London (OLD)

by sqbr

Summary

This is part of an old, unfinished story. Here's the new, finished version!

Lydia had been enjoying this rare chance to stay in the Darcy's London house, but that was before she'd found herself stuck here at night with Elizabeth out, Miss de Bourgh sick in the best guest bedroom, and no one to talk to but Mary.

Notes

Thanks again to Hele for her wonderful beta-ing and support. And I managed not to overwrite her changes this time, huzzah!

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

The first thing Lydia had noticed about London was the stench. The closely crowded houses put out a constant stream of refuse, the ground was littered with dirt from all the people and animals and industry, and the air was thick with smoke.

To a sixteen year old girl eloping with the man of her dreams it had smelt like freedom. To a married woman approaching eighteen it smelled rather more like what it was.

At least in Newcastle the air was crisp and had the exotic tang of the sea. Here, even in Elizabeth's fine house, the air sat dense and smoky and tickled at the back of Lydia's throat.

Lydia sighed and made a vague attempt to pay attention to whatever dull topic Mary was droning about. Elizabeth she was willing to put up with, it was her house after all. But Mary was supposed to be in Kent, safely out of the way as Miss de Bourgh's companion. Lydia had been told repeatedly that Miss de Bourgh did not travel, and yet here they both were, taking advantage of Elizabeth’s hospitality on remarkably short notice. It was very inconvenient of them.

Lydia had been enjoying this rare chance to stay in the Darcy's London house, but that was before she'd found herself stuck here at night with Elizabeth out, Miss de Bourgh sick in the best guest bedroom, and no one to talk to but Mary.

Was she still wittering on about Miss de Boring? Lord. One of the things Lydia had always looked forward to about getting married was seeing the three eldest of her sisters as little as possible, and even if she had learned to appreciate the joys of staying in Jane’s and Elizabeth's nice big houses she was damned if she was going to spend any more of this trip shackled to Mary.

"So I suppose she will be going back then?" said Lydia. She added silently and you with her, I hope. "Seeing as London makes her ill and her mother is so angry. I know Wickham finds Lady Catherine terrifying and he is barely ever scared of anything."

Mary frowned. "That is not what I was saying at all. Miss de Bourgh has every hope, as do I, that her current poor health is merely a side effect of the stress of travel, and that in time it will pass. To move her again now, while she is still recovering, would be most unwise." She spoke softly, to avoid waking the sleeping Miss de Bourgh.

Speaking softly did not come naturally to Lydia, and she longed for morning.

Morning brought its own disappointments. The day was not turning out as Lydia had hoped: it was only eleven o'clock, and she was already out of money. Worse, the usually friendly shopkeeper at her favourite London haberdashery was showing a remarkable lack of loyalty. Why did everyone always have to make things so difficult?

Lydia pulled herself up to her full height and tried to give off the air of someone who at any moment might start shouting. It was amazing what shopkeepers would let you get away with to avoid a scene. But this one was irritatingly stout hearted. It was not as if Lydia even owed her that much money!

"I am sorry, ma'am," said the shopkeeper, "but I simply cannot extend you any more credit. Your husband was in here not a month ago and bought up near my entire stock of pink ribbons, and I have not seen him nor a penny of the money I am owed since."
"My husband bought all your pink ribbons," replied Lydia incredulously. "Did he decide his uniform was not pretty enough?"

"I err…" The woman looked a little embarrassed. "I believe they may have been for the woman he was with." Lydia deflated. That sounded like George. The shopkeeper tried to look sympathetic, but Lydia got the feeling she just wanted her gone. "Now, ma'am, if you can just pay for his bill, plus the money you owe me for last time, then we can do business. But not before."

"On second thought, I do not want this lace anyway," said Lydia. "It is too…fussy. Everyone knows the fashion this year is for braid." She loosened her death grip on the lace and dropped it onto the counter as if it was so much tangled cotton. She turned away, trying to hide her blush, and walked confidently to the door. She thought about making some final retort, but even in a city the size of London she could only stand to alienate so many shopkeepers.

Outside the shop a stiff breeze was blowing, and Lydia had to struggle to hold on to all her packages. Perhaps in retrospect she might not have needed quite so much fabric, but the new season was starting soon and she didn't want to be shown up by Elizabeth or, worse, Mary. Not everyone had rich bored heiresses buying all their dresses for them. Anyway, the colours had been so pretty, lace or no, that Lydia was sure she could make something spectacular.

As she arrived back at the house and entered the drawing room, Lydia noticed that the blinds were closed, blanketing the already dimly lit interior in darkness. Peering through the gloom, she noticed three figures by the window. Further investigation revealed them to be Mary, Elizabeth, and Miss de Bourgh.

"Good morning, Lydia," said Elizabeth, a sardonic look in her eye as she took in Lydia's many packages. "I see that you have been shopping." Lydia was suddenly very glad that Miss de Bourgh was awake: if she had not been present, Elizabeth would probably have said something cutting about the state of Lydia's finances and the fact that Elizabeth had been willing to advance her extra money on the condition that she spend it only on essentials. As it was Elizabeth just quirked her lips irritably.

"Good morning, Lizzy. I see Miss de Bourgh is awake," said Lydia. "Feeling better, are we? It must be awful being so sick all the time. I do not think I could stand it."

Miss de Bourgh looked up at Lydia. "Indeed," she said. Her eyes lingered on the cloth in Lydia's arms and for a moment she looked as if she might speak further, but she did not. She was a tiny little thing, pretty enough for a woman so close to thirty but pale and sickly, and looking very small and washed out next to Elizabeth and Mary. Her inoffensive features were marred by a sour expression, and there was something off putting about her stiff, tense posture. Beautiful dress though. Lydia remembered George's comments about how arrogant and haughty Miss de Bourgh was. Not that Lydia entirely trusted his judgement, but it certainly did not look like Miss de Bourgh was going to be much more fun awake than she had been asleep.

"Well, it is too dark in here for sewing, I am off to find somewhere with decent light," she said. Elizabeth continued to look irritated. Ugh. She probably expected Lydia to be polite to their guests. Elizabeth was so insufferable now she had money. Lydia bowed, made an attempt at a smile and said, "It is good to see you awake, Miss de Bourgh. Good bye, Elizabeth, Mary, Miss de Bourgh," before making her escape.

Lydia had a complicated relationship with muslin. She loved the way a muslin dress flowed around her ankles like water, and always started muslin gowns imagining herself swanning around
a ballroom as an elegant vision in white. But generally somewhere around the second or third time she ripped the fabric while unpicking a seam she would start cursing it as an impractical invention of sadistic dressmakers and wishing she had chosen something more sturdy.

She looked at the tear. Perhaps she could cover it with some of her leftover braid? This would all be much easier if she had better materials to work with.

"Would not lace suit the style better?"

"It might if I had any sodding lace," said Lydia. She heard a gasp, and looking up sharply, she saw Miss de Bourgh's surprised face, a faint blush putting some colour into her pallid cheeks. If that sort of language shocked her, she clearly did not get out much. Miss de Bourgh and Mary were standing quite close to the little table Lydia was working at, they must have come in while she was distracted.

"Sorry," said Lydia. "I did not know you were there." Really, it was one thing to share her sister's house with this woman, but was it too much to ask to have a little privacy?

"I apologise," said Miss de Bourgh.

"Miss de Bourgh was curious to see what you were making," said Mary. "She has a strong interest in fashion."

"But you despise anyone who cares about fashion," said Lydia.

Mary coughed and blushed. "That is not...it is only excessive vanity that I consider to be...uh..." She trailed off and looked miserable. Ha! That would teach her to interrupt Lydia when she was sewing. Miss de Bourgh only narrowed her lips.

"I like your dress, Miss de Bourgh," said Lydia. "I wish I could afford to use fabric so fine."

"Thank you," said Miss de Bourgh. And then, after some more awkward conversation, they both finally left her in peace.

Lydia managed to avoid both Mary and Miss de Bourgh for the rest of the day, but as the afternoon wore on into evening she found herself stuck with nothing better to do than be "entertained" by one of Mary's deathly dull concertos.

Miss de Bourgh sat beside her, seemingly rapt by Mary's plodding, soulless performance. Lucky for her. Being cursed with good taste, Lydia could gain no such enjoyment, and she amused herself by imagining the piano wincing every time Mary's fingers hit the keys, the poor tortured device longing sadly for Georgiana. Now there was someone who was willing to play an enjoyable jig, even if Darcy made faces every time Lydia asked her to.

Lydia smiled. As the song finally reached its painful, drawn out conclusion, she noticed that Miss de Bourgh was smiling at her awkwardly, as if the expression was new to her and she was not quite sure how it went. "Your sister is very talented," she said.

"She certainly practices enough," said Lydia. "I never had the patience myself, I much prefer dancing."

Lydia remembered that Miss de Bourgh was too sickly to dance, and hoped she had not offended her. Being polite was hard! But if there was one useful thing she had learned from her husband, it was to appreciate and cultivate the friendship of those richer than herself. "Do you play?"

"No," said Miss de Bourgh.
"Neither do I. Lucky for us we have people like Mary to play for us, I suppose!" said Lydia.

Miss de Bourgh inclined her head in agreement.

They were interrupted by a cough from Mary, who had walked over to where they were sitting. Of course, Heaven forbid she not be the centre of attention for five minutes.

"Did you like the piece?" asked Mary.

"Oh yes," said Miss de Bourgh. "Your sister and I were just discussing how talented you are, and how much we appreciate having you to play for us."

Lydia could not help but look at Mary's boggled expression and laugh.

Lydia took a sip of her tea and sighed dramatically.

"You have no idea how I suffer," she said. "Alone in this nasty dirty city with no husband to take care of me, and forced to rely on charity of a sister who makes it clear that she would rather I were gone. I am truly to be pitied."

Mrs Carter patted Lydia's hand but did not look as sympathetic as Lydia might have liked. Yes, it was true, Mrs Carter had actually lost her husband, and from the looks of her parlour was having trouble making ends meet with what was left of his pension, but there were definite advantages to her position. Having no family meant no one to meddle in her affairs and look at her disapprovingly every time she broke some arbitrary social convention, plus she could flirt with men without worrying so much about the spectre of disgrace that Mary kept harping on about. And she did not have to follow any husband to cold, faraway places like Newcastle. Mrs Carter was lucky that Lydia was a true friend and did not hold these advantages against her.

"How is dear Wickham?" asked Mrs Carter. "I have not seen him since he moved to the north. Peter always said the regiment was much less entertaining once he left. Of course we missed you, too, my dear; I am so glad you had a chance to visit after all this time."

"Oh, you know George," said Lydia. "He is always in good spirits. I have not heard from him since I came to London, but I am sure that he is well. I am happy to see that you are well, too; I have so few friends in London and it is good to see a familiar face." Lydia’s thoughts started drifting towards the circumstances that had led to the alienation of the many "friends" George had introduced Lydia to the last time she had come through London. This was not a cheery line of thought, and she decided to change the subject. She leaned towards Mrs Carter conspiratorially.

"So, what is this that I hear about some sort of intrigue between Chamberlayne and Miss Pratt?"

When she was a girl, Lydia had always gotten excited at the arrival of the post. It was true, most letters were boring correspondence between her father and some of his dull business contacts, or interminable descriptions of how one of her countless cousins had started school or lost a tooth, but she was regardless invested in the potential contained in each letter, the possibility of exciting news or an unexpected gift or an invitation to something fun.

Letters still had that potential now, but they were rather more likely to contain bills or threatening notes from debt collectors, and letters from George generally meant either further requests for money or the possible news that he had been re-assigned and was in danger of being run through by the French. Lydia still got the occasional gift or note from various admirers, but they always made Elizabeth look disapproving. These days Lydia found it difficult to muster any enthusiasm
for the post at all.

By contrast, despite having her own share of bills and boring business correspondence to deal with, Elizabeth's enthusiasm at the arrival of a letter seemed unabated. From the look on her face, the one that had just arrived had come from Darcy. Elizabeth had put aside her needlework and sat silently reading the letter to herself by the window, her affectionate smile breaking every now and then into a quiet chuckle.

"Well, what news?" asked Lydia. "Are we to see Georgiana and Kitty this season, or are they going to stay cooped up in stuffy old Pemberley like old maids?"

Elizabeth looked up, still smiling. "You may be happy to know that they have both been saved from the terror of the white cap; Darcy says they are all to come to London in a few weeks. They will be staying with Jane and Bingley, and they have said that you are welcome to join them should you wish."

"Would I indeed!" said Lydia with enthusiasm. "How jolly we shall be! I have missed Kitty ever so; it is awfully selfish of you, Lizzy, to keep her to yourself so much."

"You can hardly blame Kitty or I for neglecting you when you have spent these last few months in Newcastle. But I have not seen as much of Jane as I might like, myself; I suppose it is ever such between sisters once they are married." She looked wistful. "Still, we are not entirely separated. You may find it a little more chaotic than you are used to, Miss de Bourgh, I am afraid, to be surrounded by all four of my sisters and I at once. You have been lucky enough to stay with the most sedate of us."

Miss de Bourgh did not reply, but Mary looked smug.

"I think it will be fun. Shall you host many parties, Lizzy?" asked Lydia. "I will be very disappointed if you do not. We should try and find husbands for Kitty and Georgiana. And Mary, I suppose. And Miss de Bourgh."

"Miss de Bourgh does not like parties," said Mary.

"Miss de Bourgh need not attend if she does not wish it," said Lydia. "Nor should you. But I am sure that everyone else would be happy to attend a party. Or a ball! I have not been to a ball in an age."

"I am sure that we will all receive invitations to more parties and balls than we could ever attend even if it was all we did all season," said Elizabeth. "Truly, it is astonishing how many bosom friends I have made in London; I have had two different women write to me this week talking of how much they have missed my company, though I can only recall speaking to them but once or twice in my life. And one of these close friends made a point of saying that my sisters and their friends were welcome in her house."

"Then you must write them back! Or perhaps not, if they are not pleasant people. But how much fun we shall have! A London season with Kitty! I wish I had had a London season before I was married, I am sure I would have been the favourite of all the gentlemen. Perhaps I could have married a Lord or a baronet, instead of a soldier. I am so sick of soldiers. Kitty might not do quite so well, for she is not as pretty as I am, but with my help I am sure that we can introduce her to someone decent."

"How very generous of you," said Elizabeth. "Do you plan to stay the whole season then? You are welcome to, of course, but I recall you saying that you did not like London and missed your friends from Newcastle."
"Oh, they are nice enough," said Lydia. "But the balls there are very dull. I am sure that I shall like London a great deal when there are balls and parties every night."

"A truly balanced mind," said Mary, "does not need the company of others to find satisfaction."

"I imagine it is hard to find satisfaction in company when no one likes you," said Lydia.

"I would rather be unpopular than immoral," said Mary.

"As if you have any choice."

"Stop it, both of you," said Elizabeth, sharply.

Mary bristled. "You have said yourself, sister," she said, "that Lydia behaves in an inappropriate manner. She is a danger to herself and the family name, and a bad influence on Kitty and Georgiana. It is up to us to set her right, for while Lydia may be determined to lead a life of sin, it is not too late for the others."

How insufferable Mary was.

"That is vastly overstating the case, Mary," said Elizabeth. "And even if it were true that would be no excuse for rudeness, especially not in front of a guest. I apologise, Miss de Bourgh; as you see, it is not always calm in a house with many sisters."

"I am sure that Miss de Bourgh agrees..." started Mary hotly, trailing off once she noticed the irritated look on Miss de Bourgh's face. She did not appear to agree; in fact she seemed quite annoyed at Mary. Lydia's opinion of Miss de Bourgh went up, and she felt slightly better about the fact that Elizabeth had apparently been saying bad things about her behind her back.

People being annoyed at Mary was such a common occurrence that Lydia would have expected her to be used to it, but she seemed quite perturbed by Miss de Bourgh's frown, certainly far more than she had been by Elizabeth's explicit put down.

"Let us not quarrel," said Elizabeth. "I see you have a letter yourself, Lydia. Does it contain any exciting news?"

Drat. Lydia had been hoping that no one had noticed. "It is from Wickham," she said. "Probably full of endearments about how much he misses me, or daring tales from the trenches. But nothing that could be of interest to you."

"What is his opinion on the war?" asked Elizabeth. "I cannot claim to have any deep knowledge of the situation, but I was under the impression that Napoleon had suffered several defeats recently, and that there was some hope that we could drive him back to France before summer."

"Lord, I don't know," said Lydia. She was fairly sure that George's only interests in the war were whether or not he'd have to fight in it, and whether or not he was getting paid. Since his regiment was not currently stationed overseas, as far as Lydia could tell the only time George ever mentioned Napoleon was to add some flavour to the war hero persona he used on impatient landlords and attractive women. "He cannot tell me any details, you know," she said. "His letters might be intercepted by French spies, and then where would we be. Anyway, I have not read it yet." Feeling a little self conscious, Lydia opened the letter.

Lydia,

I hope you are well, and that you are having a pleasant time in London. Send your
sister Elizabeth my regards, and please thank her for her hospitality on my behalf. Please try to make it clear how dire our financial situation is; you did not send any money the last time you wrote, and I would hope that if you sister is being her usual generous self, that you would not stint your own husband in return.

Otherwise, things are going quite well here. We seem finally to be coming to the end of these damned exercises; Fredericks and I were thinking of coming to London ourselves when we are done. (Have I introduced you to Fredericks? Charming fellow, and quite endearingly terrible at cards.)

Until then, all my regards,
George

A few moments earlier Lydia would have said that she was impatient to see George again; he was her husband after all, and as annoying as he could be, she loved him. At least she thought she did. But the thought of George arriving in London just filled her with dread: it meant George's friends (who were not all as nice as Captain Carter had been), and George's debts, and George's women, and the constant low level antagonism between George and Darcy.

“Well, Lizzy,” said Lydia, “I am glad that Jane is to come to London, else I am sure I would be cast out on the street when George arrives.”

Lydia was in no mood to be patient when she found herself later being watched again while trying to sew.

"Can I help you, Miss de Bourgh?” she asked.

"No," said Miss de Bourgh.

Lydia took this as an excuse to ignore her, and went back to work on the bodice of her dress, which was turning out to be quite fiddly. She had a horrible feeling she had not cut the fabric correctly; the two sides did not seem to match at all. She got out her measuring tape and started measuring all the lengths again to be sure.

"I knew your husband when we were children," said Miss de Bourgh in her soft voice.

"So he has told me," said Lydia. "But you should not expect him to come visiting here, Darcy will not allow it. Darcy will likely want me to leave as well once he is done with whatever it is he is doing and returns to London." Not that Lydia would miss it. Jane and Bingley's house was smaller, but Kitty would be there and Mary would not, which made it the best house in London.

Miss de Bourgh frowned and scrunched the pale fabric of her skirt into ugly creases with her hands. She was wearing a pastel purple dress today, with layers of fabric pleated in complicated ways around her chest and wrists, and Lydia wondered how hard it would be to replicate the effect. Probably not worth the effort.

"I must go," said Miss de Bourgh. “Good afternoon, Miss Bennet.” And then she left.

“I wonder what that was about,” thought Lydia. But there was no point wasting time trying to understand other people, they never made any sense.
"Miss Bennet, may I speak to you alone?"

Mary looked up from her book. Miss de Bourgh's eyes were alight with some intense emotion and her pale cheeks flushed pink with warmth. Her voice was still hoarse from her illness and she had leaned in close to Mary so that she wouldn't have to speak too loudly.

"Of course," said Mary. They slipped into a small room in the side of the house, Miss de Bourgh sitting down with barely concealed relief onto a small sofa. Mary sat beside her and shuffled closer so that Miss de Bourgh wouldn't strain her voice.

She wondered what Miss de Bourgh wanted to talk to her about. Since they had come to London it felt like they were never alone together any more, their comfortable routine interrupted by Miss de Bourgh's recovery, the new rhythms of Elizabeth's busy London house, and of course Lydia. Perhaps she was the cause of this meeting. It was proof of Miss de Bourgh's charitable spirit that she had tried so hard to see good in Mary's wayward sister, but hopefully she had finally come to realise the truth in Mary's judgement of Lydia. If Mary was honest with herself (and she was of course always scrupulously honest with herself) she felt a little hurt that Miss de Bourgh had not trusted her judgement in the first place. She accepted that Miss de Bourgh had her own decided opinions on morality and questions relating to her estate, but it only seemed fair for her to accept Mary's expertise on the subject of her own family.

Mary had certainly not enjoyed being thrust back into Lydia's company again. Marriage had brought neither maturity nor propriety, and she seemed as determined to torment Mary as ever. But Mary could not regret the move to London. Despite the strain to her health, Miss de Bourgh seemed happier than she had been of late at Rosings, even with her currently limited ability to travel or spend time in company, and although Mary had not found Lady Catherine's presence very oppressive herself, she found herself enjoying its absence. The city, too, had its own delights, although Mary had not yet had much chance to sample them.

Miss de Bourgh did not seem very happy now. Her fingers curled in tension on her lap, and her legs jittered subtly with nervous energy, the vibration passing into Mary where their hips brushed against each other. Mary smiled gently and placed her hand on Miss de Bourgh's, her thin fingers a shock of cold against Mary's skin. Whatever burden Miss de Bourgh was carrying, Mary felt certain that she could help her bear it. The thought filled her with an affectionate warmth.

"Miss Bennet," said Miss de Bourgh, "Is it true that Darcy refuses to be in the same house as your sister on account of her marrying Mr Wickham?"

"Uh," said Mary.

Miss de Bourgh pulled her hand out from underneath Mary's to punctuate her speech with an irritated splay of her fingers. "What a high handed prig Darcy is. I and my cousin have not always been the best of friends, but I had thought him generous enough in spirit not to abandon his own sister-in-law."

Mary stared blankly at Miss de Bourgh for a moment before her brain caught up with the conversation. "I do not think he refuses entirely," she said. "But from what I can gather he does avoid her company." Miss de Bourgh frowned. "I do not see that he should not," continued Mary.
"It is his house and he may seek what company he chooses. I do not know the details and have not asked, but I cannot imagine that he would find much in Lydia's company that would appeal to his sensibilities."

"She is still family," said Miss de Bourgh, "and whatever dark things he knows of Wickham, they should only make Darcy more sympathetic to any poor girl lured into his clutches. One need only meet her to see that she is a simple creature, too straightforward and guileless to defend herself against the charm and lies of such a man."

"Guileless? She is no such thing. And I am quite sure that she did not require much luring. No woman of sense would allow herself to be in the power of a man such as Mr Wickham, and Lydia has always been quite determined on a life of sin."

"A life of… Miss Bennet when you say such things I am ashamed to know you. She is your sister," said Miss de Bourgh. "How can you be so unforgiving?"

Normally Mary felt a sort of disdainful pity for those unable to see the wisdom of her opinions, and gained satisfaction from knowing better than to listen to their flawed arguments. But at this moment she felt only frustration and disappointment. If only Miss de Bourgh would see.

"Miss de Bourgh," said Mary, "I have tried to be patient with Lydia. I have done my best to be an exemplar of purity, submissiveness and humility, but rather than following my example she has only…" To her annoyance Mary could feel tears pricking at her eyes. She was not going to let her feelings interfere with her argument.

Miss de Bourgh turned to look at Mary, her eyes focussing on her face with more comprehenison than Mary was entirely comfortable with. She was still frowning, but her brows bent slightly from anger to concern.

"…She has shown no interest in being a true sister to me," Mary finished weakly.

Miss de Bourgh said, "I do not deny that your sister is unkind to you, and I am sorry to see it. I have always thought that it would be pleasant to have a sister, but I would not wish to live with such animosity. If I do not lecture her, it is only because I am not her friend, and would not expect her to listen to me." Miss de Bourgh looked up into Mary's eyes with sincerity, and Mary's heart felt a little lighter.

"I do wish you would listen to me," she added, rather spoiling the effect, but Mary did not mind. They sat in silence for a while. Miss de Bourgh appeared to have run through her burst of angry energy, and Mary had no wish to continue the argument at this precise moment.

Could she perhaps be kinder to Lydia? It seemed unlikely that Lydia's behaviour would change, but moral behaviour should be its own reward. She also felt a certain satisfaction at the idea of proving to Miss de Bourgh that Mary was not the cause of the unfriendly relationship between her and Lydia.

"Perhaps you are right," she said, with some reluctance. "I must face my duty as her sister with humility and a forgiving heart, for however sorely she may try my patience it is not for we mortals to judge our brother's transgressions. Or our sister's."

Miss de Bourgh smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Thank you, Miss Bennet," she said. "You make me very glad. I only wish that my cousin was as good. Perhaps I… perhaps you could speak to Mrs Darcy."

"Perhaps," said Mary. It was not often that she was in a position to offer moral advice to
Elizabeth. She would have to consider the situation carefully.

Anne smiled again and Mary was struck by how beautiful she was. And she had said that she and Mary were friends! The thought filled Mary with happiness. Since it felt like the right thing to do, Mary leaned across and kissed her.

Miss de Bourgh gasped and pulled away.

"I am sorry," said Mary. "I did not mean… I have been too forward. Forgive me." She blushed and shifted back across the sofa.

Miss de Bourgh's face had become flushed again. "There is no need to apologise," she said. "I was only surprised."

"No, indeed, I have every need to apologise," said Mary. She could still feel her cheeks burning. What had she been thinking? Her motivations seemed hazy and insufficient in retrospect. "You have been very kind to me, Miss de Bourgh, and I… I must always hold in the forefront of my mind that when two people are thrown together, as we are, there must naturally develop a certain amount of familiarity, and of course a woman of your rank has an obligation to act with the concerns with your dependants in mind, which may sometimes…" She took a breath. "One of the key features of the English language, it is often said, is the complex range of meanings which a single word may manifest depending on context. The… the word "friend" for example may refer in some contexts to a person to whom one is joined in mutual benevolence and intimacy, but it may also simply refer to a person without hostile intentions. It behooves me, as it behooves all of us, to remain vigilant to such double meanings, lest we cause offence or injury."

It was now Miss de Bourgh's turn to stare at Mary blankly.

"I have hurt your feelings," she said, slowly, sounding surprised.

Since there was no point denying it, and she could not think of anything else to say, Mary did not reply.

"Miss Bennet, I…" Miss de Bourgh twisted her hands together and frowned at her thumbs. She took a deep breath and sighed. "Miss Bennet, if you are not my friend then I do not know who is. It is only that I am a strange, difficult sort of person, and friendship does not come naturally to me. I am sorry that this has caused you pain."

"Oh," said Mary. "Miss de Bourgh, I….." The tight ball of sadness that had formed in her chest unfurled. But it pained her to see that Miss de Bourgh still looked melancholy. "You are not strange or difficult," she said. "You have merely been too far removed from society. I am sure that you will make many new friends in London. Any person of sense would be glad to be your friend."

"Do you truly believe that?" asked Miss de Bourgh.

"I do not say things I do not mean," replied Mary.

"That is true," said Miss de Bourgh. She sighed and closed her eyes. "I should not burden you with my self pity. Thank you for your kindness." After a moment she opened her eyes. She looked at Mary and then looked away. "Since we are to be friends, Miss Bennet, may I call you Mary?"

"Yes," said Mary. "Yes you may." She could not remember the last time someone had asked to use her Christian name.
"And you may call me Anne, if you wish." She gave a short laugh. "I cannot remember the last time I asked anyone to call me by my Christian name."

"Anne," said Mary. What a pretty name it was.

"Yes?"

"Oh, no, I…" She had simply wanted to hear how it sounded to say. "Would you like me to escort you back to your room? Since you are tired."

"Thank you, Mi…Mary, but I have slept enough these last few days for a lifetime. If you are willing I would rather sit here quietly with you."

Mary smiled. “I can think of nothing better.”

Chapter End Notes

There's a few places where Mary is quoting from various contemporary books, but I forgot to take note of which.

I hate to have to say it, but I think this is as far as I can write Anne and Mary's story. I've changed a lot since I started this story three (!) years ago, and one of the things I've realised is that the sort of story I was planning on writing for them is not the sort of thing I have much interest or ability at writing. I hope you've enjoyed the journey thus far, and I intend to try and draw a little epilogue picture at some point.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 3

There is a new version of this fic! And it HAS AN ACTUAL ENDING.

Sorry to anyone who finds this obnoxious, but given how many sad "is that really the end ;_;" comments I got I thought subscribers might like to know. Thanks for reading, and I'm glad I got to reward your optimism :)

End Notes

Mary is at her worst around Lydia, so of course I had to throw the two of them together and give Lydia a chance to express her point of view. I always felt sorry for Lydia, she is a very flawed young woman but she doesn't deserve Wickham.

Her struggles with sewing in this chapter were inspired by my own (failed) attempts to make myself a dress at the time.

I think this is the first time it's made clear that I'm setting the story around 1813/1814 (well, it is if you know when the Napoleonic wars ended. Which I did after I looked it up :)) I know a lot of people prefer the late 18th century but I chose the later date for the shallow reason that it made it easier to find information and quotable books.

I thought about having a note saying "From now on, it's all Lydia POV het all the time!" But don't worry, the next chapter is about Mary and Anne :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!