Summary

Miss de Bourgh really was quite a small thing, she thought, and pale. Not nearly as robust or tan as Lizzy. She looked right at home in her mother’s parlor, rather unlike Lizzy. She would certainly make a decent, obedient wife, if not a very amusing one - quite the opposite of Lizzy. And her money and rank would do Mr. Darcy a great deal of good, while Lizzy would not create a single change in his station. Anyone should prefer Anne de Bourgh over Lizzy Bennet, with reasons of finance taken into account. Perhaps he could get as used to her as she had to Will.

Notes

This fanfiction was done as part of a final project for a college course on Jane Austen. The assignment? To make a Jane Austen fan work. And what makes everything better? Girls in love. Girls in love make everything better. And I've been pretty fascinated with the possibilities in Charlotte and Miss de Bourgh's relationship, given their similarities. So, I hope you enjoy this!

May be continued in the future.

There were times when Charlotte Collins found she must stop all her activities, no matter what they might be, and take the time to count her blessings. For there were many, and she should not let them get away from her, lest she forget they exist.
It was a goodly practice even in the best of times, and one she’d done even before she’d married Will. But the first blessing, now, was that she’d married at all. That Will should have fallen in love with her. That Will should not only have an excellent curacy and steady income, but inherit Longbourn upon the death of Lizzy Bennet’s father. That she should have a comfortable home. That her husband should be a good, pious, devoted man; that he did not drink too much, or swear, or beat her at all.

That he did not embarrass himself over-often. That there were relatively few of his speeches on any given day. That he did not often disturb her when she wished to be alone. That he, on account of the virtues a clergyman must keep (or so he had told her) had not called on her to perform her marriage responsibilities too often. (Though they weren’t so bad, really - she was blessed that they did not hurt. That they were not more than mildly uncomfortable and unfamiliar. That she’d done something to deserve the profuse thanks he’d appealed on her to listen to each time.)

That, despite the distance between herself and everything she’d ever known in Hertfordshire - her parents, her sisters, her friends - she could find the shreds of happiness and comfort she needed. And that Lizzy had not been so prudent as she should have, and taken this chance from her.

And now she should return to reality. Her sister had been trying to get her attention, and she had better converse with her now, given she and Lizzy would be gone in a week. Lady Catherine had been prevailing on them to stay longer, but Charlotte knew there would be no changing Elizabeth’s mind once it was set, and there was not. So now she was fussing over the particulars of the journey, in a way of after-dinner conversation, with Lizzy subtly arguing against everything she wanted to throw on her.

Or so she could tell, when she happened to catch pieces of the conversation. Maria’s endless questions - “When will you and Mr. Collins be coming home?” “Will our brothers and sisters be able to visit you, too?” “Might I know, in confidence, whether I may soon be an aunt?” - kept her distracted for the most part. But what she did hear, she couldn’t help but dwell upon.

Lizzy had likely come to keep her company, and she was grateful for the change of pace. But there had to be a reason she insisted against the lengthening of her stay - and as she wondered about this she recalled the behavior she’d seen, or had reason to assume was occurring, involving Mr. Darcy. She could not tell for sure whether one was attached or the other, or if the attachment was of some strength, but the hints were strong, and now that he was gone a certain veil had fallen over Lizzy’s mood. Was she eager to leave only because her love was gone? She couldn’t imagine Lizzy doing such a selfish thing - not to her, her dearest friend - but at the same time it seemed the only logical explanation.

What a novel it would be, if Lizzy could not only find and marry true love, but true love worth ten thousand a year. It would be a fine match, overly fine, for Lizzy. Not that she wouldn’t want such a thing for her, of course. As much as Lizzy’s match with Mr. Collins would’ve spelled doom for Charlotte, it would’ve torn her heart to pieces to see her destitute or a spinster. But she couldn’t see why Mr. Darcy would ever agree to it. For he was meant to marry Miss de Bourgh, and she had more money than Elizabeth had ever seen, and a title at that.

Will had caught his sister-in-law’s attention, describing the same wall ornaments Maria had seen a dozen times, so Charlotte was able to look to her side, paying Miss de Bourgh more attention than anyone had all night. She was behaving the same as always, sitting quietly, coughing, and occasionally prompting Mrs. Jenkinson to adjust her somehow. When she did not speak to Charlotte, or pay her any attention, she turned away again, and did not join anyone’s conversation for a while.
Miss de Bourgh really was quite a small thing, she thought, and pale. Not nearly as robust or tan as Lizzy. She looked right at home in her mother’s parlor, rather unlike Lizzy. She would certainly make a decent, obedient wife, if not a very amusing one - quite the opposite of Lizzy. And her money and rank would do Mr. Darcy a great deal of good, while Lizzy would not create a single change in his station. Anyone should prefer Anne de Bourgh over Lizzy Bennet, with reasons of finance taken into account. Perhaps he could get as used to her as she had to Will.

“Mrs. Collins.”

Charlotte started at the small, still voice, and turned back to Miss de Bourgh. She had turned her head ever so slightly, but it was clear her tired, glassy eyes were looking at her. “M-Miss de Bourgh?” she said.

Miss de Bourgh was silent for a moment, tapping her fingers against her waist, and Charlotte had just begun to wonder whether she had imagined her greeting when she spoke again. “We’ve had quite a large party for quite a long time,” she said. “But it’s become smaller and smaller every day. Soon it will just be the four of us again, will it not?”

Mrs. Jenkinson did not bat an eye at having been excluded, Charlotte saw. “That is true,” she said. “And...as for more visitors, I’m not sure when they might arrive.” She paused. “Though I’m sure Rosings will have its share, and I look forward to seeing them, if...your mother invites us to dine.”

“She will for certain.” Miss de Bourgh shivered, then, after another silence, adjusted herself to face Charlotte more directly. “Then...after your house is emptied of them,” she said even more softly before, “I will pass by the Parsonage again, and I will be visiting you and Mr. Collins.”

For all that Miss de Bourgh had been to the Parsonage, Charlotte had never been told of the visits ahead of time - or, indeed, told much of anything by Miss de Bourgh at all. “You have no need to ask me, Miss de Bourgh,” Charlotte said. “It is without saying that...that you and your mother are very welcome at the Parsonage, if you would happen to like to come in.”

Miss de Bourgh’s eyes went wide. “You misunderstand. I will be coming only with Jenkinson.”

Charlotte was less and less inclined to believe what she was heading. “On...a social call?”

“That is to be assumed.”

“That’s...” That’s unheard of for you, was Charlotte’s first thought. Won’t that be too much on your constitution? was her second. Her third, and wisest, was not to question the daughter of her benefactress. “That’s wonderful. We’ll be ready for you, when you happen to wish to call.”

“You’ve had so many guests. You are quite ready already.” Miss de Bourgh smiled at her - a rarer sight still. “It may be unusual to you, to have only two in your home.”

“Well...it will become the usual,” Charlotte said. “Until such a time as there are children.”

“As there are sure to be,” Miss de Bourgh said.

Charlotte hasn’t expected Anne to have inherited her mother’s directness. But of course, her experience in company had been little. “I will be honored for the call,” she said to complete the conversation.

“Of course.” Miss de Bourgh nodded at her, then dissolved into a fit of coughs, leaving her unable to say anything else. Not that she would have otherwise, as the party was just breaking up, and Mrs. Jenkinson was beginning the process of preparing her to leave the room.
The next week went by in a hurry, with many more visits to Rosings from the Parsonage, but none from the Parsonage to Rosings. Lizzy and Marie gathered and packed their things, Lizzy and Charlotte had a final meeting and set of goodbyes - in which Charlotte did her best to caution her friend without truly letting on what she was cautioning her against - and left in their chaise, headed back to Hertfordshire, possibly not to return for some time.

And only then did Miss de Bourgh call. It was three days after the departure, and the one time in a week when Will was out on his rounds of the parish, when the maid ran into her study and announced her arrival. She could hardly reach her before Mrs. Jenkinson ushered her in and seated her on the parlor sofa, so from there they greeted each other with the usual formalities. “I’m afraid Mr. Collins is off on the business of the parish,” she said. “It’s just you and I, here-”

“Alright,” Miss de Bourgh said stiffly. There was a moment’s silence; she looked Charlotte up and down, and Charlotte was suddenly struck by the difference in the expense of their dresses. But she turned away without a word of comment about them, and assured Mrs. Jenkinson that she was “quite comfortable” - which, to Charlotte’s surprise, prompted her to nod and leave the room.

“Your servant will leave as well,” Miss de Bourgh said

“Ah, yes - go on, Nancy,” Charlotte said, and Nancy nodded and ran out. They were now truly alone - and Charlotte could not figure out the reason for it. What of such secrecy could Miss de Bourgh have to say to her, on their little real acquaintance? Miss de Borough, who never even talked to her, who only looked down her nose and coughed in any situation where she might otherwise have been called on to speak…

“Sit, if you will,” Miss de Bourgh said, her ladyship’s authority showing even through her weak voice.

Charlotte sat immediately, some distance removed from her. “Well…” she began, uncertain, “It’s charming to have you here, Miss de Bourgh, and on such a lovely day -”

“Mrs. Collins, would you say that you are happy?” Miss de Bourgh interrupted without looking at her.

Charlotte felt her lungs turn nearly to ice. “W-w-why,” she began, “I should say so, yes, why, there’s many things to be happy about, indeed, I…”

“I’ve noticed at our gatherings that you rarely speak to your husband of your own will,” Miss de Bourgh went on. “For a lifetime companion, you do not appear very companionable with him, which is one of the greatest signs of unhappiness.”

As before, she did not ask for forgiveness for her behavior. Nor should she expect it to be needed - but Charlotte could hardly comprehend that she was beginning these topics at all. “That’s…well, that’s not…”

“But then, I might be wrong,” Miss de Bourgh said. “Perhaps your efforts not to talk to one another are a means to preserve happiness. You would know this better than I.”

Charlotte tried hard not to look worried. “Well, that…that can have little to do with personal happiness, can it?” she said. “Happiness comes from a comfortable home, a stable income…good company, no matter from where it may come…”

“Mr. Collins’s only amusement comes from when he makes a fool of himself,” Miss de Bourgh said. “Am I wrong?”
“Mr. Collins is a good, honest, pious husband,” Charlotte recited. “His concern for his fellow man.”

“Do save yourself the trouble of lying to me, Mrs. Collins.”

Charlotte’s face went white, and she stared, trembling, at Miss de Bourgh. “L-l-l-l-

“It’s only you and I here,” Miss de Bourgh said. “Do you take me for a gossip, Mrs. Collins?”

“W-why-” Charlotte stopped herself before she could of continue. “Certainly not, never, of course not - Miss de Bourgh - but to say such things - if true - or to insinuate them - that would be -”

“I care nothing for what you must say,” Miss de Bourgh said. “Only what you wish to.”

She’s mad, Charlotte thought. She’s spent too long in the cold. She’s got a fever. I must run out immediately and call for Mrs. Jenkinson. “I do not…” she began, but only out of habit. If there was another answer - not that she would ever admit that there was - would it be something her patroness’s daughter would want to trouble herself with? “I…I have found my happiness in my situation, in all parts of it, and you need not be troubled on my account-”

“Do my questions surprise you?” Miss de Bourgh said. “I do not mean to cause you discomfort. Nor do I mean, as you say, to trouble myself. I act out of my own curiosity. Mrs. Collins - I’ve forgotten your Christian name.”

“C-Charlotte.”

“Mine is Anne,” Anne said. “I believe, and I have believed for some time, that I see a similarity in our situations.”

“S-Smiliarity?” Charlotte was more surprised than ever. “I…I cannot say the same, as you are not married, Miss de Bourgh…”

“Anne. Call me Anne. True, I am not married. But like you, I am -” Anne heaved into a succession of loud, heavy coughs; she held up a hand to prevent Charlotte’s intervention, and soon righted herself. “I am bound to a necessary situation. Your marriage has decided your path, just as my illness has decided mine, and our individual thoughts must be irrelevant in that matter.”

“But you are to marry Mr. Darcy, I am told,” Charlotte said very fast. “That must be an improvement-”

“I will still be ill when my cousin gains my father’s title.” She laughed - a weak, cold laugh, one perfectly suited to her. “I have not found a single soul who was not too stupid to do anything but pity me. Or whom I could begin to believe could take me seriously. It is as though they believe my mind has wasted away as well.” She looked up at Charlotte. “You’re not perfect. But you’re as close as I’ve come to an understanding soul.”

Charlotte did not feel she understood anything at all - or so she tried to tell herself at first. But in the back of her mind, she found herself thinking of those small things she’d never considered - that no one had ever attempted to make conversation with Miss de Bourgh, not as far as she knew, or that the only thing she had ever known about her was her frail state. She could not even be surprised at her nature, given she had no other pretext. Much like Charlotte herself, it had never been stimulated.

Her fear had given way to curiosity. “What…might you want me to understand?” she said.
“Only the things we cannot say to anyone else,” Anne said. “Your desires. Your dreams. What you might truly want. If you have no words now, then you will listen to the ones I have. And if you are trying to tell yourself that I might be a bore, then I will confidently say I am not blind to the ways of the world. I am likely better read than your husband, or any man.” She looked Charlotte up and down, an oddly lively gleam in her eye. “With the exchange of our respective knowledge, I’m sure we could make each others’ lives bearable.”

A sudden fear pricked at the back of Charlotte’s neck. Something in the way Anne was speaking - and something in the way she looked at her - reminded her oddly of Lizzy. She was just as blunt, if not as brash. *Like a man,* she thought. *She’s behaving like a man behaves.* It was an odd, familiar comfort. A piece of home of the kind that she thought to be many miles away by now.

Her heart raced in her chest. “I am already very happy,” she blurted in fear.

Miss de Bourgh looked confused for a moment - but then, for the first time in the conversation, she smiled. “Then I wish you the best of that happiness, Mrs. Collins. Do send your servant to call for Jenkinson-”

“Wait, no, don’t go.” Instinctively she reached and grabbed for Miss de Bourgh’s hand, and froze when she caught it. It was small and delicate, but much warmer than she’d anticipated. Miss de Bourgh’s eyes went wide at the sight of her motion, and a strange feeling surged up Charlotte’s hand and shook her entire body. “I…would be glad to serve you,” she said, timidly.

Miss de Bourgh raised an eyebrow. “For our benefit?” she said. “Or for mine?”

*Does it matter?* “For…curiosity,” she said, while Miss de Bourgh would allow her to be honest. “Mr. Collins is sure to be back any minute. If you would like to stay…”

“Does he go on his rounds at about this time every week?”

“At about this time.”

“Then I will be back next week.” Miss de Bourgh pulled her hand out of Charlotte’s, and folded them both in her lap. “I have a certain book, that I believe you would like. I dare say you have not seen the like in Mr. Collins’s library. I will pass it to you the next time you dine at Rosings. Send your servant for Jenkinson.”

“Ah- yes, Miss de Bourgh-”

“Anne.”

“Anne.” She would have to get used to this. “Yes, Anne.”

She stood, somewhat unsteady on her feet, and left the parlor in search of Nancy. She found her diligently polishing the silver in the dining room, but given that the silver had been polished the previous day, she tried to repress the idea that she might have been eavesdropping. She sent her on her mission, but remained in the dining room alone for some time, trying to absorb what had just occurred.

Already she felt guilty. There was an air of secrecy in this acquaintance, of subversiveness, that she knew Mr. Collins would not tolerate. She could not conceivably *lie* to him. She must tell him that Miss de Bourgh had visited, even if she did not relate the particulars. But, no, then he would insist on remaining for her visits. And then all might be lost. It might be better if she told him nothing - but could she? It was what she was beholden to. He was her husband.

*I’m sure we could make each others’ lives bearable,* Anne had said. She couldn’t possibly do that,
Charlotte thought. No one could, truly. This was the best she could possibly hope to have, and she must be content with it. But if she could…it would possibly be the only human interaction that would have made her happy since Lizzy left her. Another blessing on her list. Her very long list. She wondered where she might put it. Where it might end up.

It was, at the moment, the only one she could think of. And when she came to this realization, she walked with a renewed vigor back to the parlor, wondering what this new feeling might mean.

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