Summary

Mary Bennet, we read in Pride and Prejudice, lived a less secluded life after the marriages of her sisters. Did she rusticate a spinster forever? I choose to say she did not. Here, then, is a happy ending of two sorts for Mary Bennet. One-shot.

Notes

A/N: I know...a complete departure from my usual, but this is a story I wrote a while ago. Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen will always be one of my favorite reads. I have several editions, hardcover, softcover and electronic in my home. I have all the movies in DVD and video cassette. I subscribe to Austen blogs.

I am a fangirl. Yep.

Here is a piece of what would be termed fanfic for Pride and Prejudice. I always felt rather badly for Mary Bennet, you see, and wanted to give her a life of her own.

Thanks for bearing with me!
"There now, Miss Bennet," Hart, her maid, assured her. "You look very well."

Mary grimaced at her reflection. "I've never looked very well, Hart, so there's no use in saying so. At the most, you have done well with my hair and my gown certainly is in the first stare of fashion but I... I will never be a well-looking woman." She replaced her spectacles and checked the details in the small looking glass. Hart had managed to coax a curl into her hair, and it was drawn back in a respectable manner, not like the fashionable curls on the detail in *La Belle Assemblée* that Hart kept around for inspiration.

Hart saw her glance at it and scooped the magazine up. "It's the latest one, Miss Bennet. June, 1828, see? Right here. But I knew you'd not want all those feathers and such in your hair. It would not suit you, as you've said. Even Mrs. Darcy doesn't dress like the women in the fashion plates." The middle-aged ladies' maid was meticulous in terms of pleasing the lady of the house, Mrs. Darcy. She was employed by the Darcy family but worked for Miss Mary Bennet. It was a courtesy Mrs. Darcy paid to her unmarried sister, since she became Mrs. Darcy of Pemberley more than fifteen years prior.

Mary glanced disparagingly at the periodical. "Indeed I do not. I cannot believe I am sitting for a portrait, Hart. It still seems rather strange to me."

Hart adjusted the lace trim at Miss Bennet's shoulders and cuffs. "All the lady authors are having them done these days. I know you've seen the portraits in the papers."
Mary sniffed. She did read the papers. If only to be aware of world events. It was something scandalous that she, a spinster approaching middle years, was a subscriber to such a thing as a newspaper, but so it was. Mary had long since given up trying to be as others expected her to be.

She nodded with subdued satisfaction. Yes, this particular fabric suited her and was, indeed, fashionable. Elizabeth made sure of that. A wine-hued floss silk, with embroidery and formal flounces at the hem. An elegant gown; not at all eye-catching but still in supremely good taste. "It seems a bit too décolleté, Hart," she remarked.

"Not a bit of it, Miss Bennet. It's just to pattern. The seamstresses made sure."

Yes, they would. Of course. Everyone always seemed to heed Elizabeth Bennet Darcy.

**Spring, 1799**

Mary watched her sister Elizabeth, who at eight years of age was one year older than Mary herself, practice on the piano forte. It was a simple nursery song, and she, Mary, was to practice next.

"Well done, Lizzy," Mama said. "Well done. And Jane, your stitches have quite improved." Mary had no talent for needlework and indeed seemed only to be able to sew on patterned fabrics where her poor stitching did not show.

The ceiling resounded with the pounding footsteps of Catherine and Lydia. Well, they tried calling Catherine by her name but it never seemed to suit. Mary suggested, once, that they try calling her Kitty, since she liked being petted so much.

"Kitty! That's mine! I want it back!" Lydia's screech made the rest of the family wince, but Mary smiled privately to herself.

See? She wanted to say to her mother. See? I made that up. Me! But will you remember that?

She sighed and played with her loose tooth before picking up her picture book. At least those, she didn't have to share!

When Lydia came tumbling down the stairs, landing with a cry that shook the windows, Mama took Mary's book to give to Lydia to soothe her. Mary frowned. "That's my book," she shouted. "Mine!"

"Nonsense," Mama said. "It's from the library and so belongs to everyone. You can get yourself another."

Instead, Mary chose to take her turn at the instrument, following Elizabeth. She tried to play the same music as her elder sister, but it never sounded quite the same. Perhaps she just needed to play it more loudly. That might do the trick.

Still, try as she might, Mama never returned to the room to praise her practicing. Indeed, even Jane left. Only Elizabeth stayed.

More than anything, Mary wanted to be like Elizabeth. She was Papa's favorite. And Papa was someone Mary loved very much. Maybe, if she played loudly enough, Papa would come and listen to her.

And maybe he'd buy her a new book.

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"Mary! You look lovely," Lizzy said upon entering Mary's chamber. Of course, Elizabeth looked beautiful. Her beauty had been enough to attract their cousin Mr. Collins, years and years ago, but Mary did not resent it.

She just did not agree with her sister's assessment. "Don't be silly, Lizzy. I do not look lovely. I look, at best, passable for the portrait. That's all I care about."

Shooing the maid out of the way, Elizabeth came to stand next to her sister, adjusting the fall of lace on Mary's bodice. "And so you should care, yes. You should also care," she went on, meeting Mary's eyes in the mirror, "because Darcy has invited guests who are just now arriving."

Mary blanched. She did not do well in company. "Guests?" she managed to rasp.

"Yes," Elizabeth affirmed with a decisive nod typical of her. "An old schoolfellow who has been unable to pay us a visit before, with his family. They've just reached Pemberley, and we will now go down to greet them."

"But, the portrait! The artist will be waiting!" Mary ventured, abandoning the mirror in favor of finding her favorite quill.

"Hart, please take Miss Bennet's pen and paper to the Southern Parlor," Mrs. Darcy instructed. "The artist will want them left there for his preliminary sketches, he said."

Mary knew that the portraitist – a talented newcomer with the name of Edgecombe – wanted such things, but felt uncomfortable having them taken for her. "I can carry them myself, Lizzy," she protested with a frown.

"And so you can. But I wish you to have your hands free to greet our guests. They'll be with us shortly and we are going to meet them properly. Come along."

Hart bustled away with the quill and papers before Mary could call her back. "But Lizzy! I don't wish to meet your guests."

"Nor do you wish to have your portrait done, but see, here you are all dressed to do so," Lizzy said with a teasing lilt to her voice as she took Mary's hand to lead her reluctantly from the sumptuous bedchamber. "You shan't die, you know. You really will survive the ordeal."

"I've heard that before," Mary muttered, allowing herself to be led out.

Elizabeth chuckled. "And look, here you are to complain about it again. I was correct then and I am correct now."

"Hmph," was all Mary would say. All she could say as they reached the elegant curving staircase, wide as a river. It took concentration to hold the long skirts of the gown just so. Concentration to step carefully, not to slip. All the while thinking that Elizabeth was dressed much more simply than she was herself, for an afternoon call.

**Autumn, 1812**

"And I mean to dance every dance with Mr. Wickham," Lizzy was saying.

Mary stood just outside Elizabeth's room, wanting to ask her about her gown. She had the suspicion that one of their younger sisters had tampered with it, but she couldn't tell for certain. She was pleased, though, to hear that Elizabeth planned on spending the evening with the new officer of the regiment. Mary hoped that would mean she herself would get to converse with their
cousin, Mr. Collins.

She waited, her music held in front of her bodice just in case Kitty or – more likely – Lydia had played a joke on her. When Elizabeth emerged, Mary sighed, relieved. Lizzy was not bringing music. Good!

"Lizzy," she said quietly, "I am afraid –"

With her quick wit, her next-elder sister shook her head. "Do not be afraid. We go to Bingley's house and you know he is a friend of our family."

"But I was worried about my gown."

Surprise flashed in Lizzy's dark eyes. "Your gown?"

"Yes. I wanted to make sure it... It was fitting well." She didn't know how else to put it.

"Well, turn around then, and be quick, for the carriage will be waiting and you know Mama does not wish to be late." Elizabeth smiled then, in her wistfully spirited way that Mary had tried to emulate in her looking glass, but without success. "You look fine," Elizabeth declared.

"I do not wish to go," Mary muttered, still clutching at her music.

"You shan't die, you know. It will do you good. Perhaps you will dance. Mr. Collins has promised to dance with all of us, you know."

Mary darted a quick look at her sister. Yes, he had. But she remembered that Mr. Collins had asked Lizzy for that first dance.

Well, she would make sure to perform for him on the piano forte.

"Girls, girls," Father said as they descended. "Ready for an evening's entertainment? Where we may amuse our friends and be amused by them? Hear your sisters; they are already amused, eh, Lizzy?"

"Yes, Father," they both said, hearing Lydia and Kitty giggling as they entered the carriage ahead of them. Mary noted that her father did indeed nod his approbation of Elizabeth's attire, but he paid her, Mary, no heed at all.

She would play tonight. And then, perhaps, he would see how well she did!

Mr. Darcy was waiting at the bottom of the stairs, his smile of approval at first all for his wife. He was still a very handsome man, Mary deemed. Impressive height and, here in his home, a most congenial companion. As long as she, Mary, stayed far away from the piano forte!

Well, that was easily done. She played simple nursery tunes for her nieces and nephews, but had learned from close association with Mrs. Fitzwilliam, Miss Georgiana Darcy as was, what true taste sounded like, in music. Mary did not wish to consider herself inferior in such a manner again.

"You are looking well, Mary," Mr. Darcy told her with a brief bow. "Edgecombe is here and eager to begin."

Carriage wheels were heard, then, so they ceased their discussion for that time as the sounds of children running toward the stairs above them echoed all around. Elizabeth spun round. "Children! Where is Miss Heath?"
"Sorry, Mrs. Darcy. They heard there were children coming with your company and they had to come see."

Mary smiled peaceably up at the young people. "Hello!" she called.

"Hello, Aunt Mary! You promised us a new story tonight!" the middle girl, Fanny, reminded her.

Mary smiled, feeling whole for the first time since she had begun preparing for her portrait. "Yes, my dear. I did and I shall have one. Later."

Steps approached the door. It opened. Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth stepped forward. Mary would have been happy to wait nearer the stairs, but Lizzy paused and reached back to catch her arm. "Come on!" her sister whispered. "It won’t hurt you."

Pushing her spectacles up a little further on her nose, Mary complied, waiting at just the proper distance from the door, to her sister's right. "Hello, and welcome," Mr. Darcy was saying. "It's been too long. And I see you have your children," the lord and master of Pemberley stated. "You are all welcome. I am sure arrangements have been made?" he said, looking back at Lizzy.

"Indeed they have, Mr. Darcy. Welcome, Lord Ashton."

"Devane, my wife, Mrs. Darcy," Mr. Darcy said, making the introductions. "Elizabeth, my former school fellow, Michael Devane, Baron of Ashton and the younger son of the Earl of Stanhope."

"Mrs. Darcy. A pleasure. I have wished to make your acquaintance for years."

"Thank you, Lord Ashton. And this is my sister, Miss Mary Bennet, of Longbourn."

Mary tried very hard to remember that she was Elizabeth's sister and that everyone informed her she looked very well indeed this afternoon, as Lord Ashton bowed over her hand. "Lord Ashton," she said. "A pleasure."

"Miss Bennet, a pleasure indeed." He looked a bit perplexed, however. Mary brushed that off; people often did not know what to make of her but she was past caring. What was interesting to her were the two young children clamoring in the door now, out of reach of their governess.

Lord Ashton smiled easily and bent over to scoop the children up in his arms. "And these two sprites," he said, smiling all over his face so that deep lines were in evidence, "are my children. Michael – we call him Mick at home – and Samantha."

"Sam!" the girl insisted, squirming to be put down.

"Hello!" the Darcy children called from the landing above.

Ashton made the introductions, including Mr. and Mrs. Darcy as well as Miss Bennet.

"She's our aunt!" Bennet Darcy called out, his clear voice ringing. "She writes books and is getting her portrait painted!"

"Bennet!" Elizabeth called out in obvious chagrin at the same moment Miss Heath did. "Enough!"

Young Michael and Samantha stopped their fidgeting. "Are you Aunt Mary? From the books of stories?"

"Mick!" Lord Ashton began, trying to rein in his children.

Ignoring the adults entirely, Mary smiled at the visiting children. "I am indeed. It is a pleasure to
Ignoring the adults entirely, Mary smiled at the visiting children. "I am indeed. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance Michael. Samantha."

She did not look up to see Baron Ashton's flabbergasted expression. She only smoothed her skirts and glanced at Elizabeth. "I should repair to the parlor. I don't wish to keep Mr. Edgecombe waiting."

"Of course," Lizzy said.

Mary curtsied for the Baron and smiled again at the children – Ashton and Darcy – before taking her leave. Her sigh of relief was audible in the high recesses of the entrance to Pemberley.

**Spring, 1815**

_Her mother's sigh of relief echoed in the dining room as that woman flounced in and collapsed noisily in her chair. Hill appeared with her smelling salts. Mary largely ignored the display._

"Well, what do you think, Mary, with your sister married and out from underfoot permanently?" Father asked in his distant, genial manner from his chair at the other end of the dining table.

Mary shrugged and glanced cautiously between her mother and her father. "She was gone often enough before, was not she?" Mother continued to make gasping sounds and waving her kerchief about. "Mama, please try to breathe your salts. Papa, I am just happy that Kitty is well and safely wed, and to such a respectable man. Your wisdom in keeping her far away from Lydia has been proved."

Father eyed her carefully from under his bushy white brows. "So I have your approbation, eh, Mary? Imagine my relief. Well, I shall just leave you and your mother to moralize over the wedding guests. I'll be in my library."

Mary was left with her mother, wishing she could have been insensible of the whispers of "old maid" and "spinster" that had circulated about her at Kitty's wedding to her clergyman. Wishing, too, that she could have married a clergyman herself. She supposed, though, that her being unmarried was foreordained and, therefore, she should not take issue with it.

Indeed, at her age of four-and-twenty, she was becoming more comfortable with assigning herself to Divine Providence. If the Lord wished her to marry, he should have made her marriageable. Since she patently was not, it behooved her to find what she was fit for and seek to do it.

_A shuffle at the door preceded the buoyant voices of her eldest sister and her husband. With a sigh, Mary whispered to her mother, "Mama. Jane and Bingley are here. Do rouse yourself."_

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"I really do believe, Miss Bennet, that the spectacles should be removed," Edgecombe decided after studying her with the tip of a paint brush handle in his mouth. "Yes, indeed. You have fine skin, you know, and that will be more easily shown without your spectacles."

Mary shifted restlessly on the finely upholstered chair with its white damask and gleaming woods. "Fine skin?" With a dismissive sniff, she removed her spectacles, though she felt rather undressed in so doing. Peering at Mr. Edgecombe who moved now in a slightly fuzzy haze across the parlor, she shrugged. "Mr. Edgecombe. Please do not feel it incumbent upon yourself to make this portrait anything other than true to life. I am not to be romanticized, do you hear?"

"Mrs. Darcy has told me this," the artist informed her, his tone lofty and preoccupied. Mary heard the soft brushing of a pencil on canvas in the following stillness and reached for her favorite writing quill. There were new pens out, yes, but she preferred her quill. It worked and worked
well and she mended her own pens with dispatch.

"May I not read, Mr. Edgecombe?" she inquired after sitting for what seemed like an age. "It is rather dull to sit with nothing to do while you are so fully occupied."

"What? Eh?"

"Read? As in, I would like to read while you work? Unless you need to see my face always pointed in this manner." Mary could not see him clearly, but the artist's footsteps were clear in his approach to her.

He adjusted a fold of her skirt and she frowned heavily at him. His out-of-focus face moved with a smile. "Sorry, Miss Bennet. I wanted the color to catch the light better."

"You are not painting. You are sketching," she said, wondering why light mattered on her skirt for a sketch.

"I am. And to answer your question, I think perhaps a book is fine, but only when I allow it. I will inform you."

"May I get one, now?" she asked, feeling better about this already.

He shook his head, one hand carefully on her shoulder. "Not until this sketch is finished. Then you may. Then, perhaps, we might even take a break until tomorrow. I can work on the background until the light is right for painting. Yes, that will do very well. Now, pray, Miss Bennet, allow me to finish." She heard a smile in his voice as he said, "I understand this is frustrating, but I believe it will aid the sales of your books, no? And of course, an engraving will be a wonderful addition to your frontispieces on future editions."

Contemplating that, Mary leaned back into the chair and was silent.

**Autumn, 1820**

*Mary eyed the children with a degree of wariness. "You need me to entertain them?" she whispered to Jane.*

"Only for a moment, dear Mary. Our Carter has that broken ankle, you know, and Charles and I really have to see to Mama."

*In the hushed sitting room, Mary nodded and laced her fingers together tightly. "And Mama will not do well with children, no."*

*Jane shook her head so that a ringlet fell from her coiffure. "Not just now, no." As ever, Jane refused to say anything negative about anyone, especially their mother. But then, she was the beautiful one. Not nearly as accomplished as Mary had been, but beautiful. All her mother's praise had apparently been merited simply by virtue of marrying a man of means.*

*Miss Bennet sighed at the injustice of it all as Jane Bingley left her alone with the her nieces and nephew. Light slanted in warmly this early afternoon, catching all the highlights in the children's hair. Little Charles' hair was a golden brown color, his sisters each having dark lustrous curls like their mother. Blessed children. Children of good fortune. They sat there obediently, waiting for her to entertain them while their governess was injured.*

"Well," Mary said at last, *coming to sit on the floor with them, for that seemed the wisest course. "What shall we do while your mother is with your grandmother?"*
"I want a story!" The elder Miss Bingley declared with all the assurance of a girl far older than her own six years.

"Me, too!"

"And me!"

Mary blinked and pressed her lips together. A story? What did she know of stories, save those she had read as a child? Trifling things, they were, and not at all instructive. "Well. A story. All right," she said, more bravely than she felt.

Clasping her hands in front of her and resting them on the patterned muslin of her day gown, Mary felt her main focus was to keep their attention from wandering, so they would not notice the ever-lengthening absence of their mother. "It was a dark and rainy night when the post rider pounded on the front door," she began. Determined to use the time to good, moral purpose, Mary also committed herself to wild detail whenever Charles' eyes would wander or little Eliza started to fidget.

The end result being that the children were, all three of them, captivated while Mary herself felt good for she had entertained her nieces and nephew while imparting to them a story about the value of courage in adversity. As well as with a great many details about storms and rain!

When Jane and Charles returned, faces grim but determined not to speak of Mrs. Bennet's still-failing health, Mary was surrounded by the children, with the youngest, Louisa, on her lap. "Jane. We have been having a lovely time."

"Mama! Aunt Mary knows the best stories!" Jane's son Charles stated, his face the very image of his father.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Bingley appeared very much surprised as they eyed Mary. Mary herself felt rather proud of herself as she handed Louisa back to her mother. "Your children make a fine audience," she allowed herself to say.

"Perhaps, Mary," Charles Bingley began with his encouraging way, "you could write out what you said to them, so that we can tell them your story again when we are at home."

"Perhaps."

"Aunt Mary! Do you have time for a story before we have to go to the nursery?"

It was strange to hear the request from this Darcy daughter. "Jane, you're thirteen years old. You haven't listened to a story in years," she reminded her niece. With a smile, for Mary could not be offended by young Jane Darcy. Who could? Though in looks she closely resembled Georgiana Darcy, the eldest Miss Darcy was her mother's daughter through and through. And that, of course, endeared her to Mary.

Jane's blush was visible. "I know, but you said you'd have a new one and we have guests and..."

Mary smiled and carefully began climbing the stairs. "Of course. I do have a new one. Let me change out of this gown and then I'll join you."

"Why must you change?" Jane inquired, her face admiring. "You look very nice, Aunt. I heard Baron Ashton say so."

"What?" It was Mary's turn to blush.
Jane's eyes danced with amusement. "Indeed, he did! I heard him! Mama let me come down to meet him when his children and their nurse joined us in the nursery. He said he thought that the Aunt Mary books were written by a spinster but that you did not look like you could possibly be old enough to be Aunt Mary."

Mary coughed to cover a snort of disbelief. "He was likely paying a compliment to your mother, Jane. I doubt he meant to compliment me. I am every inch a spinster and every day of thirty-seven, remember. Which means I can do as I like. And that includes," she concluded, "changing out of this far too elaborate gown and into something more suitable. Besides," she said with a sigh as she moved from Jane and the balcony, "Hart will have to press this before tomorrow. Since I am still sitting for that portrait, I must wear it again."

Some little time later, Mary was settled comfortably on the floor of the nursery, her gauze and cotton dress much more the thing, for her personal preferences. Its leg o'mutton sleeves pampered what she might call her vanity, calling attention from her plain features and straight hair to the artistry of her seamstress. Or, rather, Elizabeth's seamstress. One thing about being Mr. Darcy's sister-in-law, Mary reminded herself again, was that she was often the recipient of the Darcy generosity and image.

Jane sat indecorously on the Aubusson carpet as well, while her younger brother and sisters lolled about, all eyes. The newcomers, Mick and Sam as they preferred to be called, sat more properly in low chairs, but soon, Mary guessed, they would join the others on the floor. Heath supervised the laying-out of the children's dinner while Mary entertained them. It was, she believed, one of the nicer duties involved with being a maiden aunt.

"And so," she was saying in her new story, "Walter had to make a choice."

The door of the nursery opened and the children all scrambled to their feet. "Mama! Mrs. Darcy!"

"Hello, children," Elizabeth said warmly. "I've come to collect Miss Bennet. We're soon to go to the dining room, Mary," Lizzy said in an aside, absently brushing something off the fine white silk she wore.

"Miss Bennet? Who's that?"

"Aunt Mary," young Jane reminded their guest in a loud whisper.

"Ohhh."

"Heath?" Elizabeth called across the nursery. "Is everything prepared?"

"Yes, Mrs. Darcy. Not to worry. Even Lord Ashton's young ones are seen to."

"That's fine, then. Children," Elizabeth went on, "I'll be up later to see you to bed."

"Will our papa be up, too?" asked young Mick.

"Indeed, I daresay he shall. Come along, Mary."

"It is only to be a family party, is it not, Lizzy?" Mary asked as they moved carefully down the broad staircase. "No other guests you neglected to mention?"

"Just us, Mary. Darcy will walk you in, and I'll go in with Ashton. The smaller dining parlor, this evening. Nothing too elaborate." Lizzy smiled as her gaze swept over Mary's dress. "You look very well, you know."
"It is all thanks to you, Elizabeth. No one knows that more than I do."

"How did your sitting go?"

Mary shook her head. "Edgecombe was blathering away about an etching for a frontispiece of my next story collection. I think he's ridiculous."

"Not at all," Elizabeth demurred as they reached the sitting room where the gentlemen waited in front of a comfortably crackling fire. "I found her, Darcy. Lord Ashton. She was with the children."

Darcy bowed briefly to her. Mary had decided that Darcy only granted her this slight honor because of her status as published authoress. She didn't know whether to be offended or grateful, so she said nothing at all. Merely curtsied to Mr. Darcy and then to Lord Ashton, who approached and bowed over her hand.

She pulled it back as soon as she could. What did he mean by that? "Good evening, Lord Ashton," she said stiffly.

"Miss Bennet. So you were with the children?"

"Yes," she said, disinclined to converse with him. "I had promised my nieces and nephews a new story, this evening."

The baron nodded. "Thank you for sharing it with my own children too, then. I am sure they could not have been better entertained."

Pushing her spectacles up the bridge of her nose, Mary didn't know how to answer. She only said she hoped so before looking to Mr. Darcy. He was to take her in to dinner.

Accordingly, Mr. Darcy held out his arm to her. She took it – as she had done many times – and was escorted to the smaller dining room of Pemberley.

**Spring, 1821**

_There was no fire in her room. That told Mary that something was indeed amiss. Since Kitty's marriage, Mary had asked her father if she could rearrange the bedrooms of their home, so as to give herself a private library of her own as well as a bedchamber. Though a bit taken aback, Papa had amusedly given his consent._

_He had also given orders that Mary's Library was to have a fire in it, every morning._

_So this morning in early April, when there was no fire, Mary knew something was wrong. With a feeling of foreboding clutching at her middle, she drew her robe around her and left her chilly bedroom to go to her mother's. In here, it was warm. Very warm. The air was close and the fire was blazing as she gazed with alarm at Hill, their servant, who was tending the fire, shoulders shaking._

"What is wrong?"

_Hill turned around. "Mrs. Bennet, Miss Mary. She's ailing."_ 

Mary frowned. "Again?"

"Worse, Miss. I've sent Wallace to get Mr. Bennet."
Mary's heart lurched in her chest at such news. That was serious indeed. "Very well, then. Is there anything I can do to help anyone?"

"No, Miss," Hill assured her as sweat rippled from her temple. "But I'm that sorry about forgetting your fire. I've been busy."

"Of course, Hill. I shall see to our morning tea. If my mother wakes, please just call for me."

"I will, Miss."

Leaving her mother's chamber, she all but ran into her father. "Mary? Have you seen her?" he asked, his voice sharp but his eyes sharper.

"She's sleeping, Papa."

Her father passed a hand over his face and Mary waited. He murmured at last, "Sleeping. Well, Mary, go on. I'll make sure you're called if you're needed."

That was doubtful, Mary reflected sourly as she continued to the kitchen. As if anyone would call her. However, she found the error of her thoughts when, before the tea things were even set out, her name was called.

"Miss Mary! Miss Mary!"

The panic in Hill's voice had Mary grabbing at her robe and running haphazardly up the stairs. "What is it?"

Breathless, she all but tumbled into her mother's bedchamber. Her father was holding her mother's hand and Hill was sobbing into an apron. "Oh, no," Mary whispered.

Her father turned his head slowly to her, his eyes hollow and dry. "Yes, my dear Mary. Your mother is dead. It's just the two of us, now."

Breakfast the following morning was a quiet affair. Mary rose early, as she always did, to read from the Scriptures and write in her journal. There was a fire in her chamber, as there always was, here at Pemberley. Her writing desk was positioned just so, to catch the best light. Elizabeth always saw to these touches. Or if not she, then she gave orders for it to be so, which was much the same. It was a comfortable chamber, and Mary knew it was hers alone; for she spent months of every year, here.

Not as many as she had before Mama had died, but still, a few. Sometimes, Papa joined her. He had chambers of his own, too. Pemberley was large enough to accommodate them all with ease, of course, and still have room for guests. Like Mr. Darcy's guest, Michael Devane, Lord Ashton. Mary sat back from her journal after setting her pen down. Not her favorite pen; that was still down in the room near the chair she was being posed in for that portrait. An irritation, that, but she supposed she would survive it, too.

Lord Ashton. He appeared to be near Mr. Darcy's age, she guessed. More tanned, with deeper lines around his eyes. He must smile and laugh a great deal more than her brother-in-law. His hairline was beginning to recede, she recollected. But still, a well-looking man, yes. His children were well-mannered and entertaining, to be sure.

A light tap on the chamber door shook her from her reverie. She had not dawdled so on thoughts of a man for some years. It was just as well to be interrupted. "Yes?"

"It's Hart, Miss Bennet."
"Come in, Hart. I suppose I'm ready."

The door opened and Hart slid in, face set in an expression of expectation. "I've your portrait gown all pressed and ready for you, for after breakfast."

"Thank you. What shall I wear to breakfast?"

Hart opened the highly polished wardrobe. "I just finished with the new trim on your rosebud dress, Miss Bennet. It will be very suitable, what with a Baron as Mr. Darcy's guest."

Mary snorted in a most unladylike manner. Hart ignored the sound; Miss Bennet often reacted thus when contemplating company.

"As you wish," Mary sighed. "It matters not." It truly did not signify what she wore, for she was an old maiden aunt and would remain so. She liked life the way it was.

"I heard other news today, Miss Bennet," Hart said in her chatty fashion as the rosebud dress was laid out with pantalettes and stockings and slippers. "Your father will be arriving today."

Mary did smile at that and, seeing her fleeting reflection in the looking glass, was startled. She looked better than she thought. "My father? When?"

"This afternoon, they were saying below stairs."

"Make sure to pull me away from Mr. Edgecombe when my father arrives, Hart. I would rather spend time with him than with an artist."

"As you wish, Miss Bennet."

Her toilette complete to Hart's satisfaction, Mary made her way to the breakfast room, expecting to find Lizzy there, if no one else, but her sister had either breakfasted and hurried away or had not yet arrived. Instead, she was greeted by Mr. Darcy's guest.

"Miss Bennet," Lord Ashton said with a smile and bow before crossing the smallish parlor to greet her. "Good morning. I am pleased to have the opportunity of breakfasting with you."

"With me? Whatever for?" Mary said, confused. "I'm just Mr. Darcy's sister-in-law, you know."

Lord Ashton flashed her a smile. "You're also a famous authoress. You think they're commonplace enough that a man wouldn't wish to spend time with one?"

Mary frowned a little into his playful expression. "My lord," she said slowly, not certain what he was getting at but certain she would wind up making a muddle of it somehow. "You are a peer. I cannot imagine that breaking your fast with me will in any way be an extraordinary experience for you." She made to move past him to the sideboard, so she could select something for a suddenly-diminished appetite. "I assure you, I am not good company."

He silently offered himself as footman, holding the covers from the dishes while she served herself, then holding her chair out for her. She had nothing to say to all of that. He was behaving in all respects properly, but she didn't know how to respond.

At last, he settled himself next to her and took up his own napkin to finish his breakfast. "I assure you, Miss Bennet, that you will be wonderful company. If for no other reason than that I can tell my children I conversed with you over kippers and eggs."

The mention of his children made Mary smile. "They're delightful people," she said, smoothing
her napkin. "It was a pleasure to have met them."

"They enjoyed meeting you, too," he assured her before picking up his toast and spreading some marmalade on it. She could smell the crisp, sweet tang of it from here and it made her want some herself.

He looked rather silly jumping up as she stood to get the toast and marmalade, what with the toasted bread crust dangling from his mouth. Against her inclination, she actually giggled. The crust fell from his mouth and Mary could not repress the mirth that burbled over. She turned from him, hiding her open mouthed laughter. Behind her, there was a clatter of porcelain and flatware, as well as Lord Ashton's coughing.

"I beg your pardon," he said, still coughing.

"I beg yours," she said, spooning marmalade on the small plate with her toast. "I should not have laughed."

He was beside her in a heartbeat, which was highly disconcerting. "No, you should have. You – you're a surprising woman, Miss Bennet."

Something undefined tightened her middle and sent her skin crinkling all over her body. It was unnerving and Mary glanced quickly down at the sideboard. "I'm not, my lord. I'm the middle daughter of a country gentleman, who will be joining us, my maid tells me, later today."

"So how did this middle daughter of a country gentleman become a widely read children's authoress? With multiple editions and now a portrait on commission?"

Blushing so that she felt her slippers would catch on fire, Mary shook her head and abandoned her toast and marmalade, and, indeed, her entire breakfast. "I told my nieces and nephews stories, my lord. That was all. When I could not come visit, I sent them stories by post."

"And your sister wished to publish them?" Lord Ashton inquired, leaning casually against the sideboard and reaching for a fresh cup for his tea.

Mary tried to take a step away from the baron. "Actually, I believe the idea was Mr. Bingley's, and Mr. Darcy was willing to sponsor the publication." This was her writing, and Mary was not hesitant to discuss it. Able, now, to meet Lord Ashton's penetrating gaze, she continued. "Have you met Mr. Bingley? He is my eldest sister Jane's husband. Darcy paid for the initial editions, but the publisher sold the first printing quickly." She smiled, remembering. "Frankly, my lord, I thought that my sisters had had a hand in that, but they assured me they had not. My publisher, then, paid for subsequent printings and requested the second book."

The door to the breakfast room opened, then, and in came Lizzy and Mr. Darcy. Mary was again amused when Lord Ashton hopped directly away from her, a slight color showing along his jawline, above the points of his neckcloth. She stifled another ridiculous giggle, though, under Mr. Darcy's incredulous stare.

"Mary," Elizabeth said, her voice rippling, "is everything to your liking?"

After flicking a quick glance to Lord Ashton, Mary nodded. "Of course, Lizzy. Lord Ashton was just inquiring about my publishing."

Darcy deigned not to say a word. After his initial discomfort, Lord Ashton smilingly lifted a new piece of toast as if in salute to his friend and returned to his seat at the table.

"I think I shall see if Mr. Edgecombe is ready to work, Lizzy," Mary told her sister. "I want to be
free when my father comes, later."

Her sister's smile was broad with expectation. "Perfect! I shall send word to him to meet you."

Darcy, who had not yet seated himself, bowed and wished her a good morning. Lord Ashton rose as she turned to him. "I would like to continue our discussion, Miss Bennet," he informed her boldly.

She didn't know what to say to him. "As you wish," was all she managed, before curtsying and hurrying away. She wanted to have her sitting done and over with for the day, before Papa arrived.

**Winter, 1823**

"Miss Bennet! A package has come for you," Hill informed Mary as the latter was preparing to pack her trunk for a visit to the Bingley estate. Mr. Bingley was certainly easier to get along with, in her view, than Mr. Darcy, and Jane of course never said an awkward thing in her life. Still, Mary did not look forward to this visit. She wished to stay home with her father. Finally, after years of waiting for it, she and her father had had good conversations. Not sarcastic dismissals, but actual exchanges of ideas. He had even encouraged her to broaden her reading matter, and had purchased for her several new books.

*He had not, however, encouraged her continued practicing on the piano forte. "It's for younger girls, Mary. And as a lady of much reflection, you must have realized you are no longer a young girl."

Indeed, at the age of thirty-two, she was no longer a young girl of any pattern. The realization freed her from self-expectation. Impulsively, she had crossed the room to kiss her father on the cheek. "Thank you, Papa."

*Her father sighed a little and caught her hands. "I just wish I knew how to provide for you, my dear. Indeed, I have spoken to Jane and Lizzy about it."

"And?" Mary asked, trepidation sitting with sudden heaviness on her shoulders.

*Papa nodded slowly and removed his spectacles to wipe them off with a cloth he kept near his chair for that purpose. "Well, as you may know, Mr. Darcy provided exceedingly well for your sister Elizabeth. Jane is also provided for, by the settlement with Mr. Bingley. Kitty has received her portion of your mother's estate." Neither of them mention Lydia, though Mary knew by her father's disgusted expression that his thoughts turned that way. For a moment. "But after discussing it with Lizzy, who discussed it with Jane, I have made a decision, Mary."

"What?"

*He patted her hand. "You will receive Lizzy and Jane's portions as well as your own. It is not enough to keep you in a grand style," he added in his laconic way as he rose to his feet, "but there will be enough for you to live with one of your sisters without being dependent wholly on them for every shilling and feeling as if you need to be a servant to your own sisters," he concluded, his eyes sober and voice now in dead earnest. "I am doing what I can, as well, to see what will be available to you before Mr. Collins runs you out of the place when I'm gone."

*Completely at point-non-plus, Mary had only been able to stare at her father as he nodded again and ambled slowly out of the room.

*Today, Hill's heavy steps sounded on the stairs and in the hall and the long suffering serving
woman almost fell into Mary's chamber, so excited was she by her burden. "Miss Bennet! Look! It's from London!"

Excitement lit in Mary's own bosom at that moment as the two women bent over the package and unwrapped it to find the publisher's galley for her first collection of children's stories.

A brief note was tied to the manuscript. "It only needed a title, but we provided one. If it meets with your approval, Miss Bennet, we may proceed to the first printing."

Bedtime Stories by Aunt Mary was the title on top of the galley.

Hill looked at Miss Bennet with some care. "D'you like it, Miss?"

"Bedtime? Well. I suppose," Mary allowed with a shrug. "They know best."

She drafted a note of approval and sent it the next day.

MB MB MB

"Please, Miss Bennet. Hold still. I cannot catch the way the light reflects in your eyes!" Mr. Edgecombe admonished her. Again.

Mary sighed the sigh of the unrepentant. "I am expecting a guest," she said, trying to make her voice sound as Lizzy's did when she got her own way. "I must make ready."

"Fifteen minutes more, before the light shifts again, and I shall release you. I can do the background without you here, as well as the detail work in the quill and paper," the artist muttered, annoyed by the interruptions, but thinking that he was at least being well paid by Mr. Darcy to paint this portrait. He would be able to stay at Pemberley, too, for the duration, so perhaps the delays were not really that dreadful.

Released at long last, Mary hurried out the parlor and up the stairs to divest herself of the formal gown with its deep neckline and rich hue. She felt much more comfortable in the rosebud dress from the morning, which was what she told Hart.

"But Lord Ashton has seen you in that once today," the lady's maid protested.

"Am I dressing for a man so wholly unconnected with me? I think not. My father will perhaps like the rosebud. He is the only man I have any interest in pleasing. The rosebud, Hart."

Resigned, that good woman did as she was told, but comforted herself by bringing Miss Bennet's hair back to the style of the morning rather than the elaborate knot she wore for the portrait. The ringlets really did accent Miss Bennet's intelligent brow and clear complexion. Miss Bennet may have no care as to how a wealthy Baron – and Lord Ashton was a wealthy man indeed, with an estate only slightly less worthy than Pemberley, and with a full title of the realm – perceived her (Miss Mary Bennet was an odd one, make no mistake, but at least doing for an eccentric was not boring.) but Hart was going to do her best anyway.

Mary carefully descended the stairs to find everyone in the primary drawing room. Everyone, in this instance, did indeed mean everyone. Adults and children, guests and family. Elizabeth glided over to her, a smile all over her face.

"We interrupted you last night, Mary. Would you please start your new story over again, so that we might all hear it?"

Flushed with disconcertion, Mary took three steps back. "Lizzy... Please, no. Not in front of all
these people." She meant "the adults," but didn't want to say so, exactly.

Her father, though, rose slowly to draw her back into the cluster of people. "Now, now, Mary. It's the price you pay for being a published name, you know." His words were light, but she stopped and stared him in the eye to see if he were just teasing her or mocking her or if he were in earnest. He had no imp lingering in his pale eyes, but something far less familiar.

Pride in her.

While she tried to discern it, he pressed her hand in both of his. "So, my Mary. Will you?"

"Of course, Papa."

While she settled herself on the floor – for she simply could not tell stories to children while perched on a chair so far above them – and arranged her skirts about her ankles, Mary was marveling that finally, here at this time of her life, she had merited her father's approval. It was all she had ever wanted.

With careful concentration, she managed to ignore – for the most part – the adults who were listening to her while she told her latest story to the children. Even Jane Darcy was now curled on the floor, not heeding all that proper posturing often deemed necessary by Society. Mary approved. This was her father's home, and Jane should be able to be entirely herself, here.

"...Then, his youngest brother laughed and brought him what was left of the pudding and they ate themselves ill!"

The children laughed and the adults chuckled and, suddenly, Mary found herself being roundly stared at by every pair of eyes. Stared at with approval. In a way she had never seen before. Even Baron Ashton had a light in his eyes.

Mary blushed.

"Well, children," Lizzy said after a few moments, "you have had your bedtime story from Aunt Mary, and it's time for bed."

"Good night, Aunt Mary! Good night!" Even Mick and Sam said that, even though their father shook his head at them. They changed it to, "Good night, Miss Bennet."

"I preferred Aunt Mary," Mary told Lord Ashton with a direct look.

His smile was reflected in his eyes. "I'll remember that. I didn't wish for them to presume on such short acquaintance, Miss Bennet. Shall I get you a glass of wine?"

Disconcerted again, she nodded. "Thank you, my lord."

Lord Ashton left her side and her father joined her, as if the men were moving in a dance. She smiled tentatively. "Well, Papa?"

"You have done well, Mary. Very well. I'm exceedingly proud of you."

She felt tears in her eyes. "Thank you."

"And now, my dear, I shall leave you to your admirers," her father said, this time with humor in his inflection. He bowed. "Lord Ashton? I trust you'll see to my daughter for the rest of the evening?"
Lord Ashton's smile was broadly welcoming. "It would be my pleasure," he said, bowing in his turn, though Mary knew that he shouldn't be, according to the rules of Society.

"Good, good."

Taking the offered wine from Lord Ashton, Mary could only stare after her father as he bid Lizzy good evening and left the parlor to go upstairs. "Well. That was unusual," she muttered, fluffing out her skirts with her free hand.

The baron cleared his throat. "Unusual, Miss Bennet?"

"Yes. Unusual." She did not wish to elaborate so she sipped at her wine and, belatedly, remembered to smile at the baron.

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December, 1828

"My dear, I have had a most unusual letter, today."

Mary looked up from her writing desk at her father. He had taken to reading his mail near the fire in the parlor hearth, and she wrote in there. Thus did they spend some time together every day without aggravation or irritation. "Is it from Mr. Collins, again?" Their cousin had taken a morbid interest in her father's continuing good health.

"No, but from another gentleman of our acquaintance. A certain Michael Devane," her father began in that distant, airy fashion of his.

Mary's blush was immediate and she bowed her head to sharpen her quill. "Is it?"

"It is, my dear."

She got her breathing back under control. Lord Ashton had certainly been kind, buying three copies of her book and traveling all the way to Longbourn to have her sign them for him and his children. He had been their guest for a week. And she had seen him at Pemberley, too. He was Mr. Darcy's friend, so it was not a surprise to see him there. But he had spent many hours conversing with her since they met while she was getting her portrait painted. "Did he have something particular to say, Papa?" The letter in her father's hand shook a little. Mary glanced at him with some alarm. "Are you all right, Papa?"

"Fine, fine. I am just a little surprised, my girl."

"What did he have to say?" she demanded, concerned. She even set down her mending knife.

Her father removed his glasses and set them carefully aside on the small table to his left. "He has proved himself rather old-fashioned, my dear. He has asked for my permission to seek your hand in marriage."

She fainted.

"And so, it was a very pretty wedding. Though she was not handsome, nor smart, nor rich, you see, Ameline did indeed marry very well because she had been true to herself and had done what she knew to be right. She became Lady Montsford and lived happily ever after."

Mick and Sam grinned impishly up at their new mother. "I think you cheated," Mick declared, laughing. "You used your life for this story!"
"But you changed all the names! How can that be a real bedtime story?" Sam demanded.

Mary Bennet Devane, Lady Ashton, smoothed the handwritten sheets back into the leather envelope from whence she had taken them. "Because sometimes, dear children, even real stories can have a fairy tale ending."

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