause.

"I would have thought you uncommonly of the same mind."

"I do not understand you?" He was brimming with levity but Mary did not understand the joke.

"I have noticed that despite letters coming in, there have been no letters out ... so I conclude you must be uncommonly attuned to each other."

Mary flushed. "I have been sending my letters by messenger, I did not wish you to incur the expense of my correspondence. You have been very good to - "

"Yes, yes, Mary, except one pays for the receipt of letters. May I see your letters?" There was no levity any longer.

Mary stared at him. "You wish to read my correspondence. Every feeling revolts."

"I am sorry your every feeling revolts but I wish to see your letters nonetheless."

"And if I refuse?" Mary drew herself upright. "You are not my father, my lord."

Whatever he would have said to that, Mary would never know because Kitty tripped in, dressed for Lizzy's ball.

"The carriage has been brought around, are you sure you do not wish to borrow my earrings, Mary? Oh, Mary what did you do to your hair, come here and I shall fix it for you."

"An excellent idea, Kitty, and I shall take these for you, Mary," and with that Mary was deprived of her letters and forced to allow her sister to poke pins into her hair.

She did not know whether Lord Ashbourne had had time to read the notes before he joined them in the carriage. She had always found him inscrutable.

Mary was mortified, even more so now that she realised how it had to look to Lord Ashbourne. She knew how he had met Kitty and Lydia, and while she knew with certainty how he felt about her sister, it was impossible not to think the worst. Another Bennet sister lost to impropriety! She
could not look at him.

After being greeted affectionately by Lizzy and feeling nothing but guilt gnawing at her, Mary looked in vain for Sir Christian.

Of course Mr Darcy would hardly allow such a man to be invited, but yet there he was.

"What are you doing here?" She dragged him into an antechamber.

"I was invited," he looked affronted.

"I cannot believe Mr Darcy would invite you."

"I was just as astonished. Darcy is not the type of gentleman with whom I associate, much too sober."

"Then why have you attended?"

"Cannot you guess?"

Mary blushed. "I do not believe you, sir."

"I meant, I have come to prevent you from staking your jewellery. I have not told you but - "

While Mary was still infuriated at him due to his interference, they had no time to waste.

"Lord Ashbourne has discovered our correspondence. I cannot stay in London. I am sure there is no way, now, of stopping the publication of my works. I will be ruined in every way."

"I am sure..." Sir Christian's face drained of some colour and then he stopped. "Why do you tell me this?"

"Because the reason I have no money for any sort of retirement from society is you! I shall avoid his lordship tonight, and he will never make a scene, so you must bring a carriage around after the ball and take me into the country."

She then whirled away from him and intended to spend the rest of the evening clinging to Kitty's side.

Kitty, however, spoiled Mary's plans by giving her a look that made it clear her sister had seen her private conversation with Sir Christian. "He is very handsome, and, perhaps, he is not as dangerous as Darcy and Lizzy seem to think."

"I do not know to whom you refer."

This was less believable when not fifteen minutes later, clearly not following her direction and going to organise a carriage or avoiding Lord Ashbourne, Sir Christian approached and asked for her hand for the waltz.

Before her sisters' marriages Mary would not have known how to waltz, but with sudden lack of young ladies and Maria and Emma Lucas' desire to learn how to waltz, she'd found herself forced to do more than provide the accompaniment.

She accepted him purely because it would allow her to interrogate Sir Christian; she had no desire to waltz with him.

"People will talk, Mary," said Kitty with a small smile. "I did not think you wished for rumours to
circulate about you with regards to gentlemen. You **did** tell Mama you came to London for educative purposes. Is dancing with a handsome rake educational?"

"I do write reformational pamphlets," replied Mary, "I am making a study of those who need reforming." If she said it enough, perhaps she would believe it herself. She certainly ended up saying it enough, having to repeat it to the aghast faces of Lizzy and Jane when she finished her dance.

"Your hand is mine, I believe?" Sir Christian bowed over it, Mary wondered if he meant the double meaning, and then saw the look in his eye and realised that like Mr Collins he studied quite hard on some of his compliments. Sir Christian had apparently heard of Mr Collins and did not appreciate the comparison.

"Then you should try sincerity, sir," replied Mary.

Sir Christian's response was to tighten his hand upon her waist.

"You should also be arranging for a carriage."

"That does not take much arrangement or do you doubt my abilities?"

"I very much doubt your abilities," was her retort.

"Then why are you asking me to elope with you?"

Mary found herself faltering on the steps, "I did not ask you to elope." Sir Christian steadied her and Mary refused to contemplate why she shivered in such a warm ballroom.

"My dear, taking you in a carriage with no accompanying sisters or servants into the country is tantamount to eloping if you wish to maintain your reputation. There can be no excuse if your companion is *me*. I have carefully cultivated no reputation at all."

"I am relying upon it, sir; nobody should believe that a man of your reputation would spend your time with me."

"Then they cannot know you very well. I am very attracted to women who enjoy pistols and breaking and entering."

Mary once again stumbled and was caught, and this time she was pressed up against Sir Christian in a way reminiscent of the alleyway. Her body reacted in very unexpected ways and she was quite about to kiss him in the middle of the ballroom when he released her.

The dance was soon over, and Mary was not quite sure whether she believed Sir Christian when, bowing over her hand he reassured her that he would not fail her.

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Mary had wondered whether she would be locked into her chamber, or some sort of guard set upon her, but she concluded that either she had read too many novels (for which she blamed Kitty) or Lord Ashbourne had underestimated her.

Surprisingly, Sir Christian did not fail her.

"Where am I taking you?"

Mary wished she could say Gretna Green, but Longbourn it would have to be; at least she would
be disgraced in her own home. "Home, sir."

It was not until they were out of London before they spoke again.

"Mary, I am afraid you are going to be very angry with me."

Mary looked at him and he looked a little like one of the Lucas boys when he'd stolen his parents wine.

"I may have, on that first day you asked me to assist you in preventing the publication of your highly libellous stories featuring many manly assets, tracked down the publisher of the ladies’ magazine and impressed on him the imprudence of publishing your work. I may have also paid him a sum of money. In short I have always had your papers." He then sheepishly handed her a stack of papers.

"Why? Why?"

"You really cannot guess, my darling?"

Mary stared at him. "But!" She wanted to hit him, but for some reason kissing him seemed much more appropriate. "Christian."

"Calpurnia."

"That is not my name, sir!" But she did not have it in her to fight about it overmuch.

The carriage stopped and Mary looked about, "We are surely not at Longbourn?"

The footman who was with the carriage opened the door. "My lord asked us to stop here and give you this."

"My lord?" said Christian even as he reached to accept the note. "Oh Lord." He recognised the writing; Mary could not see it in the dark so she leant closer and she then recognised Lord Ashbourne's writing. Christian seemed loath to open it so Mary took it from him.

It was a special licence and a note that was short and to the point.

   Dearest Sister, Give him Hell, affectionately, Ash

She stared at it and Christian read over her shoulder and expostulated. "I confided in him! I thought he was my friend!"

But he did not object to the general expectation of the note and in the end Mary woke up Mr Bennet and the local vicar and they were married immediately. Mr Bennet did not seem surprised to see them, and Mary decided she did not want to know.

Only afterwards did she discover that while Sir Christian was indeed very free with his mother's inheritance he made a point of never touching his father's. While Mary commended his sense, she made a unilateral decision that his mother's money could now be put to better use - funding her writings which she would publish herself.

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"Ash!" Kitty ran down the stairs, "Mary's bed has not been slept in!"

Darcy stood in the hallway with Lizzy, looking a little thunderous. "I knew it!"
"Knew what, Darcy?" Ash held a piece of toast in his hand, looking unconcerned.

"Sir Christian. I thought you had spoken to him."

"I did speak to him. I expect they are married by now."

"Married?" Kitty stared at her husband. "I thought you said Sir Christian was unlikely to enter the married state."

"I said it would take a little manoeuvring and the right woman."

Kitty put her hand on her hip; she would interrogate him later. Mary had been distracted for weeks now and even Lizzy had noticed Mary's mooning over the floppy blond hair Sir Christian sported. Kitty hoped she would be happy.

"Darcy, if they are married then we should wish them well and pray that Sir Christian reforms himself. Indeed Mary always wanted somebody to reform," said Lizzy, "And we did not call to discuss Mary."

"Then they shall be very happy together, but you are very right, Elizabeth, it was Lydia I wished to discuss."

Kitty's heart sank. With Mary's concerns, and her own expectations, and Lizzy's disappointment and Jane's continual waiting she had not kept up with her youngest sisters comings and goings.

"She has informed us that she no longer requires any introductions to any dukes," said Darcy.

"Well that is good, is it not?" said Kitty. There was a great dearth of eligible Dukes.

"No, it is not," continued Darcy, "She informs us of this because she has met a painter called Yeates who paints a lot of Dukes and he is going to show her all their portraits so she might choose one."

The End

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