Wedding is destiny, and hanging likewise (OLD VERSION)

by sqbr

Summary

NOTE: This is the old, unfinished version of this story. Here's the new, finished version!

In which Mary Bennet becomes a companion to Anne de Bourgh and neither of them gets quite what they were bargaining for.

Notes

While this story very much draws on my own experiences with chronic illness, my situation is different to Anne's in a lot of ways, especially the fact that I'm still getting my head around my diagnosis. I hope my depiction is moderately true to life, but apologise if it is not, and welcome any feedback on that score.

Check out this fantastic Homestuck story inspired by it: An Injured Body.

See the end of the work for more notes.
But you yourselves, I think, will allow that war, commerce, politics, exercises of strength and dexterity, abstract philosophy, and all the abstruser sciences, are most properly the province of men... Those masculine women that would plead for your sharing any part of this province equally with us, do not understand your true interests. There is an influence, there is an empire which belongs to you, and which I wish you ever to possess: I mean that which has the heart for its object and is secured by meekness, by soft attraction, and virtuous love

--Sermons to Young Women, Dr. James Fordyce

And all that evil might, with God's blessing, be happily prevented by an early and diligent application to Female Accomplishments

--Ibid

Mary Bennet was a very accomplished girl. Everyone said so, although sometimes they had to be prompted a few times. She could play three whole concertos (as well as countless reels and jigs), could quote from all the major classics, and had the largest collection of dried beetles for two counties.

It was not that she necessarily enjoyed attaining these accomplishments (well, apart from the beetles)- but it was the duty of every woman to find a husband, and since she did not possess the usual blandishments of beauty, wealth, or position, her accomplishments were all she had to rely on.

She often felt sorry for her sisters: yes, it must be admitted, they were all somewhat prettier than herself, but could any of them perform Mozart's Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor or name all the kings of England in order? No, they could not. Surely any man with sense would see past the ephemeral blush of youth and choose a helpmate with more lasting and important qualities.

In her darker moments she questioned whether memorising lists of kings really was all that important, but she could usually cheer herself up by remembering all the advice from Poor Richard’s Almanac that she had committed to memory. Now those were practical skills enough for anyone.

Harder to dispel was the doubt she did not even let let herself fully express: as unpleasant as it was to consider a life spent as a spinster forced to live off her parents largesse, the prospect of marriage was not all that much more appealing. She believed very strongly in a wife's duty to be obedient and submissive to her husband in principle, but was less sure she liked the idea of having to do so herself.

These doubts began to play on her mind more and more as first one, and then three of her sisters were married. Jane was no surprise: she was the by far the prettiest of all the sisters. And while Mary personally found him both stupid and dull, Jane's husband seemed to share her sweet but irrational disposition, so they would probably be happy enough.

Lydia, on the other hand, had reaped the whirlwind of her own sowing. Her unguarded and
thoughtless behaviour deserved no better than a dissolute wastrel like Wickham (Here Mary congratulated herself on having had the good judgement to dislike the slimy fellow from the beginning)

But Elizabeth- Ah! There was an example to quell the strongest spirit. She had some accomplishments, it was true, but lacked the discipline to apply herself as Mary had. As a result her piano playing was amateurish, her reading unrefined, and the closest she came to Mary's beetle collection was a few pressed flowers. And yet, she had been proposed to twice! First by the almost tolerable Mr Collins, and then by the apparently more desirable Mr Darcy.

Mary could see, in an abstract sense, that Darcy was the more handsome of the two, and certainly he was by far the richer. But for herself Mary preferred the more sensible and learned Mr Collins. She certainly had not been in love with him, but had started to think warmly of his potential as a future companion (especially given his stated desire to marry one of the Bennet sisters: if Elizabeth said no he was hardly going to choose Lydia or Kitty) But not only did he choose Elizabeth instead of herself, on her rejection of his suit he abandoned their family entirely and engaged himself to Charlotte Lucas, a woman who not only lacked Mary's accomplishments but was also even more plain. Surely this was not fair! And if even Charlotte Lucas was more desirable than Mary, what hope had she of finding a match?

It was with these thoughts that Mary approached her twentieth birthday.

Chapter End Notes

So Fordyce's Sermon's are total comedy gold, I can definitely see why Austen referenced them. You can find them on google books, but I don't recommend reading too much at once or your brain will melt.
The conversation of people older than yourselves will often be accompanied by less joy at the moment; but afterwards it will make abundant compensation. It will produce more recollection: and be assured my sisters, those are the truest pleasures which are tasted by a mind composed and serious.

--Sermons to Young Women, Dr. James Fordyce

There were some consolations for the marriages of her sisters.

The library at Netherfield was most satisfactory, and she was a frequent visitor (Jane and her husband having no use of it themselves)
She did not often see Lydia or Wickham, but that was as it should be, and with Lydia gone and Kitty so often visiting her elder sisters, the Bennet house had become a much quieter place.

Unfortunately, this did not mean that Mary had more opportunity for study and reflection. Having no other companion, Mrs Bennet drew entirely upon Mary to keep her entertained. In vain did Mary attempt to impress upon her mother the joys of reading and self improvement. Instead, her days were spent mostly mired in gossip and the discussion of bonnets. She did manage to persuade Mrs Bennet to allow Mary to sometimes read to her aloud, but the subject matter never rose above the level of newspaper reports and low romance.

Her only escape was to submit herself to the rigours of Society.

Unfortunately, this was not generally much of an improvement. Mary had no interest in the vain fripperies of fashion, refused to engage in the low practice of gossip, and was simply bad at dancing and cards. This made her unsuited to the company of women, and she was of course too proper to consort with men (also, if her brothers-in-law were anything to go by, all that men her age talked about were equally uninteresting topics like hunting and business)

Worse, in those few instances where she encountered someone who shared her interests she found herself unable to express herself. Mary was a considered thinker, unlike some people she was not equipped for thoughtless banter, and when put on the spot often had to fall back on some quotation or pre-considered response. Even when she had prepared something to say for a given occasion it never seemed to make the desired impression, and she was generally left wishing she'd said nothing at all.

But as imperfect as the experience was, a day spent out with other people was a day not spent at home reading "The Mysteries of Udolpho" to her mother, so as a rule she enthusiastically assented to any visit or excursion.

Today, however, she was less sure. For although it would involve a long trip (with much opportunity to read and study a variety of countryside), and even a chance to discuss theology, there were certain definite drawbacks. But duty to family must always come first (and variety is the spice of life, and so on etc) so with a faint pang of regret she assented, and without delay she and her parents prepared for the trip to Pemberley.
when the road proves rugged, or is in danger of growing tedious, one successful method of beguiling it is for the travellers to cheer and amuse one another by the play of fancy, and the facetiousness of mirth. But then the end of the journey must not be forgotten.

--Sermons to Young Women, Dr. James Fordyce

As the long journey continued, Mary was faced with a familiar decision: talk to her mother, talk to her father, or sit in silence. She was just beginning to settle on the final option when Mr Bennet, having evidently made a similar calculation, took the choice away.

"Mary", he said, smiling, "What book has so captured your fancy? Something worthy no doubt?" "Instructive and Entertaining Exercises With the Rules of the French Syntax " she replied "French entertainment?!" he responded "Surely Mrs Murray would not approve!"

"Oh!" Mary began "Don't worry, it's not actually that entertaining. And in the latest Mentoría Mrs Murray said that.." but then trailed off when she noticed that he was wearing his familiar teasing expression.

She frowned and returned to her book.

A few minutes passed. She decided that, being a mature and dutiful daughter, she would try to make proper conversation even if he would not.

"And what are you reading, father?"

"Oh," said Mr Bennet "Nothing very interesting. Some new techniques for crop rotation, Bingley is thinking of using them at Netherfield and asked me to look into it for him."

"Ah" said Mary. She was not sure even Elizabeth could find anything interesting to say about crop rotation.

This conversation, their longest in several days, now concluded, and Mrs Bennet having fallen into a slumber after a large lunch, they spent the rest of the day's journey in silence.

The trip was not without its amusements. The country they passed through was varied and often quite pretty, and after much persuasion Mrs Bennet was prevailed upon to allow a brief stop over in Nottingham. Here Mary and Mr Bennet whiled away an afternoon in companionable silence in a well stocked bookshop, until reluctantly rejoining their less literary companion, who spent the whole of the next morning complaining about being left to fend for herself in a strange city.

Strange men! Cut-purse filled slums! Threatening looking ducks! Mary had a feeling there would be no such diversions on the way back.

As they reached the end of a week spent in alternating periods of silence and unsatisfying conversation, Mary couldn't help but wish she felt some of that apparently natural familial bond with her father. Or her mother. Or any of her sisters.

But perhaps this was just the way families were. Certainly there seemed to be no special closeness between Bingley and his sisters, or Mrs Bennet and hers. Even Mr Bennet seemed to prefer the company of Mr and Mrs Gardiner to his own, rarely visited sister.

Perhaps this was only normal, and the purpose of marriage was to allow her to choose a new, better suited companion. One who would think french grammar an entirely reasonable topic for
reading.

She was distracted from these philosophical thoughts by the sudden jerk as the carriage finally reached it's destination. As the doors of the grand house opened and her father rushed out to embrace his favourite daughter, Mary wondered if perhaps she wasn't so normal after all.

Chapter End Notes

The first draft of this was written while I was reading the good but emotionally draining "Lilith's Brood" series by Octavia Butler, and was as a result rather brooding and dour. Hopefully I've managed to counteract that bit, I guess I'll have to go back to reading cheerier books :)

The Mentoria.
When I see two sisters, both of them pleasing and both esteemed, living together without jealousy or envy, yielding to one another without affectation, and generously contending who shall do most to advance the consequence and happiness of her friend, I am highly delighted: dare I add the more highly, that such characters are not very common!

--Sermons to Young Women, Dr. James Fordyce

It was not that Elizabeth Darcy didn't love her sister. She and Mary had actually been quite close as children: Not as close as she and Jane, to be sure, but Mary had been a steadfast support in the elder three girls constant struggle to be paid any attention by their mother, who was usually too busy doting over the youngest two. Defending the safety of their dolls and arguing for sweets and ink had forged a strong bond of comradeship not easily broken.

And yet here she was, happy to share her house with their old nemesis Kitty for months on end, but dreading a few weeks spent with Mary. Still, there was nothing to be done about it, and perhaps the varied company would help her mature as it had their younger sister.

Elizabeth put on her friendliest expression
"Hello Mary! What is that you are reading? French excitements? What would Mrs Murray say?"

Mary stood quietly in the main hall of Pemberley as her family made the usual greetings and questions that came with any extended separation. She avoided the watchful eye of several generations of (presumably) larger-than-life Darcy ancestors and considered her immediate future. She would never suspect Elizabeth of any such pecuniary motive, but if she had chosen her husband for his house she certainly could not have done much better. Bingley had said that Darcy's library was significantly larger than the one at Netherfield (he could of course make no judgement as to it's quality) and even from here she could make out several airy looking rooms which appeared perfectly suited to reading in comfort. Hopefully Mrs Bennet would be too distracted by Elizabeth and Kitty to bother Mary too much and she would be left in blessed solitude.

She eventually realised that Elizabeth was speaking to her and drew herself out of her reverie. "Mary, I was hoping Kitty would have a chance to introduce you to some people while you were both here, but she is gone traveling with friends, and unfortunately I am going to be stuck here at Pemberley for a little while. But I am sure we can organise something, it seems a pity to come all this way only to be stuck in this big empty house with no one to talk to but family. I suppose it will give you an opportunity to get to know your new brother and sister."

This did not bode well.

Elizabeth turned to include her parents. "Also...we received a letter this morning from Mr Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine. We invited her to visit us as a matter of form, but given her behaviour at the wedding did not expect her to accept. But, to our surprise, she has accepted, and she will be here in a few days. If you had left a little later you might even have encountered her on the way."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr Bennet "Lady Catherine de Bourgh? Unbending enough to grace us with her presence? We are blessed. Well, Lizzie, I may have to leave her to you and Darcy's superior tact and hide myself in the library. I'm not sure I could face her again after what she said
to me the last time we met."

"Blessed?" responded Mrs Bennet "I should think not! She's lucky her nephew isn't too much of a gentleman to throw her out into the street! Mary, you and I shall have to show that woman what it means to be a real Lady, I shall expect your finest gowns and manners while she's here, none of this skulking off into corners and being unsociable!"

Oh no, thought Mary. This did not bode well at all.
Over what is culpable throw the veil of charity as often as you can. As well in this as in other respects, "charity shall hide a multitude of sins."

--Sermons to Young Women, Dr. James Fordyce

Mary was not sure what to expect from the infamous Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Certainly everyone in her family seemed to hold her in very low esteem, but as far as Mary could tell this stemmed largely from the fact that she had disapproved of the match between Elizabeth and Darcy. Now clearly she had been wrong in this disapproval but Mary was not sure it was fair to blame her for doing what she felt best served her nephew’s interest. Moreover she had a fairly low opinion of her family’s judgement of character: had they not all loved Wickham and disliked Mr Collins? Even Darcy himself had been roundly despised in the Bennet household up until less than a year ago.

She placed more weight in the opinions of Mr and Miss Darcy, especially since they had known Lady Catherine their whole lives, but they were clearly uncomfortable expressing themselves openly in front of Mary and her parents. Despite being family in name they were still relative strangers to each other, and were not in each others confidences. The only other person she had heard express much of an opinion on the Lady was Mr Collins, and he had been all praise. So Mary decided to reserve judgement until she could form her own impression.

She did not have to wait long. As promised, Lady Catherine arrived within a few days of the Bennets, and for a while it was exactly as Mary had feared. She was expected to spend all her time defending the Bennet family honour by accompanying her mother in being "ladylike" (what this should entail being a point of much contention between the two) Her father meanwhile spent all his time in the library, and while he was willing to share the space with her they would both have much rather been alone. Luckily within a few days things reached an almost comfortable equilibrium, but this was still not the holiday Mary had hoped for.

As the sun rose on an unexceptionable autumn day, the whole mismatched household sat down to breakfast.
"Well!" started Lady Catherine "I must thank you for your hospitality, Mrs Darcy, but I do not know for how much longer I will be able to trespass upon it. My poor Anne is all alone at Rosings, and with her companion so ill I do not wish to leave her by herself for too long."
"Georgiana my dear" she continued, "what are your plans for today?"
"Oh" replied her niece, "Mrs Bennet and I were going to go into Lampton and look at fabric."
"Really? It is very kind of you to keep her company on such a trivial excursion. I was going to help Mrs Darcy get to know her tenants, understanding as I do the important duties which go along with membership in our class."

Here she looked very significantly at Mrs Bennet.
"Miss Bennet, would you not agree that it is important to extend charity to those of a lower station, to help them improve themselves as much as they are able?"
"Well!" interrupted Mrs Bennet "I might have had the time to go gallivanting around the countryside myself, but somebody insisted that it was vital that somebody replace the drapes in the east drawing room. I merely wanted to help Miss Darcy with the heavy tasks other less thoughtful
"Um..." said Georgiana, looking rather torn.

They continued in this manner for some time. Mary concentrated instead on her breakfast, as always making sure to chew each bite thirty times to aid the digestion.

The next time she looked up almost everyone had left: the women on their various errands, and Mr Bennet to the private study Darcy had eventually found for him- it did not have as much to read as the library, but it was out of the way, and it had a lock. The only one left was her brother-in-law.

Darcy smiled awkwardly.
"Good morning Miss Bennet." he started.
"Good morning." she replied

"I know this has not been the most ideal set of circumstances, but I hope you feel welcome here." He paused for a moment to give her a chance to reply, but Mary, still chewing, said nothing.
"I understand how you must feel: I myself am never entirely at ease except amongst friends and family. It must be very difficult for you with your sisters all taken away so suddenly. But I hope you might come to see Georgiana and myself as a new brother and sister."

Mary was not quite sure what to say to this. She paused and said "I think of Georgiana much as I do of Jane."

Mary took a moment to be proud of this response: it was completely true, but elided the fact that, their accepting and optimistic natures aside, the main thing she found in common between the two was that they were both unobjectionable and very dull. But then she realised she had lost track of what Darcy was saying.
"...and when Charles and Jane move up here you will not have many friends left in Meryton. We have spoken to your parents and they do not object. Elizabeth and I would be glad to have you, and I am sure Kitty and Georgiana would appreciate another companion. I have seen remarkable improvement in them both under Elizabeth's guidance: they are growing into fine young women. It is our hope that you could all be happy here together." 

Mary pondered what Elizabeth could have done to cause such a "remarkable" change in Catherine over a few months when she had made so little effect over the last seventeen years, but decided this was probably an impolitic observation. It was only after wondering what could motivate Elizabeth to invite her here (given that the two of them still did not relish each other's company) that the full import of Darcy's statement came upon her.
"Jane and Mr Bingley are leaving Netherfield?"
"Yes", he replied "They are looking for a property here in Derbyshire."
"So I will be alone with my parents in Meryton, unless I come and stay here with you. And Catherine. And Elizabeth."
"And Georgiana, yes."
"Oh."

Mary stood silent a while longer, not knowing what to say or do. Eventually she looked up at her brother-in-law and said,
"Thankyou for your kind offer. You have shown yourself to be a true brother by holding forth the hand of friendship without the bond of blood relationship to prompt you. I will now... I would like some time to myself to think, if that would be acceptable."

"Oh, yes, of course. I apologise for bringing this up so unexpectedly, but we thought it best to discuss it with you before you leave and the right moment seemed never to arrive. What matters is that you know that you will always have a place here if you want it; that duty discharged I shall leave you in peace."

He bowed and left.
Mary considered her lot unhappily. Still, there were worse fates. While she would miss being able to visit Netherfield, if she remained in Meryton she would still be able to stay with her Aunt Phillips or the Lucases when she desired a respite from her parents. And perhaps she could be happy here at Pemberley: she and Elizabeth had settled into their old pattern of comfortably ignoring each other and her new brother and sister had treated her kindly and were pleasant enough. Unfortunately she was unconvinced that a sufficiently large change could have come over Kitty in such a short time as to make her a desirable companion, but hopefully in such a large house, and without Lydia’s bad influence, they might find room to live amicably together.

If nothing else, she would have continued access to the wonderful library. It was to this room that she took herself now, needing a quiet place to collect her thoughts and consider her situation.

Enetering the room she took a moment to enjoy the sense of stillness, and the familiar smell of leather and old paper. But a moment later she was disappointed to realise she was not alone: the top of someone's head was just visible over the back of one of the chairs.

At first she thought it might be her father, but she quickly realised it was not. In fact, she did not recognise them at all: unless her senses deceived her, there was a stranger in the library.
and then, by a gleam of lightning, she perceived some person on the terrace. All the
anxieties of the preceding night returned. This person advanced, and the playing
flame alternately appeared and vanished. Emily wished to speak, to end her doubts,
whether this figure were human or supernatural; but her courage failed as often as she
attempted utterance, till the light moved again under the casement, and she faintly
demanded, who passed.

--The Mysteries of Udolpho, Ann Ward Radcliffe

Who on earth could it be? And, having noticed the stranger, what should Mary do now? She
could hardly speak to them without being introduced, but nor did she want to alert the Darcys to
their presence without having some idea who to expect. She would feel very embarrassed to bring
them in if it turned out to be an unfamiliar servant or other expected person.

For lack of a better alternative, Mary edged around the room to gain a better view of the unknown
interloper.

Sitting primly in a large chair was a small woman. Mary at first took her for a young girl, but then
realised that she was full grown but short and thin. She was reading a volume of an encyclopaedia
with a look of utter misery on her face. Mary wondered what it was within the letters M to Z that
made her so distressed.

From her dress and manner it seemed unlikely that she was a thief or vagabond. Since they had
not been introduced, and moreover the woman did not look like she wished to be disturbed, Mary
decided to leave quietly and inform Mr and Mrs Darcy of her presence.

Unfortunately she must have made some sound in her passage, for the woman suddenly broke
from her reverie and looked up at Mary.

She first stared in shocked and sad surprise, but then quickly assumed a more guarded expression.
The two women stared at each other for a few moments.

Eventually the unknown woman spoke.
"I apologise for my unexpected presence. A servant let me in when I arrived and I found myself
unready to greet and introduce myself to the occupants of the house. I do not wish...that is...would
you be so kind as to leave me a few moments alone to compose myself?"
She spoke so softly that Mary had to strain to hear, but the softness of her voice was belied by the
intense seriousness of her expression. As she finished her brief entreaty the woman trailed off into
silence and stared intently at a spot on the floor near her feet.

Mary considered herself a rational being, not hampered by the ties of sentimentality and excessive
emotion. But she could not help but feel a pang of sympathy for this woman who, like her, had
come to this place seeking refuge. She opened her mouth to reply, but was interrupted by the
doors to the library opening with a loud bang.

Lady Catherine burst into the room and rushed over to the strange woman.
"ANNE!" she cried "What are you doing here?!"
Miss Anne De Bourgh (as she was now revealed to be) seemed to shrink back into herself at this sudden interrogation.
"And where is Mrs Jenkinson?" her mother continued "I know she is ill but what is she about letting you travel so far by yourself?"
Anne replied, but so indistinctly that she could not be heard.
"What was that?" her mother demanded
"Mrs Jenkinson is dead."
"Dead? Dead you say? Oh dear. Oh that is too terrible. Well, then I understand your distress my dear but you did not have to drive all this way. We will go back at once."
Lady Catherine put out her hand and her daughter took it, but did not look much less distressed.

Mary tried to remember what she had heard about Miss De Bourgh. Mr Collins had mentioned her frequently during his visit, but all she could remember was that she was ill, that she was elegant, and that she did not travel. The first two were readily apparent, and the last seemed not to be so true after all, so that report was not very useful. Had she perhaps once been engaged to Mr Darcy? Surely not. For the first time in her life, Mary wished she had paid more attention to gossip.

Chapter End Notes

You know part of me wasn't sure The Mysteries of Udolpho was a real book, but it is!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

SOLITARY, something retired, or in private; remote from the Company, or Commerce of others of the same Species.
A Solitary COLUMN, is a Column that hands alone in any public Place; as the Trajan Column. See COLUMN.
A Solitary WORM, is a Worm Sometimes found in the Intestines, and which is always the only one of the Kind; as being placed in the Pylorus, and extending thence, the whole Length of the Intestines; so that there is no Room for another. See WORM.

--Cyclopædia, or An universal dictionary of arts and sciences, Ephraim Chambers

Not for the first time in her life, Miss Ann de Bourgh woke to a world of pain and darkness.

As she groaned and wiped her eyes she could dimly make out a figure moving at the side of her bed.
"Miss de Bourgh!"
It was Jackson, her maid. Good.
"Yes?" Anne responded groggily.
"Begging you pardon, miss, but Lady Catherine asked me to let her know the moment you woke up. Would it be alright if I left you to go call her? There's water and some bread for you on the dresser."
"Mmph" she replied. When it became clear that this was too ambiguous a response, she added "Yes, thankyou Jackson, that will be all."

As her brain slowly unfogged itself it came upon her that this was not her bed. In fact, this was not even her house.

And then she remembered.

Mrs Jenkinson. Pemberley. That long, horrible, stupid trip.

Anne pulled herself into a sitting position and had a few sips of water. This might be her last chance to settle her thoughts before being sucked back into her mother's orbit. Travelling had been so taxing that she had barely managed to stay awake long enough to get into bed, so they had not had much of a chance to speak after she arrived.

She took a moment to savour the dark irony of her situation. Twenty years or so it had been since the last time she had been at Pemberley. Twenty years of sitting at home waiting for a proposal that never came, of listening to Lady Catherine and Mrs Jenkinson assure her of how much better her life would be when she was at Pemberley. And now here she was, she had finally made the long journey, and was lying in Darcy's bed (one of his beds, at any rate), and yet he had married someone else, and now Mrs Jenkinson was dead. Not that much of an improvement, all things considered.

Where was she anyway? She vaguely remembered the main guest bedrooms from her last visit, and this was not one of them. Had Darcy put her in some out of the way attic as a snub against her mother? That did not seem very in character. But then she remembered: of course, the main rooms
would have gone to Mrs Darcy's family. The giant clan of (by her mother's account) ill-bred ill-mannered money-grabbing country bumpkins. Anne wondered how many of them were here. That dark dumpy woman in the library had presumably been one of the daughters. She could not help but feel sorry for them: wore betide anyone who got between Lady Catherine de Bourgh and something she wanted.

And like a malicious devil waiting to be summoned by the mere thought of her name, Lady Catherine appeared in the doorway.

"Well," she said "are you feeling much recovered? It was most distressing to see you taken so ill; you should not have taxed yourself so."

Anne merely frowned in reply, not ready to have this argument again.

"No matter, you are here now and obviously not fit for trvel. Darcy has said he is happy for you to stay here, it seems that he has not completely forgotten his familial obligations despite unaccountably bringing those people into it."

Recognising the familiar sings of her mother desiring an excuse to hold forth on her opinion, Anne asked "So the Bennets do not improve upon further acquaintance?"

"Improve? That woman gets worse and worse. Such impudence! She has no respect for my position. None!"

Lady Catherine took a breath and composed herself.

"No, I cannot say that I am at all fond of the mother, she is every bit the low-born hoyden I first took her to be. And Mr Bennet has rarely been brave enough to show his face in my presence, so who can say what manner of man he is. But hopefully we will not need to speak to either of the parents much more in the future. I came here with the express intent of welcoming the new Mrs Darcy into the family, and in that regard I believe I have succeeded. She still shows the signs of her poor breeding but seems to be trying to overcome them at least. She is most assuredly not qualified for the role, and I am sure the estate will suffer for it, but she is one of us now and we must make the best of what family we have whether we like it or no."

"Yes" replied Anne. "I suppose we must."

Having reassured herself that Anne was not much more sick than usual, and having taken the opportunity to vent several days worth of frustration, Lady Catherine took her leave, and Anne sank back into an uneasy slumber.

Chapter End Notes

I must admit, the Cyclopledia doesn't have an "M-Z" volume, just Volume 1 and Volume 2.

I had a different idea of Anne's character going into this story, but she was quite insistent about the way she be written :)
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The last accomplishment of the elegant kind, which I shall mention, is Music. This, I conceive, is to be recommended with more discrimination than the rest, how much soever such a notion may contradict the prevailing opinion. It is very true, there are young ladies who, without any particular advantage of a natural ear or good voice, have, by means of circumstances peculiarly favourable, made great proficiency in music: but it is as true, that they have made it at a vast expense of time and application; such as no woman ought to bestow upon an object, to which she is not carried by the irresistible impulse of genius.

--Sermons to Young Women, Dr. James Fordyce

Mary couldn't remember ever not playing the piano.

When she was very small she had seen Jane learning to play and had demanded to be allowed to join in, and when this was vetoed by the master, had cajoled Jane into showing her everything she had learnt after each lesson. A few years later she had started lessons herself, learning from a rather weather beaten old piano primer. At the back of a book was a catalogue of music by the author, and she had vowed to herself that one day she would know every song listed. By her late teens she had managed to track down a copy of almost every piece, plus many other works, and had become known amongst the young people of the neighbourhood for being willing to pay cash for copies of any songs not already in her possession, although where possible she would simply borrow the score and copy it out herself.

Learning to play all these songs was not generally any more difficult: she practiced doggedly every day, and was rarely caught out by any tricky key changes or odd tempos. As the years went on she sought out more and more difficult pieces, and prided herself on being able to play more different songs than the rest of her family put together.

But there was an entire section of the catalogue which remained out of her reach: the duets. Where there were two voice parts she learned them both without any difficulty, but could never find anyone to sing them with her. Even pliable Jane would protest that her voice was too poor to be borne, and after a few attempts Mary had to agree. Worse were the duets with other instruments, since the piano was all that Mary knew how to play.

And so it remained until she came to Pemberley, and met Georgiana. She was everything Mary could have wished for: dedicated and talented, willing to practice for hours on end, and always jumping for the chance to play with someone else. She never gave criticism unless it was asked for, but her perfect pitch and experienced ear meant she noticed even the slightest error and was always ready with kind and softly worded advice. Not only did she play the piano with ease, but she had a fine voice and was an accomplished harpist.

This was, of course, insufferable, and had taken all the fun out of playing.

Being of resolute constitution Mary was determined to continue regardless, and steadfastly practiced with Georgiana every morning.

"Mary," began her companion during their session the next day, "are you sure we want to perform this for everyone?"
Mary bristled.
"Our fingering is perfect; we are in time with each other; I do not think we have anything to gain by practicing any more than we have. There is such a thing as having too high a standard, you know."

"Oh no," said Georgiana, "I did not mean to say we weren't any good! You are so precise! Though I still trip up on that final refrain. But no, I just meant that it is so scary to play for all those people. Your parents are family now, and I like them a lot, but I do not want to embarrass them by playing badly. And my aunt and cousin have such fine tastes I am sure they will find fault with my playing."

"What is the purpose of learning the piano," asked Mary, "if not to perform for others?"
"I suppose that is true." replied Georgiana dubiously.
"Come now," said Mary, more kindly, "I have performed many times for audiences much larger than this, and by myself! In my experience, people will appreciate any music played with enough enthusiasm, and even in those times when I noticed myself slip up on a few notes, no-one complained. We are providing them with amusement after all, and their only responsibility is to listen and appreciate the fruits of our long labours."

"You are very brave. I could never perform for a room full of strangers!"
"Not so brave." said Mary. "When you come out you may find, as I did, that it is much more satisfying than trying to talk to a room full of strangers."

Mary left Georgiana to practice the final bridge one more time. As she walked towards the library, she wondered about Miss De Bourgh. She had seemed very ill last night, and at breakfast Lady Catherine had seemed convinced she would be bed ridden for at least a few days. Would they even have a chance to be properly introduced before Mary left?

She was thus surprised when she entered the library and once again saw Miss de Bourgh's head peeking up above the top of a chair.

"Good morning Miss de Bourgh" she said, expecting to have to introduce herself and make conversation. Instead Miss de Bourgh looked up and smiled briefly, then returned to the book laid out on her lap, caught in the folds of a large woollen blanket.

Mary took this as permission to return to her own book, and settled herself down at the table. Upon it lay the large old book of natural history she had discovered hidden in an out of the way shelf. She might have considered taking it out to read in another room, but it was very large, and very old, and anyway Miss de Bourgh did not seem like she would be a very disturbing companion.

The two shared the room quietly for some time. After a while, Mary was distracted from trying to puzzle out the inscriptions by a soft but noticeable sigh. She looked up, and saw Miss de Bourgh staring moodily into space, her book left dangling half off her lap. For a moment Mary wondered if she might need some sort of medical attention, but after a few moments passed and she did not ask for aid Mary decided she must simply be bored. Not everyone was cut out for extended reading, after all.

More time passed. Mary was once again distracted by an audible sigh. This time Miss de Bourgh was visibly frowning and rubbing her temples.

"Are you in need of assistance Miss de Bourgh?" asked Mary.

Miss de Bourgh looked up but did not reply.

Mary took this as a 'No'.
The third time she was interrupted Mary just glanced over briefly and was about to return to her book, when Miss de Bourgh finally spoke. "I have trouble reading," she explained. Mary was a little shocked. Trouble reading, at her age and in her position! She felt a sense of smug satisfaction: she might not be a member of the aristocracy, but at least she could read.

"My eyes strain very easily." continued Anne. "Mrs Jenkinson, my companion, used to read to me, you see."

Mary felt less smug and more sympathetic. Being too lazy to read was one thing, but to be physically prevented from reading! She could hardly imagine a worse fate.

"Oh." she replied. "How unfortunate."

There was an awkward silence.

"I suppose in a sense I cannot read my book either," commiserated Mary "since it is in Latin."

There was another awkward pause. Mary got the distinct impression that Miss de Bourgh was annoyed at her, which seemed awfully unfair. It was not her fault Miss de Bourgh's eyes were faulty.

But, Mary reminded herself, invalids need special patience and care. The road they must travel is much bumpier than everyone else's, after all. She decided to be Christ-like in her generosity. "Would you like to look at my book?" she offered. "The pictures are quite large; they might not hurt your eyes as much as reading words."

When this received no positive reply beyond a hard to interpret expression, Mary could not think of anything else to say. Since she obviously was not going to be able to read in peace she stood up and took her leave. Perhaps Georgiana needed some help practicing her chord progressions.

Anne was not at lunch: Lady Catherine said that she had a headache and needed some rest. When Mary went to the library again that afternoon, it was empty.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't find any piano primers which quite had what I had in mind (my highschool clarinet book had a bunch of duets and stuff in the back but none of music regency primers I could find had anything like that), the closest was this harp book.

I was playing a lot of Guitar Hero when I wrote this, which probably influenced my take on Mary's attitude to the piano somewhat :)

Chapter 9

All'ombra de' cipressi e dentro l'urne
confortate di pianto e forse il sonno
della morte men duro?

--Dei Sepolcri, Ugo Foscolo

The kipper sat alone in the centre of a large white plate. A grey-orange sheen wavered over it's glossy surface and the sunken eyes in it's bifurcated head glistened with fat.

Anne poked it gingerly with a fork.

Mrs Darcy frowned at her from her end of the table.
"Is there something wrong with your food, Miss de Bourgh?" she asked with apparent sincerity, "Would you prefer something else?"

Lady Catherine tore herself away from berating one of the servants about the table settings to look over at her daughter.
"What's the matter Anne?" she started before exclaiming "Is that a kipper? Who served you this? You there! Come here this instant! Take away this wretched fish and get my daughter some appropriate food for an invalid."

After much wrangling and discussion about the correct soaking method for oats and pointed enquiries on the freshness of the cream Anne was eventually served a bowl of porridge. She picked at it without much enthusiasm and watched the master and mistress of the house as they discussed their plans for the day. They were vexingly happy with one other.

She felt eyes upon her and was mortified to realise that Georgiana was watching her with concern. Anne coloured and turned to away to attempt conversation with the person on her other side. Unfortunately, that person was Mr Bennet.

He started back from her salutation but rallied quickly.
"I hope you are in better health this morning Miss de Bourgh?"
She assented.
"Ah good" he replied. "I think you were right to forgo the kippers. I mean no disrespect to Pemberley's cook, I'm sure they're entirely fine as kippers go, but I never quite feel comfortable with my breakfast staring at me in that way."
He then demonstrated his enthusiasm for breakfasts without eyes by taking a large mouthful of toast and chewing so determinedly as to prohibit further conversation. Miss Bennet, too, seemed unusually focussed on her mastication, and for no apparent reason Anne could figure.

Turning to observe Lady Catherine and Mrs Bennet, Anne was suprised to discover that Mrs Bennet was one of the few people of her acquaintance who was exactly as Lady Catherine had described her. The two older women were engaged in a spirited discussion about hypothetical names for any future Darcy children. Their opinions on this topic neither sought or desired, the parents of these hypothetical children were sharing some sort of private joke across the table.

Anne sighed, turned back towards Georgiana and smiled in what she hoped was a welcoming manner.

Her cousin responded by flinching back with more horrified surprise than Mr Bennet, followed by
an unconvincing attempt at good cheer.
Anne wondered how people so easily spooked had lasted so long in a house with her mother.
Georgiana made a brave attempt at a smile and said "I am glad you are well this morning, we were all quite worried about you yesterday"
"I am not well" replied Anne.
"Oh! No! Of course not, I just meant..um.." here she trailed off and looked about to attempt an escape like Mr Bennet's before she suddenly exclaimed "Mary!"
Miss Bennett looked up, surprised, from her philosophical meditations on eggs and toast.
"Miss Bennet and I are going to perform a duet for everyone later, isn't this right Miss Bennet?"
Mary swallowed and said "Yes"
She paused and then continued "I hope you will be able to attend, Miss de Bourgh. Lady Catherine has mentioned that you are fond of music, and I have heard it said that music is food for the body as well as for the soul. Perhaps we two might affect some small positive change towards improving your physical afflictions."

Anne was spared having to think of some appropriate reply to this by Lady Catherine deciding to join the conversation.
"Anne! Georgiana! I am glad to see the two of you together again. It has been far too long since you came to visit us at Rosings my dear, I know Anne has missed your company terribly"

Anne smiled encouragingly at Georgiana, but hopefully not so encouragingly that she might actually take up Lady Catherine's offer.

"It really is quite terrible about poor Mrs Jenkinson, for who is to take care of Anne now? Without someone to read to her she is quite without occupation."

"Oh!" said Georgiana with "That is terrible! Can noone else read to her?"

"Well, but of course you would want to help dear. I think this afternoon would be best, after we return from church."

Her goal achieved Lady Catherine went back to championing the proud history of the name Lewis, leaving her daughter and niece to wonder quite what had happened.

As Mary walked down the corridor after breakfast she was unexpectedly accosted by a distraught Miss Darcy.

"Oh Mary, please tell me you'll help me!" she said mournfully.
"If I can, of course, but with what?"
"Miss de Bourgh! It's not that I don't want to read to her, but she's so fierce! I am sure I will read badly to her and she will be angry."
"Fierce?" repeated Mary. She thought back to the small, quiet women she'd seen at breakfast. "Is she the sort to be violent? I suppose she must be very different when she is well."
"Oh, no! She would never be violent! And she is never really well, though she does seem particularly fatigued at the moment."

Mary regarded Georgiana with confusion.
"She never means to be cruel I'm sure, and she it's not that what she says is so very critical, but...she just gets this look and I know she's annoyed at me, and that makes me nervous, and then I say something really stupid, and that makes her more annoyed and it's just terrible."
"She doesn't make me nervous" said Mary stoutly.
"Exactly!" said Georgiana "Even Lady Catherine doesn't pierce your calm, and I think she scares my brother. If you're there I'm sure I will ever so much braver."
Sitting in an ill-lit corner of Miss de Bourgh's room, Mary had ample opportunity to rue her generosity. As much as she did not enjoy reading to her mother, it turned out to be infinitely preferable to being forced to sit in silence and listen to someone else read what sounded like bad poetry in a language she didn't understand.

She had just counted all the leaves in the plaster cornices and was beginning to divide them into categories based on shape when Miss de Bourgh turned to her and said "Do you not like poetry Miss Bennet?"

"Poetry" Mary replied "I have heard it said, is one of the finest forms of artistic expression devised by the human mind. I have memorised many edifying verses in both english and french. But I do not speak italian."

"Oh" replied Anne "Well this can't have been very interesting for you" "No"

"I am so sorry!" cried Georgiana "How selfish of me not to think of it!"

"Don't be silly" replied Anne curtly "It was my choice, and my responsibility. Now. Miss Bennet, which of these books would you find more suitable?"

Mary walked over to the bedside table and perused the spines of the small pile of books upon it. Some flicker of her thoughts must have passed across her face, since Miss de Bourgh felt the need to add "My mother chose them"

"Ah"

Mary quickly rejected several volumes of poetry (there'd been enough of that for one afternoon) and anything which consisted mostly of pictures (that seemed rather to defeat the purpose). She began to wonder at finding anything worth reading but right at the bottom of the pile found success.

Anne and Georgiana's faces fell when she held up her choice. "The Pilgrim's progress?" asked Miss de Bourgh with a pained expression. "It is regarded as one of the most significant works of English literature." replied Mary. "But I can choose something else if you wish."

"No, no, I am a woman of my word" she replied. "Well, then. Georgiana, if you do not like it either would you object to me reading the book instead?"

"Object? No, that would be..that is..no, I do not object" said Georgiana. The two women swapped places cheerfully, both looking happy for the first time since entering the room.

Mary settled into her chair and prepared her best reading voice. This afternoon might not be such a waste after all.
Chapter 10

Worldly Wiseman: How earnest thou by thy burden at first?

Christian: By reading this book in my hand.

Worldly Wiseman: I thought so.

--Pilgrim's progress, John Bunyan

Mary was beginning to understand what Georgiana found so intimidating about their cousin.

Despite her invalid state Miss de Bourgh had pulled herself up onto her pillows and kept interrupting every few paragraphs to point out what she saw as theological inconsistencies in the text.

"How is it right" she asked in a cracked voice, "that a man should abandon his family and his community to embark on a possibly doomed attempt to find personal salvation? Would it not be more moral to stay behind and be a good influence on everyone else?"

"But then they would all be damned" explained Mary patiently "By leaving, he set up a good example, which inspired his family to go on their own pilgrimage."

"But that does not make any.."

At this point Anne's body reasserted it's dominion over her mind and she was overcome by a fit of coughing. Mary stared at her in shock while Georgiana rushed over and patted her on the back. After a few seconds Miss de Bourgh regained her composure and gestured for a glass of water before lying back on her pillows looking rather the worse for wear.

"Perhaps you should not exert yourself so." suggested Mary

"Perhaps you should not choose such vexing books." replied Anne. This struck Mary as deeply unfair.

Miss de Bourgh sighed and said "No, no, that is not fair. I did say you could read whatever you liked."

She rubbed her eyes and looked up at Mary with an expression more friendly but suffused with weariness.

"Miss Bennet, were I in better health I might enjoy arguing with you about the merits of whichever theological metaphors took your fancy. But given my current state I should probably stick to poems about daffodils and other such uncontroversial fare."

Talk of daffodils made them both turn instinctively to Georgiana who smiled wanly and said "Shall I read to you some more then cousin?"

And so they settled into a new routine. Georgiana spent her afternoons reading to Miss de Bourgh and her mornings practicing with Miss Bennet. Word had arrived that Kitty would be returning soon, and Georgiana had convinced Mary to delay their duet until then. As she admitted to Mary during one of their sessions, she appreciated having a guaranteed escape from the stressful attentions of her aunt and cousin. Even when they were not practicing the two girls found many opportunities for conversation. Mary was not used to having someone express a desire for more of her company, and found she rather enjoyed it.

The imminent return of the younger Miss Bennet had affected Mary in another way. Lady
Catherine had declared the Anne was too sick to be moved and seemed in no hurry to shift. Mrs Bennet had retaliated by stating her intention to stay on until she could "see her darling daughter again" (and, as she would say to anyone who would listen, to show she would not be scared off from her own daughter's house)

Mary accepted these changes with equanimity. Her bedroom offered a sweeping view of the woods behind Pemberly and she spent much of her time there reading or doing needlework.

She sat there one morning pondering the patterns formed by the wind as it played across the the sparse leaves of the oak and ash. There was a sudden enthusiastic knocking at the door, and opening it she was surprised to see Georgiana, looking more animated than she had seen her in their entire acquaintance.

"There is a carriage" she explained. "Do you think it might be Kitty? I thought you would want to know, I am sure that if I had a sister I would be desperate to see her after so long a parting!"
"I am sure you would" replied Mary.

The two women walked down to the front room where they were greeted by Mr Darcy.
"Is it Kitty?" asked Georgiana with great anticipation.
"I'm afraid not" said her brother "It is only the doctor."
Her face fell, and then she looked up and asked quickly "Is Miss de Bourgh very ill? She seemed much improved yesterday."
"Oh no, there is nothing to worry about," he replied "I am sure she will be fine. In fact Lady Catherine suggested a ride for the four of you after she sees the doctor, Anne has not had a chance to see the grounds of Pemberley since she was a girl. That is, if you would like to go."

Georgiana looked up at him very seriously and said "Yes, of course" before adding "Oh, the four of us? So Mary will be there? Then yes, definitely! She has not seen all of Pemberley yet either, Elizabeth and I can never persuade her to come with us on our walks"

They both looked at Mary. She nearly went into her prepared speech about the dangers of too much time spent out of doors before realising they were asking for her assent, which she quickly gave.

Lady Catherine had a large and fine carriage whose many features she proudly enumerated as they rattled past the doctors carriage and down the path. She had placed Anne and Georgiana together in the back of the carriage leaving the seat next to herself for Mary.

For quite a while Lady Catherine busied herself by pointing out all the major features as they passed, with the occasional request for confirmation from Georgiana. But eventually she turned her eye upon Mary.
"So Miss Bennet," she asked "how do you find living at Pemberley? I am sure you have never stayed anywhere so fine."
Mary thought for a moment. "No" she replied "I have not"
"And I am sure you have enjoyed sharing the refined company of my niece and nephew."
Mary considered this too and somewhat surprised herself by answering, truthfully, "Yes. I have enjoyed my stay here quite considerably. When I leave I shall.." She stopped, unsure how to finish her sentence. From the other side of the carriage she was rewarded by a shy smile from Georgiana and a thoughtful expression from Miss de Bourgh.
"Well, if your sisters are anything to go by I am sure you will enjoy being able to return to your parties and dancing. You will not find much of that sort of thing here."
"No" replied Mary.
"Oh, but Aunt" said Georgiana "Mary does not dance. Well, I am sure she would dance if she was asked. But she is very kind and plays the piano so that others may enjoy themselves. Although I suppose she may miss that too..."
"Well" said Lady Catherine "That may well be. You do certainly seem more dedicated to your music than your sister. I have noticed you practicing and I am glad of it. I suppose Georgiana has
been a good influence there."

It is perhaps a sign of how long she had spent around Lady Catherines's explicit disdain for contrary opinions that Mary did not reply.

The carriage trip seemed to mark a turning point in Miss de Bourgh’s recovery. Although Georgiana still read to her she did so in a dimly lit sitting room rather than Anne's bedroom, and Miss de Bourgh even deigned to join the household in the drawing room for cards after dinner. Since Mary was not fond of cards she still did not spend much time talking to Anne but was glad to see her in better health.

Mary was not one for studying other people's characters. She liked to make sure of whether or not they were moral, and thus if they should be seen as inspiration or dangerous example, but beyond that was content to leave their motives unexamined and just take them as they were. She found it very difficult to explain or predict others behaviour, and saw no need to make the attempt.

She had thus not formed any very strong opinion on Miss de Bourgh. Despite intimidating Georgiana she did not seem a bad sort of person, but she did not show any very strong signs of goodness either. She and Georgiana were working their way through some of the more recent works of Blake, which Mary was not entirely sure was appropriate, especially for a young girl. And while she had an enviable reserve she was not quite able to mask her intense annoyance any time she lost a game, when seemed like unwomanly pride.

But the only thing which made Mary genuinely curious was the fact that Miss de Bourgh seemed curious about her. She often noticed her staring calmly at her over her cards. When Mary stared back Miss de Bourgh neither smiled nor looked away until she had to return to her game. It was very disconcerting.

Mary was thus not too surprised when Miss de Bourgh approached her and asked to meet with her after lunch.

Miss de Bourgh sat in a faded brocade chair facing away from the window.

Mary sat herself opposite, and waited.

"Miss Bennet" began Miss de Bourgh "You cannot fail to be aware that Miss Darcy does not enjoy my company."

Oh dear, thought Mary. She never knew how to deal with these sorts of situations. Should she lie? What could she say that would not get Georgiana into trouble with her cousin?

"This is understandable" continued Anne "I do not always enjoy my company myself. But I also do not enjoy being forcibly reminded of my unlikableness every time I wish to hear some poetry. I know you like Miss Darcy, and so do I in my way, while as far as I can tell you do not find my company too odious to bear. I was hoping that between us we could organise some new arrangement to everyone's benefit."

Mary could see where this was going and did not like it. It was not that she minded the idea of reading to Miss de Bourgh so much as she resented the loss of her afternoons for some unspecified amount of time.

"How long are Lady Catherine and yourself likely to stay at Pemberley?" she asked, delaying the inevitable.
Miss de Bourgh looked a little surprised at this question but did not hesitate in answering it. "To be honest I cannot say. I am as well as I am ever likely to become in a strange house. The problem is that my stomach is incredibly sensitive and unpredictable, and even with weeks of discussion with a good cook it is hard be sure of getting food that will not make me ill. To have this discussion for every meal, for days on end, is not something I approach with enthusiasm. And the ride itself is a strain, all those days cooped up in a tiny box. No, I do not know when we will leave."

"But if there is no benefit in waiting" asked Mary, "Why not leave right away?"

Anne stared at her in frank shock. "Are you always this rude Miss Bennet?"
"It is my opinion" she replied "that honesty, regardless of public censure, is always the best policy."
"I am inclined to agree" said Miss de Bourgh "Though I note that neither of us pursues this with much vigor around my mother. So perhaps my problem, then, is not that you express your opinions, but that they so clearly stem from nothing but pure selfishness."
It was Mary's turn to stare in astonishment.
"I have heard much of your moral readings Miss Bennet. May I ask, for all your philosophising, when is the last time you took some action, unprompted by expectation, which was solely for the advantage of another, without any benefit for yourself?"
Miss de Bourgh carefully lifted herself up out of her chair and went to the doorway.
"I shall expect you here tomorrow afternoon," she said, and left.

Mary sat there for some time, trying to think of an answer to her question.
Chapter 11

I take it for granted, there is no young woman who has not, or wishes not to have, a companion of her own sex, to whom she may unhosom herself on every occasion. That there are women capable of friendship with women, I cannot, for my part, question in the least. I have seen indubitable proofs of it, and those carried as far as seemed compatible with the imperfections of our common nature. I know it is questioned by many men, while others believe, that it happens exceedingly seldom. Between married and unmarried women, I hope it happens very often. Whether it does so between those that are single, I confess myself a little doubtful.

--Sermons to Young Women, Dr. James Fordyce

By the end of her piano practice with Georgiana the next morning, Mary had reconciled herself with her fate. For a start, she was gratified by how happy it made Georgiana, who had spent the whole session bubbling with gratitude. But the main reason was the realisation that she would likely soon appreciate the company. For it was becoming increasingly apparent that as much as Georgiana sought out her company now, this was only because she was deprived of that of her preferred companion Kitty. She spoke with increasing animation of her future plans for long walks, carriage rides and shopping trips, and while she always included Mary in these imaginings, given past experience and personal preference Mary had little doubt that she would end up alone.

Of course this would be nothing new- she had always preferred a solitary existence. But to her surprise she found she had become accustomed to Georgiana's company, despite their differences in interests and disposition. She resented her friendship with Elizabeth, and was glad that her sister was often busy, uncharitable emotions she felt ashamed of. While she and Miss de Bourgh were hardly friends, her company was better than none at all.

It was this newfound determination to get to know Miss de Bourgh in mind that Mary found herself eavesdropping on a conversation about them both. She had heard loud voices coming from one of the drawing rooms and would have walked quickly by were it not that her name was being spoken so distinctly and in violent tones.

"Mary Bennet" said Lady Catherine forcefully "seems a decent sort of girl for who she is, but she is not family. Not in any way that counts. While I am sure she would benefit from Anne's company, I cannot see that the reverse would be true."
"That is not the only thing you can not see." began Darcy angrily before being interrupted by his wife.
"I agree" she said sharply "That Mary and your daughter are not family, and I would never agree to my sister being sent away to live with virtual strangers as little more than a servant, far from the support of friends and family. But I also cannot agree that it would be wise for Georgiana either. They are both too young! They should be out in society, seeing the world and forming relationships, not cooped up as nursemaidis for an invalid. Surely there is someone else."
"So her cousin's company is not good enough for Georgiana, yet you would have my daughter live with some stranger? She is most distressed by the death of her previous companion, it is too much to expect her to adjust to some unknown woman on top of everything else. I do not ask much of you Darcy.."

Mary thought of Georgiana stuck in a house with an aunt and cousin who made her miserable. She considered her likely future either here at Pemberley or with her parents at Longbourne. And she considered Miss de Bourgh's question.

She opened the door.
Staring at her surprise were Mr and Mrs Darcy, Lady Catherine, and to Mary's own surprise Miss Anne de Bourgh.

"I will go." she said.

"Miss Bennet" cried Lady Catherine "Am I to understand that you have been eavesdropping on a private conversation?"

"Absolutely not!" cried Elizabeth before Mary could reply "Mary you must have misunderstood whatever you heard. You would be taking a position as Miss de Bourgh's companion. You would have to move to Kent and spend all your time waiting on Miss de Bourgh, with few opportunities to see your friends or family. Why would you choose such a thing?"

"I intend to to get married someday." said Mary "I will be in much the same situation then. What higher purpose is there to life, after all, but than to be of service to others?"

"Very pretty sentiments" said Lady Catherine "But that does not change the fact that we do not wish to have you."

She was distracted from her rant by an insistent tug on her elbow. A whispered conference took place with much gesticulation on both sides, before Lady Catherine made a sour face and said "My daughter wishes to speak."

Anne looked briefly at Mary before staring at her hands and saying "Thankyou for your kind offer Miss Bennet. Based on my own personal preference, I would be glad to have you as my companion. However I do share your sister's worries that a well bred young woman such as yourself might feel stifled by such a limited and sedate existence. Perhaps it would be best if you took the position for a period of a few months while Lady Catherine and I search for a companion of a more suitable age and station."

"I accept" said Mary.

And despite the objections of everyone else in the room, and then of Mr and Mrs Bennet, in the end this is the agreement that was come to.

The next few days were very busy. It seemed that urgent business called Lady Catherine back to Kent, and it was only by much persuasion that she was convinced to delay their departure until Mary had had a chance to say goodbye to Kitty.

The much anticipated return of her younger sister finally came, Kitty arriving in a wave of enthusiasm and happy anecdotes, filled with excitement over her time away. She had stayed with a large group of friends in a manor house in Shropshire, and if her account was to be believed they had spent every day engaged in a different variety of adventure, and everyone involved was the kindest, wittiest and most wonderful of people. She saved her particular praise for a Mr Hewitt, the younger brother of their host, and every time his name came up Georgiana would stifle a giggle and Kitty would blush.

Mary did not end up feeling as alienated as she had expected- Mr Hewitt was training for the priesthood, and as a result Kitty kept asking her questions about theology, having apparently felt her ignorance during her conversations with that gentleman. She and Georgiana did indeed seem more fond of each others company than they were of Mary's, and they spent much of their time engaged in pursuits she did not wish to share, but they did make some effort to involve Mary where they could, and she was forced to admit that her brother-in-law was right, Kitty had indeed changed for the better.

Be that as it may, she was still committed to helping Miss de Bourgh. She was much absorbed by
the preparations for their departure, and spent much of the time staring into space fretfully while Mary read the newspaper. She would occasionally exclaim with impatience at some unwanted political decision, but since Mary did not attend to politics she had nothing to say in return.

To Mary's surprise, one thing Miss de Bourgh shared with Kitty was a common desire to see she and Georgiana play, as well as a stated regret that they could not play themselves. "It seems unfair" said the younger Miss Bennet "That here is Georgiana practicing diligently every day, and she is stuck in a house with lazy do-nothings like Lizzie and me who never practice if we play at all. It is a pity you are leaving so soon, perhaps the two of you together might be enough to get us to play."

The duet itself, held on the night before her departure, felt rather anticlimactic. She and Georgiana played well, and their audience was most appreciative, but her mind was overcome by thoughts of her future. Would she have a chance to play for others at Rosings? Would she be forced to entertain when she did not wish to? The many unknowns of her situation began to strike Mary for the first time. Just what had she signed herself up for?
A disadvantage of being Miss de Bourgh's companion which had not occurred to Mary when she agreed to it, but now struck her with undeniable force, was that it involved spending nearly two weeks in a carriage with Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

It was not that Mary disliked Lady Catherine. She found her strength of character and moral certainty inspiring in small doses, and the two of them were on civil terms. But after a while her constant questions and advice began to feel wearying and intrusive.

Before they left Mrs Bennet had been very firm on one point. "Mary is not the prettiest girl in the world," she had said with some regret, "But she is a good girl, and I would see her happily married. I do not understand why she should be squandering her youth in some stuffy old house where she'll never get to meet any men. You must promise me that she will get many chances to go out and meet new people, and if you know any eligible young bachelors I would greatly appreciate it if you could send them her way."

And so for the whole of the first morning Lady Catherine had been expanding at length about the superiority of Kentish society, and the many balls and parties which she would make sure Mary was accompanied to. This was interspersed with strong admonitions that Mary was not to see this as a holiday, that her first responsibility was to Anne's welfare and that if she was not willing to take this responsibility she should say so at once and save them all the trouble.

Mary's replies were apparently serious-minded enough to mollify her, for she eventually tired of the topic and began enumerating her many dependents and the ways in which she had improved their lives.

"What are you doing?" asked Miss de Bourgh.
Mary started in surprise, since the last time she had looked at Miss de Bourgh she had seemed fast asleep. Lady Catherine was outside dealing with some problem with their accommodation and had instructed Mary to stay in the carriage and watch over Anne, who had been curled up under a blanket in the corner of the carriage for several hours. As much as she was beginning to tire of Lady Catherine's company, it was infinitely preferable to sitting in a stationary carriage with the curtains drawn. It had been so long since she had had a chance to serve the scenery, she was not even sure where they were now.

"Reciting poetry to myself" replied Mary "To pass the time."
"Well" said Miss de Bourgh sleepily "If you must, then do so a little louder, that way you can keep us both entertained."
After a while Miss de Bourgh rubbed her eyes and said "It is awfully dark in here, is it night already?" then lay back down and fell asleep.
Having been hearing of it's virtues for so long, Mary was glad to finally reach Rosings. It did seem a fine building, although at this point even a humble shack would have seemed like a welcome sanctuary if it promised Mary some time to herself and a chance to read.

When they arrived Miss de Bourgh was taken up to her room by her ladies maid, and Lady Catherine was taken away by business. Mary was left in the hands of the housekeeper Mrs Smith, who showed her around the house with a brusque efficiency.

She was shown her room, a large well placed apartment on the second floor. Mrs Smith went out of her way to demonstrate some of the less obvious shelving and storage space, but Mary only had eyes for one thing- her own piano! In her own room! But before she had a chance to play it, let alone unpack, she was whisked off on a tour of the rest of the house. This was Miss de Bourgh's room, best not disturb her just now. That was the sitting room where the family entertained guests. This was the breakfast room, to which she must **not** be late.

Mary had some trouble keeping up, but made a special note to remember the route from her room to the library, and felt confident that she would figure out the rest as she needed it.

That night she was told that she would dine in Miss de Bourgh's chamber.
"Good evening Miss de Bourgh" she said softly, unsure if she was awake.
"Good evening Miss Bennet" replied Anne, lifting her head slightly from her pillow.
Laid out on a small table next to the bed were two dishes of food, one generous and varied the other a small bowl of gruel.
Anne sipped a few spoonfuls of her meal and then asked "Are you settled in well?"
"Oh yes" replied Mary "And I am very grateful to have my own piano. I cannot thank you enough."
"Oh" said Miss de Bourgh "I see. I asked Mrs Jenkinson's family to take what possessions of hers they wanted from her room while I was gone. Perhaps they did not want the piano."
She sniffed slightly and then continued "Well I am glad to know it will be used. If you will excuse me I am not hungry and will rest now, please continue without me and blow out the candle as you leave."

Her first few days at Rosings continued in a similar vein. Mary spent much of her day in Miss de Bourgh's room, either eating or engaged in solitary pursuits like reading or needlework. Miss de Bourgh would sometimes ask her to read whatever book she had to hand, and it was perhaps a sign of her illness that she did not express any opinions on the sentiments contained therein. The rest of the time she spent with her piano or exploring the house and grounds, and soon felt as much at home as she felt she was ever likely to. From time to time she would visit the nearby village. It was not a very exciting existence, but it was at least an undemanding one. Even Lady Catherine was too busy with the estate to require much of her time.

Eventually, of course, Miss de Bourgh recovered enough to start expressing an opinion on Mary's choice of reading matter, and it was not long before she delivered an ultimatum.

"You may read whatever you wish in your own time, Miss Bennet" she said firmly "but I reserve the right not to have to listen to anything that makes staring at the wall alone seem preferable."

Since Miss de Bourgh was unwell, Mary felt it would be kind to let her have her choice of what was read. But after a week of reading nothing but heavy symbolic poetry extolling the virtues of death Mary felt it her duty to intervene.

"Do not embrace death, Miss de Bourgh" she said seriously. "I know that you are unwell, and it might seem like a release to join your friend and be free of the shackles of mortality. But as much
as we might anticipate with joy our reunion with Our Lord at the Gates of Paradise it is our duty while living to embrace life, and find what joy we can in this earthly domain for however long our loving Father feels it is right we should inhabit it."

"I am not embracing death" replied Anne curtly "I am merely depressed. I do not know how you deal with depression, Miss Bennet, assuming that you have ever known such sorrow, but my spirits are lifted by poetry. I apologise if my attempts to increase my own happiness have been of any detriment to yours."
She glowered at Mary in a very unapologetic seeming way before adding "And do not be under any misapprehensions about my health. I am not some sighing consumptive about to fade away into the hereafter. I come from a long and proud line of dyspeptic but durable de Bourghs, there is every likelihood that I shall outlive you."
"Oh" said Mary "I apologise if I have spoken out of turn. If reading these poems does you good then I am of course ever ready to oblige. But I must admit that they do oppress my own spirits a little."

They eventually decided on a compromise: they would alternate choosing what was to be read each day in turn. In addition, any work must be in a language they both could understand, and there was to be absolutely no theology, at least not while Miss de Bourgh felt unfit for the task of adequately defending her point of view.

"What" asked Mary shortly after they had come to this agreement, "Of novels like Pamela, which seek to morally educate their readers through the medium of fictional prose?"
"You wish to read Pamela?" asked Miss de Bourgh incredulously "Well, I do not object to such novels in principle. It would be hard to find any novel which does not hide some moral in it's plot somewhere. But I do object to any such "educational" text which claims that a young girl should find her employer attempting to force himself upon her and then locking her up to be endearing. I am sure you would not appreciate such behaviour from me."
Mary blinked at the incredibly odd mental image this statement produced. "No, she replied, "I would not. Although the situations are hardly equivalent."
"That is true. I prefer my women a little older, not to mention willing."
"Miss de Bourgh" said Mary "I had thought you above such humour."
"And indeed I am" she replied, "I am sorry I spoke so."
A little discomforted, Mary returned to her current and much less controversial book, a introduction to the plants and animals of Kent.

It was not long until Miss de Bough felt able to eat meals with Lady Catherine in the main dining room. This was the first time for a while that Mary had had much of a chance to speak to them both at once, and when she was given an opportunity to speak, turned to Miss de Bourgh and said "I have been thinking of our conversation the other day, about Pamela."
Miss de Bourgh froze in the act of bringing a spoon to her lips. "I was hoping Lady Catherine and yourself could clarify my position for me: am I an employee? I am aware of and grateful for the fact that you are providing me with room and board, and that I am to have my usual allowance, but was not sure if this was simply on behalf of my father or if it is in fact a salary."
Anne let out an almost imperceptible breath. "Well," replied Lady Catherine "That depends on how you define an employee. Certainly, I am paying for your room and board, and intend to supply you with whatever money you might require for trinkets and so forth. But your sister was quite insistent that you came here as your guest, and that you be treated as if you were Anne's equal. So in that sense you are not an employee."

Employee or not, it quickly became clear that while Anne herself was not very demanding, when
they were both in the company of Lady Catherine there were suddenly a very many obligations that Mary had to Miss de Bourgh which needed to be attended to. Could she not see that poor Anne was cold, why had she not gotten her a blanket? Why was she sitting them so far from the window when she could be looking outside at the bright sunny day? Why were they sitting so close to the fire when Anne was so clearly oppressed by the bright light and heat?

Mary found herself conflicted. On the one hand, she respected Lady Catherine's opinion. On the other, she did not see how she could be expected to know these things, especially when she had only been here for such a short time.

Waiting until they were alone, Mary asked "Were you indeed in need of a blanket this morning, Miss de Bourgh? I would not wish you to be uncomfortable."
"I was a little cold" she admitted, "But to be honest, with the blanket on I was a little too warm. Perhaps it would have been better to have closed the window instead."
"I would suggest asking, then" replied Mary, "That way you would be more comfortable, and Lady Catherine would not take me to task for my inattentiveness."
"Mrs Jenkinson would have known to open the window" said Anne, "And if she was not sure would have asked me my preference."
"Well I am not Mrs Jenkinson" replied Mary, "and I am not very observant of such things."
"Indeed you are not" replied Miss de Bourgh.
Chapter 13

It is difficult to say whether the instrumental duties of religion, as they are usually termed, have been more misrepresented by superstition and hypocrisy on one hand, or by vicious refinement and vain philosophy on the other. By the former they have been extolled, as if they were the whole of religion; while the latter have decried them as vulgar, unavailing, and insignificant. The real truth is, that they are not only a part of religion, but an essential and important part of it; essential, as expressing its several affections, and important, as nourishing and maintaining them; essential, as a direct compliance with the divine authority, and important, as rendering such compliance more ready and habitual.

--Sermons to Young Women, Dr. James Fordyce

Mr Collins towered precipitously behind the altar, sermonising with a steady and serious tone. "It is difficult to say," he said, "whether the instrumental duties of religion, as they are usually termed, have been more misrepresented by superstition and hypocrisy on one hand, or by vicious refinement and vain philosophy on the other."

Mary sighed and prepared herself for another familiar sermon. She had only been to church three times during her stay but already had heard from Fordyce, Sterne and Atterbury. It was not that she disapproved of quoting from established and renowned preachers, but she would have preferred to at least occasionally hear an original sentiment, or at least some different wording.

And it would have been very easy not to come to church. Miss de Bourgh was only just now able to come herself, and before that it had been an effort to persuade Lady Catherine that Mary should not stay and keep her company. But, regardless of the quality of the sermons, Mary was not to be so easily swayed from the path of piety, and with all the changes in her life she appreciated the familiar rituals of Eucharist and prayer.

Looking around the congregation after the service Mary tried to put a name to the various faces. There was Mr House, the baker, and his wife. There was the Elliot family, second only to the de Bourghs in consequence (a very distant second, if Lady Catherine's disdain was any guide). There were the Mason sisters, who ran the local school. She had met some of these people as visitors to Rosings, but the only time she had a chance to speak to them alone rather than as Miss de Bourgh's accessory was at church.

Noticing her attention, the elder Miss Mason smiled and came to pay her respects.

"Well, Miss Bennet," she asked, "how are you settling in? Does Hunsford compare well with your own Meryton?"

"Oh yes," replied Mary. "Although it is not of much consequence to me where I am situated. Happiness should come from within and not rely on superficial external circumstances, after all."

"Perhaps," said Miss Mason. "But as superficial external circumstances go, one could certainly do a lot worse. My sister and I come from Leeds, where it is all cold winds and desolate moors. Everything is so much more alive here, so green and warm. And the people are lovely too, so welcoming! I hope you have found them so yourself. Lady Catherine keeps a close eye on us all like a watchful gardener, pruning and planting as needs be. Watch out, here she comes, hopefully none of our branches are out of shape and need snipping off. Good morning, Lady Catherine! I must thank you for the books you suggested we buy, the children have found them most edifying."
Lady Catherine graciously accepted Miss Mason's thanks, and offered some further advice on curriculum before firmly bringing the conversation to an end and steering Mary towards the carriage.

"I am not sure you should speak too much with those Mason women, Miss Bennet," said Lady Catherine as they rode away. "They are from all accounts perfectly acceptable schoolmistresses, but you do not want to be associated with blue-stockinged spinsters. I must introduce you to some of the right sort of young people. Have you not made any acquaintances at the local assembly?"

"Do not mind my mother," said Miss de Bourgh later when they were alone. "You should associate with whoever you please. And for myself, I can think of no more worthy companion than the Misses Mason. I am sure they are a better influence on you than I am. You should certainly not look at me as a model for needlework, I do not know why I bother."

She unpicked at the growing tangle of threads beneath her needle halfheartedly and then asked,"Speaking of my bad influence, have you made any progress with your Latin?"

"A little. I am still not entirely convinced that it is proper for me to learn it."

"Come now, Miss Bennet. I have seen the wistful look in your eye when you pass the natural history books in the library. You cannot be satisfied with expurgated primers forever. And is Latin not the language of God? I am sure we have an old Vulgate Bible lying around somewhere, you could read it in the original. Although I suppose that if you really wanted to get back to the source I should have you learning Greek as well."

"Latin is sufficient for now, thank you."

Her doubts as to its propriety notwithstanding, it was not in Mary's nature to relax on a task once she had started it, and she applied herself to her Latin primer studiously. It had been some time since she had last learned a new language, and she enjoyed discovering all the similarities and differences with English and French, and untangling the ancient roots of so many modern words. She wondered what it would be like to follow Miss de Bourgh's advice and also learn Greek. Or perhaps Italian, even if that would inevitably lead to more melancholy poetry.

Another advantage of the primer which she was currently appreciating was that it served as a distraction from Miss de Bourgh waxing lyrical on the many virtues of Charlotte Collins.

"Did I tell you that she agrees with me about the need for new rooves for the south tenants? She could not say so in front of my mother of course. Ah! A woman of such sense and taste is wasted on that odious, stupid man. I do not know how she can bear to be touched by him. The way he simpers and preens, and always so fawning to Lady Catherine and myself, as if we cannot see that it is all out of self interest."

"Do you suspect him of insincerity then?"

"I am not convinced that Mr Collins is capable of sincerity, unless it is that his dishonesty runs so deep that he has even fooled himself. Have you noticed that he never unequivocally expresses an opinion until he is sure we agree with him? And you have said yourself that he gets all his sermons from books, I suppose it saves the unnecessary effort of original thought."

"But how is this different from Mrs Collins? Does she not also change her opinion to match that of Lady Catherine and yourself?"

"No! Well, yes, she does temper her opinions somewhat in order to please Lady Catherine, but so do we all. My mother is not a woman many dare contradict without good reason. Charlotte always
admits her true opinions to me when we are alone. If those opinions should happen to be similar to mine it is only because we are like minded. Ah! And here they are. Mrs Collins! And Mr Collins. What a pleasure it is to see you."

"Miss de Bourgh, so good to see you! And Miss Bennet, too, of course. Indeed, the pleasure is all ours to see you. And to be invited once again to Rosings Park! It is a unique and unparalleled honour as always."

Mr Collins looked slightly less pleased to find himself maneuvered into a seat as far from Miss de Bourgh as possible, buffered by first Mary and then his wife. Mary was not entirely pleased with this seating arrangement either, but tried to make the best of a bad lot.

"Mr Collins, on the subject of your sermon this morning— I have often meditated on Fordyce's metaphor of religion as Divine Friendship. Would you agree then that the attendance of church services, under this metaphor, is rather like a Divine..."

"Come now, Miss Bennet! I know that it is considered impolite to listen in on other's conversations, but I could not help but overhear Miss de Bourgh telling you this morning that she was fatigued by an excess of sermonising. As a clergyman I am of course in the business of sermons, but even I must agree that they should not be taken in excess. Since I am sure that like myself you would never wish to cause the least distress to our most generous host, let us talk of other things. Have you seen the changes Mrs Collins and I have made to our little rectory garden? It is no match for the fine grounds of Rosings Park of course, but I flatter myself to say that for a rectory garden you could not do much better. Lady Catherine herself suggested some of the key features, and I am inclined to think that they make all the difference. Would you not agree my dear?"

"Do not forget Miss de Bourgh's suggestion of planting chamomile near the entrance."

"Oh no, of course! That was indeed most helpful advice. Miss de Bourgh, I must apologise profusely if I in any way seemed to imply that your wonderful suggestion was not appreciated or remembered. No indeed, I think of it every time I enter or leave our little house, and am happily assaulted by a profusion of refreshing scent."

Mary sighed to herself and thought wistfully of verbs.

Mary was fairly stuck with the Collinses. Not only were they at church and in frequent social contact with the de Bourgh's, but being her nearest family acted as her chaperones to those social functions Lady Catherine did not deign to attend. These included all of the frequent local assemblies, for whatever Mary's personal inclinations were, Lady Catherine was determined to fulfill her promise to Mrs Bennet to put Mary in the path of eligible young men.

It was only now, attending such events without her sisters' company, that Mary realised how much she had relied on them for conversation and introductions at assemblies and balls. Mr and Mrs Collins had certainly followed Lady Catherine's orders and introduced her to everyone they knew, but their natural tendency was to associate with other older or married people, and by the end of the evening it was usually the case that the only people Mary had really spoken to were the Mason sisters.

Having prepared herself for yet another assembly, Mary wandered to Miss de Bourgh's chambers to make her farewell for the evening.

"Good night, Miss de Bourgh," said Mary, poking her head through the door.

"Good night, Miss Bennet," replied Anne, looking up from a letter with a shortlived smile that
quickly changed to an expression of horror. "Good Lord, Miss Bennet, what are you wearing?"

"It is a dress Lady Catherine gave me. She said my other dresses were ill fitting and out of fashion."

"I can see that, I remember it well from two seasons ago. But...do you like it?"

"Like it? It is not immodest, and seems to me to resemble what other young women are wearing. I might prefer something a little more comfortable."

"But the colour. And oh, the sleeves... For a woman of my mother's age and tastes is one thing, but for you... Surely it cannot be to your tastes."

"I have no preferences to speak of. The clothing you have seen me in is all from my sisters. My youngest sister tends to discard dresses as out-of-date before they are very worn, any pattern you have seen in my clothing is due more to her tastes than mine."

Miss de Bourgh frowned to herself. She then looked Mary steadfastly in the eye and said, "Very well. I suppose we cannot do much about that at this late stage. But would you object to me having Jackson refashion your hair? It seems a waste to bunch it all up like that."

"It makes little difference to me, but I would not object."

As Jackson bustled around her head, pinning and twisting, Mary said, "I am very grateful to Lady Catherine and yourself for your advice in the matter of my appearance. It would be pleasant to think that I might find a soulmate who puts no value in such shallow considerations, but I know in my heart that it is unlikely. With your help I have an increased chance at finding a match, and for that you have my thanks."

"Do not thank us yet," replied Miss de Bourgh. "We may know a little more than you of fashion, but note that I am still unmarried though eight years your senior. I would put my money on you being married before I ever am, with or without our help."

"But you are so well read!" replied Mary. "I suppose you are a little older than most men prefer, but you are still young enough to have children. It is unfortunate that you are not able to come out into society, I am sure you would fare better than I. If nothing else you have wealth on your side, and I have heard it said that the plainest woman is counted attractive so long as she has money. And you are not really plain, one might almost describe you as pretty."

Anne smiled. "Well! Thank you for such a sincere compliment. I will return it by saying that you are not so very plain yourself. Regardless, I am resigned to my fate, in fact I have begun to quite enjoy the idea of avoiding matrimony. I cannot think of many men I would trust to have such power over me, or to care for Rosings Park as it deserves."

"You do not wish to get married?" asked Mary incredulously. "But what will you do with your life? What purpose will you serve?"

"That which I do now," replied Anne. She added, "Miss Bennet, the hour of your departure is nigh upon us, and I see that Jackson has finished working her magic on your hair. I hope you have a pleasant evening, with much flirting and dancing and other useful steps to matrimony, and I will see you on the morrow."

Thus dismissed, Mary left.

The Collins stood silently waiting in the light of the approaching carriage, stiff and separate in the evening chill. Their hellos said, they would likely have remained silent for the rest of the journey.
had Mary not spoken.

"Mr Collins," she began. "Might I ask your advice?"

"Of course, dear cousin! If there is any way in which I might share the benefit of my experience and, dare I say it, my own little share of wisdom, then do not hesitate to ask."

"I am sure we can both agree that matrimony is the only natural and desirable goal for any unmarried woman. But if a woman finds herself a spinster, if perhaps she simply cannot find a suitable husband, can she still find happiness and purpose without marriage? Or is even considering such a life an insult to her sex?"

"Miss Bennet!" cried Mr Collins. "Do not give up hope! Whatever your other flaws, you are still young!"

He leaned forward and grasped her hand. "Perhaps you have allowed an affection to take root where it was not reciprocated. Perhaps the desired young man finds another more attractive and suitable. Such rejection would sting grievously, I am sure. But no matter how remote the possibility, you must continue to hope for a husband. Truly, it is your only chance at an useful and happy life. There is nothing more pathetic or unnatural than a woman who chooses to remain unmarried, life without a husband and children is no life at all."

"I do not mean me, Mr Collins. I refer to Miss de Bourgh."

"Miss...de Bourgh? She has expressed a desire to remain unmarried?"

"Yes. And I worry that this attitude may lead to detrimental effects on her future. Could you perhaps talk to her, and explain the dangers of remaining unmarried to her, as you have to me? Or should I try to convince her myself?"

"Oh, but that is completely different! No, for you are not able to support yourself, and so must marry in order to avoid being a burden on your family. Miss de Bourgh has her own fortune, she is very rich indeed and so...and so it does not do any harm, you see, for her to remain unmarried. No, I would not dream of criticising her choice in this matter, if that is her decision."

"But you made no mention of money before, what has that to do with it? What is your opinion, Mrs Collins?"

"Well," she replied cautiously, "I am afraid to say that money has a lot to do with it, whether we like it or not. Regardless of duty, you will find that the world is a difficult place for an unmarried woman without independent means. As to Miss de Bourgh...the lives of the very rich are different to ours, and I find it is best not to hold them to the same standards that one might apply to you or I. And it has been my experience that they are not usually of a mind to listen to advice from those beneath their station."

"But that would be dishonest! And I must strongly protest your implication that money or station make anyone except from the usual dictates of morality. Are we all not equal in the eyes of the Lord? I defer to Lady Catherine's judgement on account of her age and experience, but she and Miss de Bourgh are subject to the same laws as I am, and will face the same moral calculus come judgement day."

Charlotte laughed. "Indeed, Miss Bennet, you sound like a frenchman." After a quelling look from her husband she added, "But believe me when I say that you should not press the issue with Miss de Bourgh. Should you wish to persuade Lady Catherine or Miss de Bourgh of your opinion, and as a rule it is not your place to do so, it should not be done directly. If you are friendly and
attentive, and speak carefully, you can make it appear that your idea is in fact their idea, and they will be able to accept it without loss of pride. Leave it to Mr Collins and myself, we know how to talk to them.”

Unsatisfied, Mary sat brooding for the rest of the journey, and at the assembly found herself unable to apply herself much to the necessary task of mingling and flirting. She was asked to dance once, but as unusual as this was, she did not take it as much of a compliment, for the young man spent the whole dance unsubtly promoting his own interest in a local dispute over which Lady Catherine had influence.

When it became clear that Mary did not sympathise with his tale of woe and unfortunately placed apple-carts, he made his excuses and sought after more pliable companions. Remembering some of the advice Lydia had given unbidden every time she felt Mary was being too unsociable (which is to say, every time the two of them went out together), Mary sat herself by the punch bowl and watched the bustle of social commerce around her.

Lydia's advice turned out to be effective—before long she was engaged in several friendly if brief conversations about the quality of the punch, the number of dancers, and the recent variability of the weather. She took note of each speaker's social position with respect to her own and compared this with the tone of their address, and as the evening wore on she began to wonder just how many people had the same attitude as the Collinses. For those beneath her in station, or wishing to ingratiate themselves with the de Bourgh's, seemed on the whole much more friendly, and those above her much less predisposed to please. She wondered how many of her social inferiors only seemed interested in her ideas and well being. And how much more true must this be for Miss de Bourgh? Mary's determination to speak to her increased.

Luckily Mr and Mrs Collins were no more interested in burning the midnight oil than she was, and Mary did not have to entertain herself with such thoughts for long before returning to Rosings. Passing Miss de Bourgh's chambers on her way to bed, Mary was surprised to see a candle still burning.

She quietly stuck her head past the door. Miss de Bourgh was resting her head on her arms across her writing desk and staring with half lidded eyes at the various unfinished correspondences littering its surface. She looked up.

"Hello, Miss Bennet." Anne smiled sleepily. "I did not realise it had become so late. My stomach is being particularly troublesome this evening, so I could not sleep. Did you enjoy the assembly?"

"Yes," replied Mary.

"Oh, good."

Seeing that Mary still stood in the doorway, Miss de Bourgh asked, "Is there something else?"

"No," replied Mary. "Good night, Miss de Bourgh, and pleasant dreams."
Chapter 14

A single woman is, particularly, defenceless. She cannot move beyond the precincts of her house without apprehensions. She cannot go with ease or safety, into public. She is surrounded with many real dangers, and fancy conjures up more spectres of its own, to disturb her repose.
As she goes down the hill of life, her friends gradually drop away from her, like leaves in the autumn, and leave her a pining, solitary creature. Even brothers and sisters when married themselves, lose their usual fondness for her, in the ardours of a newly acquired connexion; and she wanders through a wide, bustling world uncomfortable in herself, uninteresting to others, frequently the sport of wanton ridicule, or a proverb of reproach.

--Letters to a young lady, Rev. John Bennett

Anne woke to the bustling of the maid and a blinding headache. What time had she fallen asleep last night? Thinking back she vaguely remembered a conversation with Miss Bennet; had Jackson come in after that to put her to bed? Well, it didn't matter, tired or not she had gotten some sleep, and had things to do.

She stumbled sleepily through her morning ablutions, nodding vaguely as Jackson conversed at length on the latest London gossip she'd heard from her cousin, head butler to the Earl of M-.

"Miss de Bourgh?"

"Yes?"

"Are you quite alright? You seem to be falling asleep; either my gossip is particularly dull, or you are not well this morning. Would you like me to tell Lady Catherine to cancel your plans for today?"

"Thank you, but no. She is already convinced that I am not capable of fulfilling my obligations as heir, I shall not give her further ammunition. Miss Bennet shall simply have to help me out a little more than usual."

Jackson made a small sardonic snort.

Anne sighed. "She means well."

"I'm sure she does."

The problem, as it turned out, was not Miss Bennet, but Lady Catherine. Anne had hoped to have her plans executed before breakfast, before there was any chance of a veto. Unfortunately, her mother's almost supernatural instincts for interference led her to corner Anne as she was directing a servant to bring around the carriage. After expressing shock that Anne would leave the house at all given her visible fatigue and the inclement weather, she managed to bully her down to only one of the five calls she had had planned for the morning, and forced Miss Bennet to promise to keep Anne to her word.

"That woman is insufferable! I am not a child, unable to judge my own limits, nor are you my nursemaid to slap my hand if I do not obey instruction."

"Do you intend to disobey Lady Catherine, then?"
"What? No, no." Anne glared peevishly through the rain specked window of the carriage. "Although, tell me, Miss Bennet, were I to do so, how would you react? Would you inform of my disobedience if I had sworn you to secrecy on the matter?"

"I would not make such a promise," replied Miss Bennet, "and I would hope that you would never ask me to make it, for it would be in direct contradiction of the promise I have already made to Lady Catherine. And if you were to attempt to gainsay her advice then I would remind you that you are forsworn to follow it. A promise is a promise, Miss de Bourgh, and not to be broken lightly."

But no promises were broken that morning: as usual Anne did as she had been told, and the two women only made one call. It was Lady Catherine's intention that Anne tax herself as little as possible with the responsibilities of her position, and then only with the most restful, delicate, and feminine of tasks, such as offering charity to invalids and gifts to children. For this reason, the single call that Anne made that morning was to a Mr Bob Langdon, a hale and hearty tenant who was having problems with his drains.

"But do you really not object to losing access to your field for so long? It seems an awfully large inconvenience. Or are you afraid of Miss de Bourgh's reaction should you speak against her?" asked Mary earnestly.

Bob Langdon shifted uncomfortably in his small wooden chair and looked to Anne with mute distress. Mary followed his gaze and frowned at Anne disapprovingly. "Perhaps you should wait outside, Miss de Bourgh, so that Mr Langdon and I may speak more freely."

Anne gaped speechlessly, while the older man hastily protested.

"No! Miss Bennet! I am not afraid of Miss de Bourgh! She is a good landlord, she and Lady Catherine. And if they made a decision involving my farm that I didn't like, well, I would tell them, you can be certain of that. And I have a good hope that they would listen. But here and now there's no dispute at all, this new drainage system is a good idea, I'm sure of it."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. You see, Miss Bennet..." Here Mr Langdon launched enthusiastically into a long and detailed description of the drainage problem on his land, how it related to the properties of the soil and the angle of the slope, and how it would be altered for the better by the planned improvements.

Mary nodded and smiled half-heartedly. As it became increasingly clear that he was going to keep talking about drains indefinitely, she stopped him and said, "Thank you, Mr Langdon. I must admit I had not thought deeply on the topic before now, but your arguments seem sound."

She did not protest when Anne began their farewells and returned them to the carriage.

"I would appreciate it, Miss Bennet," said Anne, "if you did not harass my tenants with your ill informed opinions."

"I am sorry," said Mary, stiffly. "But it is a well known fact that many people are uncomfortable speaking hard truths to those upon who they are dependent."

"You certainly do not seem to have any such trouble."

"That is not always true. And I am not as dependent as Mr Langdon."

Anne gave up on the conversation, and tried to cheer herself up with thoughts of breakfast and a
Mrs Collins looked up and smiled, then hurried towards the carriage. "Good morning, Miss de Bourgh, I hope you are well."

"Well enough. We have just been to see Mr Langdon about his drains and are returning home. Are you on your way out?"

"Yes, I am to visit poor Mrs Smith, she has had a bad fall."

"Really? Poor woman. But lucky to have your company. It makes me glad to know that the neighbourhood is in such good hands. Although you should not overtax yourself in your condition!"

"It is only a short walk; the fresh air will do me good."

Anne looked with affection upon her neighbour and friend. She had not taken immediately to Mr Collins' new wife, assuming that anyone willing to marry such an odious man must share some certain quality of odiousness themselves. But Charlotte's good sense and kind nature had won her over, and Mrs Collins' company had become one of the few bright points in Anne's otherwise fairly solitary existence. Anne smiled; Charlotte was using the umbrella she had given her, but was less pleased to notice how poorly her boots seemed to be standing up to the thick mud of the road. Would it be out of place to buy her a new pair?

"Miss de Bourgh, Mrs Collins, I would like to return to a topic we discussed last night."

Anne turned her attention regretfully away from Mrs Collins and towards Miss Bennet, and peered into the foggy recesses of memory.

"Oh!" she said. "You refer to purchasing you some new clothing. I did not know that you had discussed that with Mrs Collins. I am sure she will agree that it would be a good idea, especially since she saw that monstrosity my mother had you wearing last night."

"You are to buy Miss Bennet a new dress? How kind of you! I am sure she appreciates the generosity of such a gift, from both you and from Lady Catherine."

'Oh, it is nothing. I would buy you a new dress if I thought that you would not feel odd about it. I can imagine you looking spectacular in velvet."

"I was not talking of dresses," said Mary. She looked significantly at Mrs Collins, who widened her eyes and shook her head rapidly.

"What is it?" asked Anne.

"I speak of marriage."

"It is nothing significant," said Mrs Collins quickly. "Miss Bennet was only somewhat concerned that you have yet to find a suitable man to marry. But I reassured her that you are simply exercising prudent caution for the good of yourself, and of Rosings, and that you will marry when a worthy suitor appears. Her concern for your well-being does her credit, but as I told Miss Bennet last night, it is not her place to dictate the actions of her betters."

"Miss Bennet, what business of yours is it whom and when I marry?"

"I am sure she meant no harm by it."
"I did not! But is it true then, Miss de Bourgh, that you do intend to marry?"

"As Mrs Collins says, should I find a man worthy of Rosings then yes."

"Oh. I seem to have misunderstood. I apologise. But you should not be too cautious or wait too long. For is not a single woman the most defenseless of creatures? And an old unmarried woman is the sport of wanton ridicule and a proverb of reproach."

"So you are motivated by concern for my well being? How kind of you, Miss Bennet. I would have thought that you would want to become a proverb of reproach; are not reproachful proverbs your stock in trade? But, unlike you, I am neither defenseless nor ridiculous, and I have no need of your advice. If you must find a pathetic creature in need of advice, perhaps you should look at yourself. For what but a combination of delusion and insufferable pride could lead to your insistence on pronouncing your ill-informed opinions at every opportunity, no matter how inappropriate the context? We have heard you opine on agriculture and matrimony, shall you now lecture us on military strategy? Or perhaps you should lecture Lady Catherine on the correct way to give advice, for it seems that you are even more of an expert on that subject than she. Do you not agree, Mrs Collins?"

But she had left.

A fine drizzle settled over the two women as they drove back up to main house in silence. They remained silent through breakfast, while Lady Catherine took the opportunity to explain her latest plans for refurbishing what was left of the original decor, and were silent as they walked towards their chambers. As they reached the top of the stairs Miss Bennet finally spoke. "Would you like me to read to you, Miss de Bourgh?"

"I believe I have heard enough from you today. You are dismissed, I will not trouble you for your services again until tomorrow."

Anne strode off as energetically as she was able (which was less of a fierce stride and more of an aggressive amble), and went to her room, where she was able, at last, blissfully, to sleep.

On waking she regretted her earlier impatience with Miss Bennet. With some reluctance, Anne decided that she should probably apologise. She followed the familiar path towards what had been Mrs Jenning’s chambers, any worry that Miss Bennet might not be there quickly evaporating in the din of scales and arpeggios leaking through the solid wood of the door.

"May I come in, Miss Bennet?"

"Of course," replied Miss Bennet, stopping her practice but leaving her hands, fingers tensed, on the keys.

"You are very quick. I am no judge, but you never seem to miss a note; I admire your skill."

"I have no special ability, anyone with the will to practice could do as much."

Anne suppressed a flash of irritation, thinking of her own abortive and frustrating attempts to learn even the basics of the piano as a weak and sickly child. She reminded herself why she was here and bit her tongue.

Anne sat next to Miss Bennet on the piano bench. She softly tapped out a few notes with her index finger, her hands looking very small and pale next to Miss Bennet's.

"That is not the correct way to play the piano."
Anne balled her hands into fists and put them in her lap. Miss Bennet was not making herself easy to apologise to.

"I am sorry," said Miss Bennet. "I spoke out of place. You may play that way if you wish."

Anne sighed.

Miss Bennet sighed.

A silence stretched out between them, awkward and sticky.

"I would like to apologise, Miss Bennet, for my rudeness earlier today. My lack of sleep has made me irritable, but that was no excuse for berating you so in front of Mrs Collins."

"Thank you," said Miss Bennet. "I forgive you."

Something in the martyred tone in which this was uttered prompted Anne to add, "Of course you too should have aimed to keep the disagreement between us private; I do not enjoy making a public spectacle of myself, nor do I wish to have you make fools of us both. While you stay at Rosings you are a representative of this house, and you have responsibility to maintain our public face. Even in private I would expect a much greater level of tact and delicacy than you have so far exhibited. It is not your place to pry into the private lives of your betters."

Something like defiance flashed through Miss Bennet's eyes but she said only, "Yes, Miss de Bourgh."

"Well, I shall leave you to your practice," said Anne, departing with a strong sense of dissatisfaction.

She did not find herself having to make apologies very often, but she was fairly sure that did not count as a success. Unfortunately, she did not have much of a model to work from: the only person with the power to hurt her enough to require a true apology was Lady Catherine, and her approach to a mistake was less the admission of guilt and more an increase in the intensity of her usual altruistic bullying. Disturbingly, Anne could not convince herself that she had not taken this approach with Miss Bennet, or even remember if she had actually said that she was sorry. Well, there was no helping it now.

It was only later, as she sat bored in the library, that it occurred to Anne that whether or not she had apologised, she had definitely not rescinded her previous statement to Miss Bennet that her services would not be required for the day. Further investigation revealed that Miss Bennet had taken the opportunity to go for a walk. As a result, Anne was left to entertain herself to the best of her own abilities. These abilities did not stretch very far.

Anne did not have many friends, but those she had were quite verbose, and she had various other prosaic letters she had been avoiding writing.

Miss Bennet arrived back at Rosings flushed with exercise and damp with rain, her poorly cut
dress bunched and stuck with mud. Anne wondered what had prompted her usually sedentary companion to venture out into the inclement weather, until she noticed the wrapped package of books held close to her chest.

"Good afternoon, Miss Bennet, have you had a successful shopping trip?"

"I have indeed," she replied, cheerfully. "Two musical scores that I ordered had come in, as well as a new copy of "Letters to a young lady" to replace the one that you accidentally threw against the wall."

"How pleasant for you. I suppose your intention now is to read them."

"Yes," said Miss Bennet. "Unless... would you like me to read to you instead?"

"If it would not be an inconvenience, I did say I would not require you to."

"It is no inconvenience," said Miss Bennet. She looked down protectively at the package in her hands and added, "But perhaps a different book would be wise."

Anne smiled. "Perhaps you are right."
Chapter 15

A PLAIN dress you have often found extremely pleasing. What such a dress is to the person; that, and much more, is Sobriety to the mind. Sobriety is a sort of spiritual vesture entirely void of show; substantial, home-spun, and hardy; calculated to defend against the injuries of the world, as well as to cover the nakedness of the soul; proper to be worn every day and not unfit for anyplace where a reasonable being ought to appear; perfectly decent, and to a judicious eye extremely beautiful; in a word, so indispensable and becoming, that she who is without it has been ever deemed, by the virtuous and wise, an object of deformity, loathing and wretchedness. Like every thing else of greatest value, its worth is best known by its loss.

--Sermons to Young Women, Dr. James Fordyce

Mary winced slightly as the seamstress pinned and adjusted the swatches of fabric around her uncomfortably posed body. Jackson frowned pensively.

"More gathering at the front, I think, Mrs Hendricks. Are you comfortable Miss Bennet?"

"It is a little tight."

Jackson gestured expressively to Mrs Hendricks, who adjusted the fabric accordingly. Mary let out a breath she hadn't realised she had been holding in. Jackson looked at her approvingly. "Yes, I think that will do. Well, I believe that I hear Lady Catherine and Miss de Bourgh arriving back. Mrs Hendricks, I leave Miss Bennet in your capable hands."

Mary felt rather out of her depth. She could not remember the last time she had gotten a dress made from scratch. Normally she just took one of her sisters' old dresses and adjusted the neckline up and the seams out. She was not used to having to make decisions on sleeve length and pattern choice and contrasting ribbons, it was all so overwhelming and arbitrary. She had asked Miss de Bourgh plaintively if she could not make these decisions for her, but Miss de Bourgh's reply was that someone who prides themselves on their female accomplishments could not go on through life without knowing how to choose a dress.

The seamstress, Mrs Hendricks, was not a chatty woman, and Mary had nothing relevant to say with regards to her craft beyond the occasional "Ouch", and so she was stuck standing, swaddled in a cocoon of fabric and pins in silence. It was strange to have so many people going to so much trouble over her appearance. It all felt rather immodest, to try so hard to look attractive. Miss de Bourgh had argued that not paying attention to one's appearance was a waste of the beauty one was born with, and thus an insult to its Creator, but Mary was not entirely convinced.

Through the window she could just barely make out Lady Catherine and Miss de Bourgh as they approached the house. She considered Miss de Bourgh's appearance. She definitely paid more attention to it than Mary did to her own. She would not go so far as to consider her vain, but the difference was certainly pronounced. Under her winter coat Miss de Bourgh's dress was carefully cut to flatter her slight figure, and bristled with the latest fashion for frills and trim. Her naturally straight hair hung in artistically coiled ringlets which Mary knew required careful cultivation, but were now sagging slightly thanks to a day in the wind. Her thin fingers twisted in the strings of her embroidered bag and rubbed at her face, its usual pallor splotched with an unhappy looking redness. But Mary lost all thoughts of appearance as she realised that Miss de Bourgh was crying.

This was most alarming: in all the months she had known her, Mary had never seen Miss de
Bourgh cry, not even at the death of Mrs Jennings. She stepped off the chair to go to her and was rewarding with an unfortunate ripping sound.

"Miss Bennet!" exclaimed the seamstress. "You'll rip all your seams! You can't go walking around in that, it's not finished. If you aren't going to let me finish working on this dress you must at least change into your old one; Miss de Bourgh will not be pleased if I have to start it all again from the beginning."

Mary waved off the entreaties, picked up her dragging hems, and went to follow Miss de Bourgh.

It did not take long for her to regret her rash decision, as innumerable pins poked her fingers and pricked her sides as she walked. Luckily she did not have to search for long. She found Miss de Bourgh sitting on a bench by a window in a drawingroom, resting her head against the glass. As Mary entered, Miss de Bourgh looked up and offered a thin and unconvincing smile.

"Wonderful news, Miss Bennet. Mr and Mrs Collins have a son."

Before Mary had much of a chance to react they were joined by Lady Catherine, who presumably wished to share the news herself. But she was quickly distracted from this goal by her shock at Mary's appearance, and Mary was sent off with strict instructions to finish with the dressmaker and clothe herself more appropriately.

Back in more conventional attire, Mary sought out Miss de Bourgh again. She was sitting in the same place, but was now sorting through a box of half finished crochet projects and needlework.

"I started a blanket for the baby when I first heard it was coming. Have you seen it, Miss Bennet?" She poked through the tangled mess, scattering various unfinished projects and snarled balls of yarn. "Oh, never mind, there it is." Miss de Bourgh held up a small blue square with uneven edges the size of her palm, stretching it out between her fingers before sighing and letting it drop back into the box.

"I suppose I did not ever really let myself believe it. She is fully bound to him now." She sniffed and wiped her eyes and looked far more miserable than one would expect for someone whose friend had just successfully given birth to a much awaited child.

Mary did not understand. Did she mean that Mrs Collins was bound to Mr Collins? Had she not already been bound to him before? And how was this upsetting? But Mary had not grown up in a house with her mother and Kitty without learning something about how to comfort those whose hurts she did not understand, and she quietly sat next to Miss de Bourgh and held her hand.

Miss de Bourgh turned towards Mary and said, "Please, do not give me any of your pre-prepared words of wisdom. I could not stand it."

"As you wish."

Mary sat and felt rather useless. It occurred to her that while she might not speak any of the wise words she had read, she could still take comfort from them herself. But while she had read much on the importance of a listening ear and sympathetic heart, she did not recall much in the way of specifics.

"I am a very selfish friend, Miss Bennet," said Miss de Bourgh softly. "I should be glad to see Charlotte so happy. Have I not complained that there was no affection between them? And yet I see the joy, the love between two parents and their child and my first thought is to be jealous that
none of that love is for me. I am even less worthy of her than he is."

Mary struggled to think of what to say. Talking to people was so difficult. "I do not think... You have been a worthy friend to me."

Miss de Bourgh sat up, her expression gaining focus and not a measure of annoyance. "You do not think I have been worthy friend to you?"

"Oh no! Yes! I, that is..." Mary blushed and stammered and tried to resist the instinct to stop talking before she made things any worse. "You have been a true friend to me, Miss de Bourgh. And to Mrs Collins. Jealous feelings are... not good. But they are understandable. What matters is that you overcome them. Which I am sure you will."

"Hmm. At any rate, I am glad that the birth went well. She is recovered, and young Master Collins is from all accounts a healthy little boy. I hope with all my heart that he may fare better than my brothers."

"I did not know that you had brothers, Miss de Bourgh."

"I did not keep them for very long."

Miss de Bourgh sighed and leaned against Mary's side. "This is no good. If I may impose on you further, Miss Bennet, and request some manner of distraction?"

"Would you like me hear the piece I have been working on? It is another Beethoven, I think you might like it."

"I would love to."

If Miss de Bourgh held any resentment towards the younger William Collins, she hid it very well. She seemed genuinely fond of the child when they went to visit Mrs Collins in her confinement, although uncertain of how to hold him. She could not of course compete with his parents, who expressed overjoyed astonishment at his every action, from the vivid blue of his blinking eyes to the healthy strength of his cries for attention. Even Lady Catherine seemed fond of the child, and condescended to visit several times with advice and small gifts.

The one thing that could complete Mrs Collins happiness was a visit from her closest friend, and this was achieved within a few weeks of the birth. Mrs Darcy had been awaiting news of the child for some time, and drove down from Pemberley as soon as she was able.
"The whole of this unfortunate business," said Dr Lyster, "has been the result of pride and prejudice."

--Fanny Burney, Cecilia

Peering through the palings of Rosings as she entered Hunsford, Elizabeth could not help but think to herself, "You are a fine house, but mine is better."

As much as she had refused to let herself be cowed by wealth and circumstance when she was the poor Miss Bennet, friend of the parson's wife, she could not help but notice the difference now that she was Mrs Darcy, wife of Lady Catherine's nephew.

Instead of sharing a small guest bedroom in the parsonage, she had her own room at Rosings, overflowing with gaudy furnishings. Instead of lording his dominion over her, Mr Collins was now deferential and submissive. And instead of being mostly ignored by Lady Catherine and thus able to do as she pleased, she was now an honoured guest whose schedule was carefully controlled and filled with tours and social engagements.

Overall, there was not a lot to be said in favour of the change.

Whenever possible Elizabeth was at the parsonage with Charlotte and her new baby. The younger John Collins scowled, and blinked myopically at the world when not screaming for attention from his mother and grandparents. Elizabeth was more predisposed to enjoy the company of children when they were old enough to sustain a conversation, but could not help liking him when she saw how happy he made Charlotte.

A mushy layer of snow and mud lay over the park, making it difficult for Elizabeth to go on the walks she had enjoyed during her last stay in Kent. Instead she was mostly stuck indoors with Lady Catherine. It had been her intention to get to know Miss de Bourgh a little better, or perhaps spend time talking to Darcy or Mary, but it was Lady Catherine who demanded her attention and dominated the conversation.

Lady Catherine alternated between making a great show of how generous and kind she was to Mary, and treating her like a piece of unremarkable furniture existing solely for the benefit of Miss de Bourgh. Much was made of the large, if somewhat weather-beaten piano in her room, as well as the dresses and books she had been given.

Looking around Mary's room, Elizabeth noted with a mix of affection and disgust that as well as a small library of books, Mary had started a new and equally gruesome replacement for the beetle collection left at Longbourne.

"Befriending the local wildlife, I see," she said cheerfully.

Lady Catherine frowned. "Indeed, I have explained to your sister repeatedly that her time would be much better spent in more feminine pursuits, but has been quite immovable on the subject. Were she a little younger I would have her learn drawing, but it is too late to correct such defects of upbringing now."
"Well, I am even more determined to get Mary back to Longbourne," Elizabeth said to her husband as they retired for bed on the night of their arrival at Rosings. "I am not certain that we were right to allow Mary to come here at all. I have been here a day and can barely stand another minute, how can she be happy after a matter of months? Expected to serve and entertain the silent and stupid Miss de Bourgh with no friends or family for support? It is not to be borne."

"You would not relish such a life, but Mary must make her own decision. And do not underestimate my cousin, her circumstances and personality have left her poorly suited for company, but she is quite intelligent, and can be engaging enough when she has the desire and opportunity."

"I suppose it is unfair to censure anyone for silence in the company of Lady Catherine. Charlotte speaks very highly of her kindness. Perhaps I am letting myself be influenced by jealousy; she was once your intended."

Darcy smiled. "Do not fret. Anne never had any hold on my heart, nor I on hers. You are in as much danger from Mr Collins."

"Fitzwilliam!" she admonished. "How can you say such things when you know how inconsolable I have been since Charlotte stole him from me?"

"Forgive me, my dear." he replied. "Please allow me to do what I can to ease your disappointment."

The next morning, Elizabeth managed to escape with Mary to a private room before Lady Catherine could accost them.

"I must ask, Mary, are you happy here? Lady Catherine keeps telling me all the many ways in which she has improved your life, but I place rather more trust in your opinion on the matter. Say the word and we will whisk you away to freedom."

"I am quite satisfied with my position."

"Are you, really?"

Elizabeth stared at Mary trying to gauge her thoughts, but her expression was blank and unreadable."Well, I am glad to see you have not let Lady Catherine force you into becoming quite as dull as Miss de Bourgh, even if I do dislike your beetles."

"Miss de Bourgh has a great respect for natural history, and has introduced me to many fascinating books. She likes my beetles."

"Does she indeed. Has she found a new companion? Lady Catherine was uncharacteristically vague on the question. You should not feel obligated to stay if she has not, we only agreed to a few months and she has had them."

"She has not yet found a new companion. And thank you for your concern, but I do not wish to leave."

"Well, can I persuade you to come with us to Longbourne for Christmas? Our parents would be glad to see you again."

Mary did not look as if she would be glad to see them. But what she said was, "I had promised Miss de Bourgh to help her give out gifts to the local children."
Elizabeth sighed and decided that, promises or not, she was going to have to be honest about her motives. "As I'm sure you've noticed, my father has not been himself recently." From Mary's expression it was clear that she had not noticed. "Ah. Well, he made me promise not to worry you, and there's no reason to be so very worried, but his heart is not what it was. I don't know how long he has been ill, but he had a bad spell when he was at Pemberley. Despite his strong protestations of good health I made him see a doctor. The surgeon said that if Papa takes care of himself he should not be in any serious danger, but it would still...I think it would be good if you could visit."

"Of course."

Elizabeth squeezed her hand "Do not fret. The life of a country gentleman is not so very taxing, and our mother has put her full energy into keeping him well so as to save Longbourne from the Collinses."

Mary nodded mutely.

One of the few amusements offered at Rosings was cards. To Elizabeth's surprise, Mary was conscripted into playing, though she did so with neither enthusiasm nor skill.

"I am surprised to see you at the table," said Elizabeth. "We could never induce you to play at Longbourne."

"All young women should play cards," said Lady Catherine. "It sharpens the mind and is a necessary connection to society."

"And do you agree with this, Mary?"

"I would not agree that it is necessary," said Mary, "but it can certainly be helpful. If my only goal is self-amusement then I see no need to play, for I do not enjoy it. But I do not object to playing in order to further the pleasure of others."

She certainly seemed to bring pleasure to Lady Catherine- since her commitment to the game did not include any close level of attention or much motivation to succeed, Mary played very poorly, and Elizabeth was sure that were the table to consist only of Rosings residents and local dependents (as was usually the case) then Lady Catherine and Miss de Bourgh would have no difficulty in laying waste to all those who challenged them. However, since Elizabeth was no one's dependent, and quite good at cards, she caused Lady Catherine evident displeasure by winning consistently. Elizabeth wondered how Darcy was going against Mr Collins and Sir William at billiards in the other room.

"I believe we have had enough of cards for one evening," said Lady Catherine firmly. "Miss Bennet, if you would grace us with a song?"

As Mary launched enthusiastically into something complex and tinkly, Lady Catherine smiled. "I was pleasantly surprised by your sister. She is not without accomplishments, and although a little more decided in her opinions than one might like she is a good sensible girl and very open to guidance. As you know, I was planning on finding a more suitable companion, but Anne has become quite fond of her, and I think we may allow her to stay."

"And is Mary to have any say in this?"

"What possible reason could she have to object? As you can see she has every luxury here, she is treated quite as if she were a member of the family. She is very happy."
"And have you asked her opinion on this score, or has she been informed of how she feels?"

Elizabeth reminded herself the she was trying to reconcile with Lady Catherine, not drive a wedge between them. She rapidly excused herself, and walked into an empty room to cool her temper.

To her surprise she was shortly joined by Miss de Bourgh, who sat next to her on the small couch.

"I apologise for my mother's rudeness. And I do not believe I ever thanked you properly for your hospitality in June," she said softly.

"We were glad to offer you what assistance we could, I am sure it must have been very a very difficult time."

"Yes." Miss de Bourgh looked up and frowned intently. "Do you truly think that your sister wishes to leave Rosings? Did she say something to you?"

"No. She says she is quite happy. But Lady Catherine is very forceful; I worry that she is being pressured into something she does not truly want."

Elizabeth was gratified to see what looked like an expression of true concern on Miss de Bourgh's face. "That possibility had not occurred to me. But you are right, my mother is not an easy woman to disagree with, and Miss Bennet values her opinion highly. Given the opportunity to choose freely, there is no reason she would not prefer to be with her family."

"Perhaps. At least with us she is treated as an equal. At the very least, I worry that she has no ally here. I would be less concerned of her being overwhelmed by Lady Catherine if I knew that you were willing to speak up in her defense, especially since she values your opinion so highly."

"I will speak to Miss Bennet."

"And will you speak to Lady Catherine as well?"

"When I feel it is appropriate." Signaling her unwillingness to discuss it any further, Miss de Bourgh changed the subject. "Are you enjoying your stay in Kent?"

"Yes, very much, and thank you for your hospitality. I realise you are not able to travel to Pemberley, but should you ever be in London you are quite welcome to stay with us at our house in town."

"Thank you. You are of course always welcome at Rosings. I know that Mrs Collins has missed your company since she moved from Meryton, and though I have never had a sister, I imagine that you and Miss Bennet must regret spending so much time apart."

"Clearly you have never had a sister. As much as I love Mary, speaking honestly we get along much better now that we live in separate houses. But it is good to see her, and Charlotte as well. And little John! Perhaps he will follow in his father's footsteps, and become a great orator, note how totally he captivates his audience with only a few gurgles and smiles."

Chapter End Notes

The writing of this and the next chapter were rather delayed by some unexpected illness and death in my own family making the subject rather less fun to play with :/
(I'm fine with it now, the delay in posting the finished version so many months later
I'm fine with it now, the delay in posting the finished version so many months later had a lot more to do with me discovering Dragon Age: Origins :))

And yes, the chapter quote is a very cheeseey choice, but Hele suggested the author as someone Elizabeth would be reading, and when I found out that this quote is where the title of P&P comes from and then realised it does work for this chapter (sort of :) I decided to use it.
Chapter 17

Be not easily exceptious, nor given to contradiction, for this occasions contention; nor be rudely familiar, for familiarity breeds contempt.
"If any thing be not fitting, do it not:—if it be not true, speak it not." In a word, cherish in your heart a true love for your fellow-creatures: this will at once make you good-natured, and agreeable to others, and pleasant to yourself: it will give every object smiles, and your prospect of heaven will look much the brighter for it.

--Jonas Hanway, Virtue in humble life

With a week left before Christmas there was not much time for discussion or preparation, and before she knew it Mary was saying goodbye to Rosings and on her way to Longbourne.

On arrival her first thought was to see her father's health for herself. At first he seemed the same as ever, but after a while she noticed that he leaned back in his chair with more exhaustion than ennui, and his wry grins were tinged with more pain than cynicism. He made no mention of his difficulties, and seemed determined to act as if nothing was wrong. Mrs Bennet was another matter entirely.

"Oh Mary!" she said piteously "It has been such a trial! You must make you father take care of himself. Why this morning he went out into the fields to talk to the men for hours on end in this bitter cold despite the surgeon specifically forbidding it. What if he were to die, and leave me without a roof over my head? You know how I suffer with my nerves, the stress has me in agonies. He has no concern for my feelings at all, I would not be surprised if he drives me to die."

Of course Mr Bennet was if anything even less likely to listen to Mary than he was to his wife, and her comments about responsibility and cautious self discipline went unheeded.

Before Mary left Lady Catherine had made sympathetic noises about how cramped and small Longbourne would feel after spending so long in the splendour of Pemberley and Rosings. But she did not find it so. In fact found herself enjoying the smaller more familiar space, feeling more affection for her family home than she had in years.

It is said that absence makes the heart go fonder, and perhaps it was true. Not only did she find herself enjoying the comfort of reading in her old familiar chair, but she even found herself enjoying the company of the Lucases and appreciating the trees along the walk to church and effort the local priest put into his sermons.

This lasted about a week.

Mary was reminded that it is also said that familiarity breeds contempt. It did not take long for life to slip back into the same dull routine she had been glad to escape from, with the added unpleasantness of worrying about her father and answering her mother's probing questions about Rosings and Charlotte's baby. Lady Catherine was right, she did miss the richer surroundings and lifestyle of Rosings a little, but what she most yearned for was someone to talk to.

One thing she was determined to do before she left, though she did not expect any pleasure from it, was to have a proper conversation with her father. Attempts to spark a dialogue with statements about the importance of family and the tragedy of words unsaid having failed, she turned to more mundane topics.
"You wish me to recommend you a book about drains?"

"It has been a topic of some discussion between Miss de Bourgh and myself."

"I am surprised that she concerns herself with such worldly matters, she seemed the type to be above such things. But I suppose that with no man of the house...hmm. Well, I will gladly share with you what I know of the arcane art of drains. Had I a son such knowledge would have gone to him, but instead the torch now passes to you. Use it well." He smiled to himself "I imagine you'll make a better student than Bingley. Poor boy had no idea what he was getting into; these city fellows think becoming a country gentleman is all balls and fancy houses when in fact it's a lot of keeping track of expenses and mud."

Miss de Bourgh was herself feeling the restrictions of her life as landed gentry, although not presently the aspects involving mud. While Anne liked her companion most of the time she had sometimes wished Miss Bennet was elsewhere so that she could spend more time alone with Charlotte. However that was before Charlotte became surrounded by a coterie of family and friends who never left her side, and now Anne was left with little to do but think.

The new year began with the christening of Master John Collins, with a very pretty sermon about beginnings and the joy of new life. Alas Anne could not ask Miss Bennet who Mr Collins had borrowed it from, but found herself feeling a little inspired despite herself.

It was a new year, and perhaps it was time to turn over a new leaf and get some direction in her life. It had been a long time since she had really believed she would ever marry Darcy, yet she had still passively accepted Lady Catherine planning her life on the assumption that she would one day be mistress of Pemberley. But now even Lady Catherine had to admit that that would never happen. So what now? Did she really want to spend the rest of her life trapped in this house under her mother's control? What other choice was there?

It was with these thoughts in mind that Anne was happily surprised by a visit from Charlotte.

"Good morning Mrs Collins! You did not have to visit me so soon after leaving confinement, though I am as always glad to see you."

"I can think of no place I would rather visit, and I am glad to be out of the house."

Anne, already in a good mood, was buoyed by this evidence that Charlotte had missed her company too. She remembered what Mrs Darcy had said about the importance of Mary having an ally against Lady Catherine. Perhaps that was what she needed herself, and who better than Charlotte?

The spoke of everyday things, of the quality of the roads at this time of year and how beautiful Master Collins had looked in his christening gown. Anne spoke of her reading and Charlotte smiled and nodded encouragingly but the thread of conversation quickly lagged and Anne decided this was a sign that she should speak of other things.

"Mrs Collins, I have been thinking."

"Yes?"

"I have spent too long letting the world pass me by, cooped up in this gilded cage of a house. I need to go out and see the world, it will not come to me."

"I do not understand. Do you intend to travel? But you were so ill after your return from Pemberley, would it not be too taxing?"
"As much as the idea is appealing, it would undeniably be unwise for me to go on a Continental tour or other such long trip. But London is only twenty miles from here, I could make it there in a day."

"London! But even a day is a long time for one so little used to traveling. And London is so noisy and dirty, and for a woman of your rank there would be constant social obligations. Would you not be happier here with your friends and family?"

"I have friends and family in London. And I have no intention of coming out into the bustle of London society, for that would be too fatiguing. I do not see why I cannot rest and receive occasional visitors in the London house as well as I do here."

"But will Lady Catherine not oppose it?"

"Oh I am sure she will forbid it, but I am not going to let that stop me. And this is where you can help, Mrs Collins! I realise that you are very dependent on Lady Catherine's support and cannot afford to oppose her too strongly, but if we choose our battles and speak together I feel we might be able to change her mind without raising her ire. Not just in this, and on your behalf too should you ever require it. Miss Bennet as well, she is more under Lady Catherine's influence but might still be persuaded. My mother is too used to having her word as law, if all three of us stopped passively accepting her pronouncements she might actually learn to listen to the opinions of others."

Charlotte wore a troubled expression.

"You are very quiet, Mrs Collins. Tell me you will stand by me, I could not stand to be alone in this."

"You are not alone, Miss de Bourgh."

"So you will support me?"

"I cannot..I cannot openly oppose my patron. I am sorry."

Anne sighed. "I understand. Well, how best do you think I can persuade her to let me go? Much as it pains me I suppose I could ask for Darcy's support, he has certainly proven himself willing to brave my mother's wrath. Perhaps you could discuss it with Mrs Darcy." She made a sour face at the thought. Hopefully it would not come to that.

"Oh" said Charlotte "I am not sure..I do not think it would be right or sensible for me to act against Lady Catherine behind her back."

"But you do agree with me that she should be opposed? Do you truly support my wishes here?"

"I agree that Lady Catherine can be very forceful in her opinions, and can see how you would find this stifling."

"But you think I should still follow her orders."

"It has been my experience that one can achieve more in life by avoiding conflict than creating it, especially when dealing with a mind as strong as Lady Catherine's."

Anne thought about what she had seen of Charlotte's behaviour, dealing with her family and parishioners, not to mention Lady Catherine and herself. And it was true, she could not think of a single time she had seen her come into conflict with anyone, she was always polite and deferential
and kept any disagreement to herself. She had a sudden horrible thought.

"Do you feel the same way about me? Have you been pretending to agree with me to keep the peace?"

"I have not pretended. However I must admit, there have been times when our views were not in accordance but I decided you needed a sympathetic ear more than a contrary opinion."

"So you are my friend only when it is convenient to you, and honest only when our views happen to coincide."

For the first time in their acquaintance Anne saw something akin to anger come over Charlotte's face, though only for a moment.

"I am your friend Miss de Bourgh. But I am also Lady Catherine's friend. And I have my own mind, I cannot always agree with you and be completely honest with you at the same time. I do not crave conflict, and it has been my observation that Lady Catherine and yourself do not like to be opposed. I felt that I could best serve you by giving you someone to whom you could vent your frustrations without being contradicted, if I was wrong then I apologise but I had only your well being at heart."

Anne wasn't sure she believed that, she felt fairly certain that Charlotte had also been thinking of how the well being of the Collins family was served by being on the right side of the heir of Rosings. But perhaps the true fault was in herself, for refusing to believe the evidence that Charlotte was anything other than what she wanted her to be. She sighed. If she could not rely on Charlotte, who else was there? Miss Bennet could be more relied on to speak her mind, but since she tended to agree with Lady Catherine anyway that wasn't much help, especially without Charlotte to back her up. And she had no reason to expect any loyalty from Darcy. Hard as it was, perhaps she should just accept that she was going to have to change things on her own.

"Let us talk no more of it. Tell me, has Mr Collins persuaded Lady Lucas that John has started to smile, or is she still convinced that it is only wind?"

By the time Mary arrived back at Rosings all the visitors to the parsonage had left and things quickly returned to the way they had been before, at least on the surface. Mary had never been much of a judge of social dynamics but even she could sense some coolness between Miss de Bourgh and Mrs Collins, and there was something not cool but still different about the way Miss de Bourgh acted around Mary herself as well.

But right at the moment Mary was not worrying about Miss de Bourgh, she was on the hunt for a basket. It was not inherently valuable or ornate, but had been made for Elizabeth as a gift by their grandmother and she was very fond of it. When Mary and Elizabeth had crossed paths at Longbourne her sister had mentioned that she had lost the basket and asked Mary to make the search at Rosings. She had considered asking for help from one of the servants, but decided they would probably not be able to tell it apart from any other basket, and there was a certain thrill to exploring the house by herself.

Mary opened the door to one of the guest bedrooms and peered around the darkly curtained gloom. She was about to walk to the window and let in some light when she noticed a movement in the corner. She peered into the darkness and then, when she realised what she was looking at, stifled an exclamation and left the room as quickly and silently as she could manage.

That had been Jackson!
With a man!
In an embrace!
Mary did not know how to process this information. She liked Jackson, she was one of the friendlier servants and had greatly assisted in her adjustment to Rosings. She had seemed such a sensible, moral woman, how had she fallen into such a lapse? Should Mary confront her? In her experience that sort of action rarely ended well.

In a daze she continued her search and eventually found the basket put neatly away in a cupboard. She shook her head to clear her mind and steeled herself. She knew what she had to do.

"Yes?" said Miss de Bourgh, answering the knock on her door. She looked irritated at being interrupted while dressing for dinner.

"Excuse me, Miss de Bourgh, but I was wondering if I might speak to Jackson."

"To Jackson?"

"Yes, I..that is..." Mary faltered. She truly did not want to lie to Miss de Bourgh, but what was she to say? But to her surprise Miss de Bourgh's expression lightened and she gestured for Mary to come into the room.

"I take it then that you did see Jackson and her husband," she said after closing the door.

Mary turned to Jackson, who was standing to the side looking rather embarrassed. "That was your husband? But I thought you were unmarried!"

"David is at sea most of the time and we can't yet afford our own house, so I'm still working here still until we have enough saved up. We find what time together as we can grab, I'm awfully sorry we startled you like that. Lady Catherine is very strict on none of her servants being married which is why we didn't tell anyone."

"Including me" said Miss de Bourgh. "At least not until Jackson realised you'd seen them and she decided to throw herself on my mercy." Mary got the feeling that this had resulted in words, although Miss de Bourgh's expression was tinged with more affection than annoyance.

"You lied?" asked Mary.

"It was that or lose my position, and we only need wait another half year or thereabouts before we can go and live together. Besides, I like working for Miss de Bourgh, she is a good mistress and I would miss her. I am sorry for lying, though. I was planning on telling Miss de Bourgh soon that I was leaving so that she could find a new ladies maid, I suppose this just moves the plan forward a little."

Mary was having a little trouble adjusting to the new situation. Lying was in and of itself a sin, but it was not the sin she had been originally prepared to confront. She had had bible quotes prepared and everything.

"I must thank you, Miss Bennet, for coming to me and not Lady Catherine. We were so scared I'd be fired." continued Jackson.

"How do you know that I did not?"

Here Jackson looked even more embarrassed. "I got Clara, she's one of the maids, to keep an eye on you. She's David's cousin, so she already knew we were married."

"I do not approve of all this subterfuge, the path of lies leads only to destruction. I am sure that if you explain the situation to Lady Catherine she will understand."
"That seems unlikely," said Miss de Bourgh "Last year she fired one of the grooms on the spot when she found out he was engaged. Luckily I heard about it and helped to find him a new position, but she was willing to leave the poor man on the street. Would you have the same thing happen to Jackson?"

Jackson smiled at Mary hopefully. Mary considered the fact that there was no immorality in a servant being married, merely a violation of fashion. She did wonder at their lack of self control, but after some mortifying incidents involving her sisters had decided that such a lack was alarmingly common.

"Were she unmarried and unrepentant I might" she replied. "For one must not let affection blind oneself to duty. As Ye Sow, So Shall Ye Reap, and perhaps it would act as a necessary lesson."

"But given that she is not."

"I will keep my silence. But I do not like it."

The look of relief on Jackson's face was so palpable that although Mary might question the morality of her decision she could not bring herself to regret it.

As they walked to the dining room Miss de Bourgh asked "Would you really have exposed Jackson to my mother if she and her husband had not have been married?"

"It has been both my experience and the conclusion of much study that to let vice go unchecked is to invite ruin and assure destruction. It is of course preferable that a sinner should recognise that they have gone astray when corrected and repent, but if they will not then thy must be punished, lest they take it as encouragement to sin further."

"That is a very unforgiving view of the world, Miss Bennet."

"It is an unforgiving world we live in, for we women especially."

"Miss Bennet—" Miss de Bourgh paused. "I hope I do not overstep my bounds, but: are you perhaps thinking of your sister, Mrs Wickham?"

How did she know? But now that Mary thought back, her mother had complained bitterly about Charlotte passing of the news of Lydia's then deep disgrace to Miss de Bough and Lady Catherine. "Not specifically" she replied "I spoke of the general principle."

"You must not blame yourself or her for what happened. I have known Mr Wickham my whole life, and many strong minded and fully grown women have fallen for his charms. Any young girl would have little hope of resisting a concerted effort on his part to seduce her, regardless of what moral precepts she had been taught or what past behaviour she had displayed. The fault lies with him, and if anyone should have been punished beforehand to prevent future sin it should have been Wickham. Not that I would expect it to have done any good." This was such a reversal of the way she had been inclined to view the situation that Mary did not know how to reply. "Well, regardless, thanks to you Jackson will not suffer any punishment, and for that I am grateful." She smiled. "I am glad to know, too, that you are willing to oppose Lady Catherine when it is right to do so. I wish such bravery were not so rare."

It had not occurred to Mary that her choice was brave. But it was true, if Lady Catherine found out that she had aided in her deception she would probably be very angry. Mary was torn between berating herself for not thinking through the consequences of her actions and proud of herself for placing morality above self preservation. Well, there was no going back on it now.

At dinner Miss de Bourgh was uncharacteristically bouyant, praising the quality of her boiled beef
and responding cheerfully and vociferously to Lady Catherine’s pronouncements.

"It is good to see you so happy my dear" said Lady Catherine. "It has hurt me to see the low
spirits which have oppressed you of late."

"Yes, I suppose I have been rather down. But today I am happy. For the future holds infinite
possibilities if I am willing to grasp them."

"Now that is exactly what I would wish to hear. In fact I have been thinking of your future
myself." Miss de Bourgh's easy expression changed into one of wary suspicion. "It is
clear to me that your life here is too limiting. You should not be forever tied to my apron strings,
but out in the world living the full life of an adult woman. My vision for you has been far too
narrow."

"Then we are in agreement." said Miss de Bourgh cautiously.

"That is good to hear! Yes, it is well past time we found you a husband."
Chapter 18

But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

---1 Corinthians 7:34

"And how shall I obtain this husband?" asked Miss de Bourgh angrily. "Shall we take out an advertisement in the Times seeking young, well born men, in need of a fortune, and with no pressing need for an heir? Am I to be packed off to the highest bidder regardless of my feelings on the matter? Do you care at all that I do not wish to marry?"

This outburst completed Miss de Bourgh was left looking pale and drained, and she sat back in her chair heavily, short of breath.

"Do not be absurd. We have always had visitors here from time to time, I will simply make sure that more of those visitors are eligible young men. And however you may think you feel about marriage now, you can be sure those feelings will change when you meet the right man."

"How foolish of me, to think that I would know my own feelings."

"Come, let us not argue. I have invited Colonel Fitzwilliam to visit us a little earlier this year, and hopefully he can recommend us some suitable men of his acquaintance. And John himself would make a most suitable match should something develop between the two of you, he certainly could not come from better stock. In a few weeks we can ask his advice, and perhaps you will see things differently then."

"A few weeks?"

"Yes, I received a letter from him this morning. He had said he might be kept elsewhere on business but finds himself free and will be able to visit us shortly."

Never one to continue a conflict she felt wasn't going anywhere, Miss de Bourgh sighed and changed the subject and the conversation shifted to various practicalities and gossip. Shortly afterwards the Elliots arrived and the evening progressed in the usual way. But Mary had not lived with Miss de Bourgh for so long without learning to recognise the tense shoulders and dark expression that indicated that she was in a foul mood.

Mary's feelings confused her. She agreed with Lady Catherine that Miss de Bourgh should marry, at least she thought she did. Yet she found it hard to feel any enthusiasm for her plans, especially since they clearly made Miss de Bourgh so unhappy. She was reminded of Elizabeth's reaction to their mother trying to get her to marry Mr Collins. Mary had not been very sympathetic at the time, but now could see what a bad match it would have been for both of them. Miss de Bourgh deserved better than that, yet with such limited prospects how was she to find someone to make her truly happy?

Meeting Miss de Bourgh the next morning Mary prepared herself for the worst. Her previous attempts to lighten Miss de Bough's dark moods with some quotes from Paul had not been as
successful as she might have hoped, so this time she had prepared by collecting some of Miss de Bourgh's favourite books and had committed to not immediately contradicting every wrong thing Miss de Bourgh said, or at least not in too much length.

She was thus almost disappointed to discover Miss de Bourgh looking happy, sitting at her desk in the middle of a pile of papers and engrossed in writing.

"Good morning Miss Bennet."

"Good morning Miss de Bourgh." Mary put her pile of books down in what empty space she could find and waited for Miss de Bourgh to finish.

"I apologise that I am not ready for you, I find myself inspired to uncharacteristic heights of organisation this morning, a plethora of tasks that I have been happily ignoring have suddenly all called out to me that they must be completed this very instant." She tapped the end of her pen absently against her lips, looking pensive, and wrote something down on the list in front of her

"There, but I am done for now. And I see that you have brought a very uncharacteristic choice of reading materials." Miss de Bourgh smiled "Were you trying to cheer me up after my disagreement with Lady Catherine?"

"Yes."

"Thankyou for the thought. I was indeed quite unhappy with her last night, but on further reflection have decided she may actually be right. And with my mother it is important to pick one's battles carefully, perhaps by going along with this scheme of hers I may later persuade her to go along with some of mine."

This was unprecedented. Miss de Bourgh thought Lady Catherine was right?

"You wish to marry Colonel Fitzwilliam?" Miss de Bourgh had not spoken of her cousin often, but what little she had said had been ambivalent at best.

"Good heavens no. And I have no intention of marrying any man unless I am certain that he and I are well suited. But I think we would all benefit from a visit from some new people to Rosings, and young eligible men are people too. While I do not have high hopes of ever finding a man whose company I prefer over my own, it is not impossible, and I see no harm in making the attempt."

"Oh." said Mary. "That is..I am very happy to hear that."

"Because it is the duty of every woman to get married?"

"Yes..no..I.I truly want what is best for you Miss de Bourgh. Whatever that may be."

"Thankyou, I am glad to hear it." A smiled played across Miss de Bourgh's face only to be replaced by a more pensive expression. "And that reminds me of something I have been meaning to talk to you about."

"Yes?"

"I hope you know how much I appreciate the help and companionship you give me here at Rosings. You will always have a home here for as long as you want it." Mary's heart twisted itself into a ball in the pit of her stomach. She could sense a looming "but". "I was talking to your sister." ("No!" thought Mary "Don't do that!") "She expressed a concern that you would be happier living with your family, and only stay here out of a sense of obligation or fear of my mother's censure. If that is true please tell me, I would never wish to make you stay where you are
unhappy. My situation is not as dire as it was in September, I could find another companion should you wish to leave."

"I do not," said Mary. The idea of returning to her family permanently was deeply unpleasant, she'd only just managed to escape! But how could she get this across, when the very strength of her negative emotions made it so difficult for her to get her thoughts in order? Mary stared mutely at Miss de Bourgh, who, clearly sensing her distress, returned her gaze with calm concern.

"Do not be alarmed, if you wish to stay then you shall, and I am glad of it. But promise me that you will speak to me should you change your mind, I would never wish to cause you pain."

"Yes," said Mary. She took a deep breath and sat in a nearby chair. And of course now that it was no longer required, her mind felt able to properly address the question. To her surprise she found herself saying "I do miss my family." Before Miss de Bourgh could react she added "Sometimes. But not enough that I would wish to leave Rosings permanently. Definitely not." Mary considered. What did she want? "I was glad to visit Longbourne again, more glad than I had expected to be. If it is convenient, I think I would like to visit again, perhaps in a few months. My father...it was good to see my parents, and the other familiar people and places. But I would only like to visit." Mary considered how her position must appear from Miss de Bourgh's point of view "I suppose it is different for you, whose experience of travel away from home has been so unpleasant. But...I think you understand, how one might love and honour ones family but still desire..."

"Some distance?"

"Yes."

Colonel Fitzwilliam was certainly not looking forward to his visit to his family at Rosings. The house itself he was quite fond of, but he generally tried to see it's inhabitants as little as possible. Being forced to visit earlier in the year than normal meant he would not be able to walk the grounds as much as he might like, and without Darcy or anyone else to keep him company he was going to have to bear the full force of Lady Catherine's attention alone. Anne was tolerable enough company when she was in a friendly and talkative humour, but that was a rare event.

Last year's visit had been particularly unpleasant. Darcy had not long been married, and Lady Catherine had waxed lyrical on his betrayal of family and class. Colonel Fitzwilliam had envisioned year after year of awkward silences and angry rants without Darcy's company to lighten the burden and wished that Darcy had like himself been able to resist the allure of the charming but unsuitable Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Thankfully the breach between Lady Catherine and Darcy had been mended, but Fitzwilliam was regardless here alone. Then again, Miss Elizabeth Bennet had been very charming, and perhaps her sister, Anne's new companion, would be equally so. A small possibility of brightness to yet another of the constant round of family obligations that were his lot as a younger son.

Alas, when he arrived Miss Bennet turned out to be rather plain, not to mention a dull conversationalist.

Worse, the vague hints Lady Catherine had made in her letter inviting him to come became near blatant exhortations for him to marry Anne or at the very least immediately produce some other poor fellow to marry her. At her request he had carefully considered those of his male acquaintances fitting Lady Catherine's standards of wealth and breeding, but since he was too scrupulous to suggest anyone he felt would no make an at least moderately happy match with Anne had failed to think of any potential husbands.
It felt as if he had barely walked in the door before Lady Catherine engineered the Colonel and Anne to be stuck in the same room alone together, whisking Miss Bennet off on some invented task with an admonition that the two cousins "had not seen each other in too long, and surely had much to talk about."

Naturally they sat for some time in an awkward silence, punctuated only by the regular ticking of the ornate and ugly clock dominating the sitting room.

Well, there was no point sitting around waiting for Anne to make conversation. "I was sorry to hear about Mrs Jennings," he said. "But Miss Bennet seems pleasant enough."

"Yes."

He thought about commenting on the weather, such as it was. But there was no point wasting time with pleasantries, better to get the awkwardness out and dealt with. "I suppose it is worth making sure: you do agree that we most definitely should not marry, yes?"

"Indeed."

That was something at least. He tried to think of how to say "I am neither willing nor able to play matchmaker to my twenty eight year old spinster cousin." without actually saying it. "I have been considering my male acquaintance. As you know, Lady Catherine has asked me to suggest which of my friends might enjoy visiting Rosings as guests. But I am not sure that there are any amongst them with whom you would be likely to share any significant commonality."

"Do not trouble yourself on my account." she replied. Colonel Fitzwilliam frowned in irritation. That was all very well for her to say, but Lady Catherine expected him to trouble himself as much as was necessary. Luckily she seemed to realise how unhelpful her reply was, for she added "I do not expect much from this. At most I hope for some new and interesting conversation for a few days. I apologise that Lady Catherine is putting you in this position."

"Ah, well, if you will be satisfied with interesting rather than eligible I might be able to oblige you. Hmm. I know a very entertaining fellow by the name of Mr David Sharrow, his parents are forever at him to get married though he has no interest in matrimony. If he comes here and makes a show of seeking your hand it will satisfy his parents and Lady Catherine both."

"Yes, I suppose so. Thankyou."

Anne felt buoyed by the outcome of this conversation right up until the moment when she discussed it with Lady Catherine.

"I knew it was a good idea to invite John," she said in a self satisfied tone when she and Mary returned and Colonel Fitzwilliam requested her permission to invite his friend to Rosings. "I have met Mr Sharrow in town, he was quite charming. A little wild, but I am sure he would settle down with the influence of a strong feminine guidance. His estate is not far from here, so he should be able to arrive soon."

"Wild?" began Miss Bennet "I would hope that..." but was quailed into silence by Lady Catherine's glare. "Miss Bennet, it is not your place to question who I choose to invite into my house. Well, now that that has been settled I have things to do. John, I shall expect you to write to your friend directly."

When Lady Catherine had left Miss Bennet asked Colonel Fitzwilliam "But is he very wild? I do not mean to cast aspersions upon your friend, but as single women it is imperative that Miss de
Bourgh and myself guard against any malign masculine influence."

"Miss Bennet be assured that you are in no danger from my friend. I will admit, he is somewhat of a gambler and a flirt, but he would never direct his attentions where they were unwanted. Sensible moral young women such as yourself or my cousin would be in no danger from such a man."

"And I suppose by 'sensible' you mean 'plain'" thought Anne to herself. "I wish I had known this earlier." she said unhappily "I might not have been so enthusiastic about you inviting him into my house."

"I did tell you that he had no interest in marriage, what did you expect?"

"I have no particular interest in marriage" said Anne "And I am hardly wild."

"But you are a special case." He turned to Miss Bennet "Do you know, when she was a girl, Anne declared that not only had she no interest in marrying any man her parents chose, but that she would marry a woman?"

Anne blanched.

"Really?" said Miss Bennet.

"Yes, I believe she had someone in particular in mind too, a pretty young friend of the family by the name of Miss Finch. Lady Catherine would never have approved the match though, her portion was far too small." He grinned "There's a thought: we should get Darcy to settle some large sum on you, then I am sure there could be no objection to your suit. After all you are not only a woman but part of the family now, and are already accustomed to all of Anne's peccadilloes."

"But..." Miss Bennet's eyes glazed as she tried to comprehend such a strange notion. This was intolerable. Anne stifled the overwhelming desire to curl into a ball and wait to die of embarrassment.

"Do not be vulgar." she said stiffly. "Come, Miss Bennet, let us go. We have trespassed too long on Colonel Fitzwilliam's time, I am sure he has more productive things to do than talk to us."

Anne was furious. How dare he bring up such an embarrassing story! And in front of Miss Bennet! Anne had spent some time trying her hardest to forget Amelia Finch.

Amelia's father had been a local landowner, and the two girls had been friends since childhood. As they reached adolescence their relationship had progressed to the writing of terrible poems and heartfelt declarations of eternal friendship. When Mr Finch took a position in Bath there had been many tears and the mutual determination not to let their love be broken by distance or the cruelty of parents, but events had culminated in anticlimax when Amelia turned out to be a very poor correspondent, and Anne had not spoken or written to her in years.

The real tragedy of it all was that this had been, and was likely to remain, the most significant romantic relationship of Anne's life. At least she had been able to express her affection and engage in not entirely innocent embraces. All that she had gained in adulthood was an understanding of the significance of her marked preference for women, and the impossibility of pursuing it.

"Miss de Bourgh? May I talk to you about something?" Anne snapped out of her reverie.

"Of course, Miss Bennet."

"Well, when I visited my family, I asked my father if he could recommend me any good books
about drains..."

As she prepared for bed Anne was was reminded again of John's comment. It was true, ignoring the issue of gender, Miss Bennet was about as good a choice for husband as anyone else she could think of. It had taken a while for them to get used to each other, but they had now had settled into a comfortable sort of domesticity and with Colonel Fitzwilliam in the house they were even sharing a bed. Of course Anne didn't find her particularly attractive, but that was likely to be true of any man as well.

Not that Miss Bennet was entirely plain. Her skin was very tan, but one could see that as a pleasant glow. Her hair was thick and coarse and would never curl into fashionable ringlets, but hanging down free as it did now it made a flowing black curtain around her face. And her figure might not be ideal, but it was certainly not shapeless.

"Miss de Bourgh?"

"Yes?"

"Did you want something? You were staring at me."

Anne blushed and looked up at Mary's face. "I was engaged in thought. I apologise."

Miss Bennet smiled, her dark eyes glinting in the light of the fire. "One need not apologise for thinking, Miss de Bourgh."

Anne nodded mutely, then crawled as far as possible to the far side of the bed. 

Mary had not been sure what to expect of Colonel Fitzwilliam. Elizabeth and Georgiana had spoke of him quite highly, and it was not as if Miss de Bourgh had said anything very negative, but there had been something very uncomplimentary in the way she had avoided expressing any opinion when Lady Catherine had been waxing lyrical on his virtues. Having met him, Mary found the Colonel amiable enough in small doses, but could definitely see why Miss de Bourgh had no wish to spend the rest of her life with him.

As Miss de Bourgh's companion Mary was more often a spectator to Colonel Fitzwilliam's conversation than a participant in it. They did not find themselves talking alone until a few days after his arrival at Rosings, when he happened upon Mary in a copse of trees near the house.

"Hello Miss Bennet." he said cheerfully "I am glad to see that I am not the only one fool enough to go for a walk in this weather! The mud is doing terrible things to my boots but it is worth it for the marvelous view, would you not agree?"

Mary followed his gaze to look out at the rolling hills and frost covered trees. "Yes, I suppose it is quite pretty." she said "But I am here to search these hawthorn bushes for weevils."

He laughed "Well, that is a worthy use for these fine grounds too, I suppose. I wish that Anne could be persuaded to come out and see the beauty that lies just beyond her bedchamber. It does her no good to lie about all day, and I wish that Lady Catherine would not encourage her in it. Mrs Jennings, God rest her soul, was a good woman, but she coddled my cousin far too much. I am glad to see that you leave her much more to her own devices."

Mary, who saw outside exercise as a necessary evil rather than a goal worth pursuing for it's own sake could not agree with this. Overall she did not like his implication. "I am not with Miss de Bourgh at present at her own request, she said I would distract her from resting were I to remain..."
with her this morning. And her lying abed is necessary, she becomes very ill when she does not rest adequately. Lady Catherine is only concerned for Miss de Bourgh's well being, as am I."

"I mean no offense." he replied "But if she is so ill why does she not see a doctor? When I visited Rosings as a boy there were often physicians attending to Lord de Bourgh and Miss de Bourgh, yet after my uncle died I can hardly recall seeing any. Ah, but I should not drag you into these family disputes, it is not as if you could have much hope of influencing Lady Catherine even if you wanted to. I am glad to see that you are concerned for my cousin's welfare, at least. I shall leave you to your weevils, good day."

To Mary's great pleasure she did manage to find some weevils, of a kind she had not seen before, and when Miss de Bourgh came to visit her room Mary had set her killing jar beside her on the table and was carefully writing up her notes.

"I see the hawthorn bore fruit, Miss Bennet." she said by way of greeting.

"Metaphorically." replied Mary, "But at this time of year these beetles are all the tree has to offer. Are you feeling better now, Miss de Bourgh?"

"Much, thankyou."

"I did point out that the pudding was very rich."

"Thankyou Miss Bennet, I know you did. But sometimes the pleasures of fine food are worth the punishment I must suffer later." She winced "Although that argument seemed more persuasive last night than it does now."

"Miss de Bourgh..." Mary had a deep sense of foreboding that this was one of those topics where her meagre skills at tact would be insufficient. All previous attempts to offer Miss de Bourgh advice on her health had received a very firm response on the limitations of the educated amateur. "Have you ever seen a physician about your condition?"

"Countless." she said darkly.

"And they could not suggest a diagnosis or treatment?"

"Oh, they suggested many. My father and I must have been diagnosed with every ailment imaginable, from gout to consumption to excessive virginity. I have been cupped, bled, dosed, starved, sent on long walks and confined to my bed. Between us we must have tried every elixir and tonic for sale by every quack within several counties, all of which had no effect beyond occasionally making things worse. After my father died Lady Catherine and I agreed that it was a pointless waste of time and we stopped trying. A decision I have yet to regret."

"Oh." said Mary, disappointed.

"It could be worse. I am still able to do a great many things, and can afford to pay others to perform those tasks I cannot. Do not pity me Miss Bennet."

"I do not." replied Mary. "I merely wish there was something I could do to help."

"But you do help, Miss Bennet, as much as anyone can. You read to me, and you give me someone to talk to. Just last night you reminded me about the pudding."

"That's not what I meant." she said but did not press the issue. She held the jar to the light and watched the weevils weakly waving their little legs as the poison took hold. Miss de Bourgh quietly flipped through one of the books on Mary's desk, then asked to see the jar herself. She held
it carefully with both hands and considered the contents.

"I cannot help but feel a little sorry for the creatures. It cannot be a pleasant death." She put the jar back down gently on the table and closed her book. "Do you know what sort of beetle you have found? Is it the one you were looking for?"

"I am not sure. I think it may be the Anthonomus but at this stage I can't be sure."

Mary finished writing up her notes and put them to the side.

"I wonder how long it will be until Mr Sharrow arrives." she said.

"I am not sure. But I am increasingly unenthusiastic at the prospect."

"As am I, he does not sound suitable at all. It is a pity that your health does not allow you to come out or travel, if this is the sort of man we are to expect to be introduced to by Colonel Fitzwilliam."

"Do you think that I am wrong to let myself be so restricted? That I should be willing to undergo the extra strain of travel and society?"

Mary paused, and then was surprised at herself for pausing. It was not in her nature to second guess herself on a question of this nature, in fact she prided herself on her ability to give her opinion quickly and honestly, regardless of censure. She had learned to sometimes keep her opinion to herself where it was not welcome, but Miss de Bourgh had asked. She took a breath.

"I...I will not lie to you, Miss de Bourgh, but I am not sure that you wish to hear my answer."

"I stand forewarned. Proceed."

"I have observed you, as you know, for many months. Although I am not a physician, I cannot deny that you are very ill, and appear to require a life of retirement and limited exertion. But having seen what social duties and travel you are able to perform at Rosings, I cannot help but feel...that you could travel outside Rosings as well. Perhaps even as far as London. You would find it fatiguing, but not unduly so, as long as you had somewhere to rest afterwards. At least, that is what I believe."

Miss de Bourgh responded with a sigh. "That is what I believe as well." she said.

"Oh!" said Mary. This was unexpected. She considered. "Perhaps you could write to Mr Darcy and ask to stay with him in London. My sister said that I was welcome to visit whenever I wished, and I am sure that the same offer extends to you as Mr Darcy's cousin."

"It does." said Miss de Bourgh. "But that is not...I would have to persuade Lady Catherine that it was wise."

"That should not be so hard." said Mary "After all, we both agree it would be in your best interests. And she is the one who has been so determined that you should meet new people. Perhaps you should ask her at breakfast, then it can be organised in time for the start of the season."

Miss de Bourgh blanched. "No, not at breakfast. Leave it to me, please, Miss Bennet."

"As you wish."
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I question much, whether the morning air is so wholesome as many imagine. The sun must necessarily extract from the earth, when it first appears, a variety of vapours, which strong constitutions may withstand, but which must be injurious to weak ones.

--Sir John Sinclair, The code of health and longevity: or, A concise view, of the principles calculated for the preservation of health

Her errands for the morning done, Mary arrived at the breakfast table full of optimism and cheer. If all went well she might be travelling with Miss de Bourgh to London, which would be of great benefit to them both, and for the first time since arriving at Rosings she felt she'd actually done as her mother had asked and participated in one of the local assemblies properly. She'd been asked to dance three times last night! By three different gentlemen! And it was all thanks to Colonel Fitzwilliam: he'd made a small stir amongst the local attendees by dint of being Lady Catherine's nephew and a single man of good breeding, and so after he asked Mary's hand for the first dance she had gained a certain amount of desirability by association. The two other men she'd danced with were both a little old but not terrible company, and when she wasn't dancing she'd found herself invited far more into conversation with other young single people than had been her previous experience. The Colonel had even gone out of his way to include her in his conversations with others, though without much evidence of enthusiasm. Mary had been quite impressed by his consideration.

Not that any of this had made the assembly all that much more enjoyable: despite Lydia's frequent claims that it was all sour grapes at never being asked, Mary really didn't enjoy dancing all that much. And she had little in common with the people she'd spoken to, although some of them had been pleasant enough. But if she were concerned only with her own happiness, Mary might not attend assemblies at all; her goal was to participate in all the rituals expected of a young woman seeking a husband. And, at least relative to her usual lack of success, last night that goal had been achieved.

She sat down and greeted Miss de Bourgh and Colonel Fitzwilliam, who both returned her salutation cheerfully.

"Good morning, Lady Catherine!" said Mary. For once Mary would be able to answer her questions about whether she had been putting herself forward with good conscience. Mary smiled up at Lady Catherine happily, but her expectations of a friendly conversation were cut short by the expression of sour disapproval on that lady's face.

"Good Morning, Miss Bennet," said Lady Catherine, her voice dripping with disdain. "I was in the village this morning and had a very enlightening conversation with Mrs Elliot."

Mrs Elliot? Mary tried to think of anything she might have done that Mrs Elliot would disapprove of.

"She tells me," continued Lady Catherine, "that you quite monopolised Colonel Fitzwilliam at the assembly last night. I realise that you have difficulty attracting the attentions of dance partners on your own merits, but you should not presume upon my nephew’s generosity. He has quite enough of you at Rosings; when you are out together in public you should not foist your company upon him. Do not forget your position in this house. And you, John," she said, turning to her nephew,
"are not to let your admirable pity for Miss Bennet's friendlessness put you at the mercy of gossip and innuendo, or to let it interfere with your ability to make connections with those more worthy of your company."

Colonel Fitzwilliam gaped. "There is innuendo involving me and Miss Bennet?" He looked at Mary with alarm, as if she had suddenly sprouted an extra head when he wasn't looking. "I can assure you that any such rumours are unfounded, my behaviour towards Miss Bennet, and hers towards myself, has been entirely proper. We only danced one dance! You might as well accuse me of having designs on... on Jackson."

"I did not accuse you of having designs on Miss Bennet," said Lady Catherine. "Obviously such an idea is absurd. I merely stated that you had opened yourself up to the accusation. Mrs Elliot said that you quite abandoned her daughter after dancing with her in order to talk to Miss Bennet; Miss Elliot's feelings were apparently quite hurt. The Elliots are a quite venerable family, I see no reason for you to sabotage such a potentially valuable connection."

"If I avoided Miss Elliot," said Captain Fitzwilliam, "it was not on Miss Bennet's account. I simply wished to avoid her constant prattling. Miss Bennet at least knows how to be silent."

Lady Catherine drew breath to retaliate, but before she could begin was interrupted by Miss de Bourgh, who coughed significantly. She had been watching the argument with a frown, the spoon she'd been using to eat her eggs laying unused on her plate. During Colonel Fitzwilliam's visit she had been inclined to stay fairly quiet at meals, since Lady Catherine and the Colonel left little conversational space for anyone else. But she was speaking now.

"Miss Bennet is family," she said. "There should be no scandal in Colonel Fitzwilliam dancing or talking to his cousin's sister-in-law, especially since she is a lady and of good character." Miss de Bourgh paused and closed her eyes for a moment before turning to Mary. "Miss Bennet, I apologise for my mother's rudeness."

Mary was taken aback. Miss de Bourgh had apologised for Lady Catherine's rudeness on many occasions, but never in front of Lady Catherine. Had she really been so very rude? After the unexpected criticism, Mary had been obsessively thinking back over her behaviour of the night before, trying to decide what she could have done differently. It was true that she could not think of anything, but Lady Catherine had a much better understanding of society's rules than Mary did.

"Lady Catherine is only trying to help me moderate my behaviour," she said. "As a representative of Rosings, it is my duty to behave properly at all times, and I am as always grateful for any advice on that score." Despite her words, Mary felt a wave of gratitude to Miss de Bourgh. Even if Mary disagreed that she needed defending, it made her happy to know that Miss de Bourgh had been willing to do so.

"Indeed," said Lady Catherine. "I am quite shocked at you, Anne. Perhaps it is not only Miss Bennet who has forgotten the bounds of propriety."

Miss de Bourgh wiped her slightly shaking hands on her napkin and gestured to a servant, who came to her side.

"Please take my and Miss Bennet's breakfasts to my chambers," she said. "I find the atmosphere in this room oppressive. Come, Miss Bennet." And she stood up and walked away. With no other option, Mary followed her.

"I apologise for my abruptness," said Anne when they arrived at her chambers, "but I am in no mood to talk." Her heart was racing and she felt angry and unsteady. She tried picking at her
breakfast but she’d lost her appetite. "This is unbearable," she said, and pushed away her plate. "And it will only get worse. To accuse you of improper behaviour, and with my cousin no less! Heaven knows what insinuations she will make when this rake friend of his arrives and starts making love to all and sundry. And of course she will blame you when he somehow manages to resist my bounteous charms. I am truly sorry, Miss Bennet; you do not deserve such ill treatment."

"But perhaps I was behaving improperly," said Miss Bennet. "You did not see."

"I have seen you, Miss Bennet, on numerous enough occasions to have a fair grasp of your character. You could not behave improperly if you tried. No, it is jealousy, pure and simple. And on my behalf, though for myself I cannot begrudge you your youth and vitality. I would have you flirt outrageously with a hundred young men, all much more rich and handsome than my cousin, were it to make you happy."

"I do not flirt," said Miss Bennet hotly.

"Exactly," said Anne triumphantly. "And so I know you did not flirt with Colonel Fitzwilliam."

Mary had no response to that. Anne sighed. "But as we have seen, your innocence does not protect you from the accusation. Ah, and I am so fatigued from opposing my mother on this one little thing. I do not know that I will ever have the strength to be really free of her, to escape the prison that is this house. The magnitude of the task overwhelms me." Anne slumped slightly in her chair, her spirits oppressed beyond bearing by the thought of the years stretched ahead of her with no respite from Lady Catherine's repressive control. Anne reached across the little table and placed her hand upon Miss Bennet's. "And now you are dragged into it as well. Unless you choose to escape back to your family, and I would not blame you if you did."

"Well," said Miss Bennet. "I have already written a letter to send to my sister to ask if we could stay with her, but I would only go if you were to come as well. I am sure that she will say yes, though I think it would be more proper if the request came from you."

Anne's grip on Miss Bennet's hand tightened. "You have written to Mrs Darcy?" Anne was suddenly possessed by a mortifying horror beyond expression.

"No," said Miss Bennet, "I have written a letter to send to her. I do not intend to send it without your permission."

To her surprise, Anne found herself feeling disappointed. Of course: now she would have to take responsibility for the choice.

"I have also compiled a list of tasks that I feel we must complete before embarking on the journey, such as organising for your duties at Rosings to be covered for and deciding which of your possessions must be transported and how best to transport them. With your permission I would like to speak to Jackson on this matter, I am sure that she could offer some most efficacious advice. From what Colonel Fitzwilliam said of his friend's habits, I do not think it is too late to write and ask him to visit another time, though we would have to wait for his reply before leaving."

"Oh," said Anne. Broken into smaller tasks the prospect of moving to London seemed almost attainable. For once she felt like it might really be possible to change her life and not just passively react to what was going on around her. "I...thank you, Miss Bennet."

Miss Bennet turned over her hand and squeezed Anne's gently. "A problem shared is a problem halved," she said, smiling, and Anne felt herself smiling in return.
Mary lay awake, deciding if she wanted to get up.

It was Mary's preference to keep regular hours, waking each morning with the sun and getting as many of the day's tasks done as possible before breakfast. But she did not like to wake Miss de Bourgh, and so during the Colonel's stay Mary had been inclined to wake a little later than was her usual habit.

It was very dark in Miss de Bourgh's chambers. She often rested during the day, and so had very thick curtains that blocked the light of the sun almost completely. The only illumination was the guttering remains of the fire, casting a weak orange glow that reflected dimly off the furniture and left the bed in virtual darkness. Miss de Bourgh was a dark and indistinct form to Mary's left, curled in on herself on the far side of the bed. Mary had never liked sharing a bed with her sisters (nor they with her) and Miss de Bourgh felt that it was an insult to both Mary's virtue and Colonel Fitzwilliam's honour that Lady Catherine insisted on Mary and Miss de Bourgh sharing a bed during his stay. Yet Mary liked sharing a bed with Miss de Bourgh, and part of her wanted nothing more than to curl up beside her and go back to sleep.

But she did not want to lie in bed all day. Given how late the two of them had stayed up the previous night discussing the logistics of travel with Jackson, it could be some time before Miss de Bourgh awoke. Mary carefully sat up and pulled back the blankets, trying not to disturb her companion. But it was to no avail.

"Hmm?" said Miss de Bourgh blearily, and she rolled over towards Mary.

"Go back to sleep, Miss de Bourgh," said Mary.

Miss de Bourgh frowned up at Mary, and snaked up an icy hand to rest on Mary's hip. "It is cold," she said, "and you are very warm." She then lay her head back down by Mary's side and showed every sign of going back to sleep.

This left Mary trapped sitting up in the cold with no covering beyond her nightgown. She looked at Miss de Bourgh, trying to decide if there was any way to move without disturbing her. Her hair glinted a dull copper-red in the light of the fire, and seeing that some had fallen into her face, Mary gently pushed it back with her fingers. Miss de Bourgh's face was colder than Mary liked. Deciding that there was no help for it, Mary shuffled back down under the blankets and went back to sleep.

Mary woke again a while later to an awareness of Miss de Bourgh stirring beside her. She had wrapped one arm across Mary's stomach and nestled her head against Mary's chest. Miss de Bourgh opened her eyes and smiled at Mary sleepily before seeming to become aware of her position, at which point she went a little pink and sat up quickly.

"Come, Miss Bennet!" she said, getting out of bed with uncharacteristic vigour. "The day beckons!"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to end so suddenly, there is definitely more of Mary and Anne's story to come. I was finding it more and more difficult to make the everything fit together as a coherent whole, and I think the next part (which I've already started, though I make no guarantees as to when it will be finished :) will work much better as a semi-separate work.
Anyway, I hope you've enjoyed reading! This was the very first fanfiction story I ever wrote, as a "short test" of the AO3 beta in late 2008 that spun quickly out of control. I'd only just been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome and had to quit my job, and a lot of my feelings about the situation went into Anne. Two and a bit years later my perspectives on both chronic illness and writing have changed a fair amount, but this story and these characters are still really important to me, and I look forward to seeing where they take me in the future.
There is a new version of this fic! And it HAS AN ACTUAL ENDING.

Sorry to anyone who finds this not-chapter obnoxious, but given how many sad "is that really the end ;_;" comments I got I thought any subscribers might like to know. Thanks for reading, and I'm glad I got to reward your optimism :)