Wedding is Destiny, and Hanging Likewise

by sqbr

Summary

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

The new, final, and complete version of the story originally posted as "Wedding is Destiny and Hanging Likewise" and "London".

Notes

Contains background Elizabeth/Darcy and Kitty/MOC/MOC, also a lot of unfortunate 19th Century attitudes to sex/gender/disability and fluffy anachronistic subversions of same.

The first 17 chapters are in essence the same as the original "Wedding is Destiny and Hanging Likewise" and "London", but there are lots of small changes all over the place, mostly cosmetic but sometimes plot/character related. If you’ve read the originals I still recommend reading the new versions of chapters 1-17 to see how things have changed.

Many thanks, as always, to my amazing beta Hele. She was my very first commenter and without her help and encouragement this story wouldn't exist (and what did exist would have much worse grammar)
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

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

Mary had often felt pity for her sisters: yes, they might perhaps be 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.

And yet three of her sisters were married, and Mary had yet to receive a single proposal.

Jane was no surprise: she was by far the prettiest. 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, again no surprise, had fallen into iniquity. Her unguarded and thoughtless behaviour deserved no better than a dissolute wastrel like Wickham.

But Elizabeth – Aah! There Mary's view of the world was shaken. For while Elizabeth had some accomplishments, she lacked the discipline to apply herself as Mary had. 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! And by such men as to make even Mary a little jealous.

Mary could see, in an abstract sense, that Darcy was the more handsome of the two, and certainly he was very rich. But Mary preferred the more sensible and learned Mr Collins, and had entertained some hopes in that direction. She certainly had not been in love with her cousin, but had started to think warmly of his potential as a future companion. He had stated a desire to marry one of the Bennet sisters: why not Mary? But not only did he choose Elizabeth, on her rejection of his suit he had 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?

There were some consolations for the marriages of her sisters.

The library at Netherfield was most satisfactory, and Jane and Bingley encouraged her to make
use of it frequently. 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.

A visit to Mr Darcy's estate at Pemberley had thus sounded like a blessed reprieve. And well it might be, if she could survive the journey.

Mary was faced with a familiar decision: talk to her mother, talk to her father, or sit in silence. She had nearly settled 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?" Mary was not adept at reading the subtext to people's words, but felt quite certain that he did not mean this as a compliment.

"'Instructive and Entertaining Exercises With the Rules of the French Syntax'," replied Mary. "French entertainment?!!" responded her father in surprise. "Surely Mrs Murray would not approve!"

"Oh!" Mary began, in a reassuring tone. "Do not worry. The text is not intended as literal entertainment. In fact it is quite dry. And in the latest Mentoria, Mrs Murray said that..." Mary trailed off when she realised that her father was wearing his familiar teasing expression. Ah. He had been joking.

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. They then reluctantly rejoined their less literary companion for dinner, and Mrs Bennet spent the whole of the next morning complaining about being left to fend for herself in an unfamiliar 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 a sudden jerk, as the carriage finally reached its 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

So here we are again with a new and improved version of "Wedding is Destiny and Hanging Likewise"! These notes are aimed at both new and old readers, so I’m going to include most of the original notes as well as mentioning the changes I’ve made.

This was my first ever attempt at writing fanfiction, started in 2008 because I’d gotten into the AO3 beta and wanted to try out the posting options. Also I’d recently had to quit my job due to an acquired disability and needed a distraction. I’d always had a soft spot for Anne and Mary and thought it could be fun to throw them together and see what happened. I certainly did not expect my cracky little fic to expand into a 50K behemoth! In the seven years since then I’ve learned a lot about writing, sexuality, disability, and myself, and have a lot of affection for this fic and it’s place in that journey.

One important thing I’ve learned: chapters should not be 500 words long! Thus the new "chapter one" combines the first 3 chapters of the original fic. I’ve also removed some of the more creative grammatical choices, and tilted the scale more towards showing than telling. This is still very much 2008!sqbr’s story, 2015!sqbr wouldn’t write it this way, but 2015!sqbr wouldn’t start it at all.

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. I haven’t read the full book myself, in fact I don’t think I’ve read any of the works I quote in full. My Phd taught me some very useful skills in pretending to have read things.
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 and dreading a few weeks spent with Mary. Still, there was nothing to be done about it, and perhaps the varied company would help Mary 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 had declared himself unqualified to judge its 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 must apologise. I had planned for Kitty to be here during your visit, but she is gone traveling with friends. Perhaps this will give you a chance to get to know your new sister."

This did not bode well. Mary did not enjoy spending time with new people, and Darcy's sister had always seemed too insipid to be interesting.

Elizabeth turned to her parents and gave a sardonic smile. "But we are not to be entirely abandoned. I received a letter this morning from Lady Catherine, saying that she is to visit in a few days. I had given up hope of mending the breach...but it would appear that she has forgiven me for existing after all."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr Bennet. "Lady Catherine de Bourgh? Unbending enough to grace us with her presence? We are blessed indeed." He and Elizabeth shared a wry look. "But I may have to leave your esteemed aunt to you and Darcy's superior tact and hide myself in the
library. I am not sure I could face her again after what she said to me at your wedding."

Mrs Bennet was less phlegmatic at the news. "Blessed?" she cried, "I should think not! That woman is lucky her nephew is too much of a gentleman to throw her out into the street! Mary, you and I shall have to show Lady Catherine what it means to be a real Lady. I shall expect your finest gowns and manners while she is here, none of this skulking off into corners and being unsociable!"

Oh no, thought Mary. This did not bode well at all.

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. 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, Mary 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' confidence. 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."

Elizabeth made some faint sounds of regret at her leaving, but was not able to muster much enthusiasm. Lady Catherine had said words much to this effect every day for two weeks. Much longer, and she would outstay the Bennets.

"Georgiana, my dear," continued Lady Catherine, "what are your plans for today?"

Her niece replied in a soft and wavering voice, looking down at her plate. "Mrs Bennet, Mrs Annesley and I are to visit Lampton and look at fabric."

"Indeed? It is very kind of you to keep Mrs Bennet company on such a trivial excursion. I am to help Mrs Darcy get to know her tenants, understanding as I do that people such as ourselves have certain important duties to our dependents." Here she looked very significantly at Mrs Bennet. She then turned to smile thinly at Mary. "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?"

Never one able to resist a direct question, Mary replied, "Oh yes. It is the duty of each of us to share what benevolence we can with the less fortunate, without expectation of praise or—" 

"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 folk see fit to load her with."

"It...it is no trouble...." said Georgiana.

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 other person left at table was her brother-in-law.

Darcy smiled awkwardly. "Good morning, Miss Bennet."

"Good morning," she replied.

"I know the circumstances of your first visit to Pemberley have not been ideal, but I do 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 famil...close 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 north 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 Kitty in a few months when she had made so little effect over the last seventeen years, but decided this was an impolitic observation. It was only after wondering what could motivate Elizabeth to invite Mary to live with her when they got along so poorly 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 property here in Derbyshire."

"So I will be alone with my parents in Meryton, unless I come and stay here with you. And Kitty. And Elizabeth."
"And Georgiana, yes." His voice was sympathetic.

"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, "Thank you 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. Trapped in Meryton with her parents, or trapped here with Elizabeth and Kitty. But 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.

Entering 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.

Chapter End Notes

The next few chapters remain very short but I was too fond of the chapter divisions and their quotes to lose them.
[...] 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, 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 a vagabond. Since they had not been introduced, and 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 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. However 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.
"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?"

Miss de Bourgh 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. She 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

Part of me wasn't sure The Mysteries of Udolpho was a real book, but it is!

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 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.

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

Not for the first time in her life, Miss Anne 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 all right 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, thank you, 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 her mother 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 like him. 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 boors. 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: woe 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, her mother 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 travel. Darcy has said he is happy for you to stay , it seems that he has not completely forgotten his familial obligations despite unaccountably bringing those people into it." She paused and frowned.

Recognising the familiar signs of her mother desiring an excuse to hold forth, Anne asked, "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 it 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 Cyclopaedia doesn't have an "M-Z" volume, just Volume 1 and Volume 2.
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 been forced 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 great deal, 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 bedridden 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 volume 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 Miss de Bourgh. "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.

Miss de Bourgh 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.

The kipper sat alone in the centre of a large white plate. A grey-orange sheen wavered over its glossy surface, and the sunken eyes in its 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?"

Anne's mother tore herself away from berating one of the servants about the table settings to look over at her daughter. "What is 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 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 am sure they are 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 her mother and Mrs Bennet, Anne was surprised to discover that Mrs Bennet was one of the few people of her acquaintance who was exactly as her mother 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.

Mrs Annesley looked at Georgiana with a mild frown. Georgiana nodded slightly and turned back to Anne with a brave attempt at a smile. She said, "I am glad you are well this morning; we were all quite worried about you yesterday." Mrs Annesley smiled at Georgiana approvingly, and Anne felt a pang of melancholy for her own lost Mrs Jenkinson, who had been of equal help when Anne was lost in difficult social situations. She had no such ally now.

"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 to perform a duet for everyone later, are we not, Miss Bennet?"

Miss Bennet 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 she hoped 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. "That is terrible! Can no-one 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, Anne's mother 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 Georgiana.

"Oh Mary, please tell me you will help me!" she said mournfully.

"If I can, of course, but with what?"

"Miss de Bourgh! It is not that I do not wish to read to her, but she is so fierce! I am sure I will read badly 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 am sure, and it is not that what she says is so very critical, but...she has this look and I know she is displeased, and that makes me nervous, and then I say something really stupid, and that makes her more annoyed and it is just terrible."

"She does not make me nervous," said Mary stoutly.

"Exactly!" said Georgiana. "Even Lady Catherine does not pierce your calm, and I think she scares my brother. If you are there, I am sure I will be ever so much braver."

"What of Mrs Annesley?" Mary had come to admire Georgiana's companion's ability to stay calm and polite under the most trying of circumstances. Even Mary's mother could do no more than drive her to a coldly polite silence.

"Lady Catherine has taken a dislike to her," said Georgiana, sadly. "She said she would make Anne nervous, although I cannot see how. Will you help, Mary? Please."

Mary was unused to anyone desiring her presence. She could also see no way to say no without seeming unforgivably rude. "Yes," she said. "I would be glad to help."

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 Miss de Bourgh. "Well, this can not have been very interesting for you."

"No."

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

"Do not be silly," replied Miss de Bourgh 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 that 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.

Miss de Bourgh 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.
And now we hit the first major change: the inclusion of Georgiana’s companion Mrs Annesley. I can’t remember why I left her out the first time, I think I just forgot about her until I was nearly done with the Pemberley section and decided it was too much trouble to add her back in. I like having her in the story now, she makes a useful contrast to Mary.

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 6

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 a good example, which inspired his family to go on their own pilgrimage."

"But that does not make any..." At this point Miss de Bourgh's body reasserted its 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 Miss de Bourgh.

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 that Miss de Bourgh 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 Pemberley, 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 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 am afraid not," said her brother. "It is only the doctor."

Her face fell, and then she looked up and asked quickly, "Is Anne 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 she ride with you and Mary 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."

"Yes, of course," said Georgiana. "Mary 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 doctor's carriage and down the path. She had placed Miss de Bourgh 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 accustomed Mary had become to Lady Catherine's disdain for contrary opinions that she 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 Miss de Bourgh, 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.

The only thing that 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 entirely 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 Miss de Bourgh. "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 less that she minded the idea of reading to Miss de Bourgh and more that she resented the loss of her afternoons.

"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."

"If there is no benefit in waiting, why not leave right away?" asked Mary.

Miss de Bourgh 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 vigour 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 7

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 unbosom 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. 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 companionship, 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 with 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."

"It is not Anne's welfare alone that concerns me," began Darcy before being interrupted by his wife.

"I agree," she said sharply, "that Mary and your daughter are not family. 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, not cooped up as nursemaids for an invalid. Surely there is someone else."

Mary did not enjoy Society. She 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.

Lady Catherine's voice became even louder. "You would have my daughter live with a 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 Longbourn. And she considered Miss de Bourgh’s question.

She opened the door.

Staring at her, surprised, were Mr and Mrs Darcy, Lady Catherine, and to Mary’s own surprise, Miss Anne de Bourgh.

"I will go to Rosings," 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 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."

Miss de Bourgh looked briefly at Mary before staring at her hands and saying, "Thank you 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 worry 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 my mother 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 was 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 his friend Mr Fletcher, and did not seem to be able to decide which of them she liked more. Every time either 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 a priest, 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 other's 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 her where they could, and she was forced to admit that her brother-in-law was right, Kitty had indeed changed for the better.

When Georgiana was busy there was always Mrs Annesley. She was an agreeable enough woman, placid and polite and well suited to Georgiana, but she was not especially fond of reading, religion, or music, and thus was of little interest to Mary.

"I am glad for you, Miss Bennet," said Mrs Annesley, on yet another afternoon when the two of them had been left to their own devices. "The role of companion is, to my mind, one of the highest purposes to which one may dedicate oneself. I myself have been so happy at Pemberley. I am not ashamed to admit that I had become quite desperate when Mr Darcy offered me the role; there are so few respectable ways for a single woman to support herself, even a widow. And Georgiana is such a lovely girl. I do not mind helping her overcome her little bouts of nervousness, or offering her advice; it is as if she were the daughter I never had. I am sure you will become quite as fond of Miss de Bourgh."

"She is too old to be my daughter," said Mary.

"Well, yes," said Mrs Annesley, smiling blandly. "But she is an invalid, so she will need your help all the same. And since you are of an age you may become closer friends."

"We may," said Mary, though she found it hard to imagine ever being as fond of Miss de Bourgh as Mrs Annesley was of Georgiana. She found it hard to imagine being that fond of anyone.

Mrs Annesley considered Mary carefully. "I would recommend trying to be her friend," she said. "While meaning no insult to Lady Catherine, she seems a very exacting sort of person, and very protective of her daughter. I suspect your life at Rosings will likely be more agreeable if Lady Catherine believes you to care about Miss de Bourgh's interests. Look after her when she is unwell, of course, and read to her as needed. But there are also many little things one can do to make life more congenial for the household: encouraging conversation when your hosts are feeling dull, helping with the servants and so forth. It is good to be useful."

"Yes," said Mary. Was she expected to do all that? She had not noticed Mrs Annesley putting herself to so much trouble for Georgiana, but nor had she been paying much attention.

Regardless, Mary was committed to her role. Miss de Bourgh 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 her 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 Lizzy 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?
Chapter 8

How wonderful is Death,
Death, and his brother Sleep!
One, pale as yonder waning moon
With lips of lurid blue;
The other, rosy as the morn
When throned on ocean's wave
It blushes o'er the world;
Yet both so passing wonderful!

--Queen Mab, Percy Bysshe Shelley

A disadvantage of being Miss de Bourgh’s companion that 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 to which she would make sure Mary was accompanied. 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 Miss de Bourgh, 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 observe 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 its 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 lady's 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 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 Miss de Bourgh, lifting her head slightly from her pillow. Laid out on a small table next to the bed was a small bowl of gruel and a dish piled with a generous variety of food. Miss de Bourgh 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 Miss de Bourgh curtly. "I am merely melancholy. I do not know how you deal with melancholia, 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 its 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 discomfited, Mary returned to her current and much less controversial book, an introduction to the plants and animals of Kent.

It was not long until Miss de Bourgh 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."
Miss de Bourgh 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 pay you an allowance and supply you with whatever money you might require for trinkets and so forth. But your sister was quite insistent that you came here as our 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 Miss de Bourgh 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 towards 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 there 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 Miss de Bourgh. "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 9

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.

Mr Collins towered 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. Not everyone was friendly, and sometimes she found them looking at her strangely and making odd remarks. But this was not very different to her experiences at church in Meryton.

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 embroidery; 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 roofs 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 yours 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 manœuvreved 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 fulfil 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 Miss de Bourgh, looking up from a letter with a short-lived 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."

Miss de Bourgh 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 Miss de Bourgh. 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 delightful 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 to you 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, 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. 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." Miss de Bourgh 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."
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
long nap. But such petty comforts slipped her mind when she saw who was walking up the road in the opposite direction. Her heart lifted. "Charlotte!"

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." Anne did not add that the odds of her finding a man she rated worthy of Rosings were approximately zero. She might have married Darcy, if he'd asked, but then again she might not. Alas, few responded well when Anne expressed her opinions on marriage as a trap whereby women gave up their power and money for little advantage, so she generally kept them to herself.

"Oh. I seem to have misunderstood," said Miss Bennet, who had not misunderstood at all. "I apologise. But you should not be too cautious or wait too long. For is not a single woman the most defenceless 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 defenceless 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 Jenkinson'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.

She tried reading a book, but within a few chapters her eyes started to ache. She tried knitting, but that was almost as much of a strain and infinitely more dull, given that she had nothing to listen to as she did it. She tried looking out the window and communing with the beauty of nature, but nature was unobliging and offered her only bland grey skies and soggy unappealing looking countryside. She got up and conversed for a while with Jackson and the housekeeper, but lacked the energy to apply her mind with much focus to the minutiae of household maintenance. Eventually, she remembered the correspondence she had started unsuccessfully during the previous night's insomnia, and returned to her chambers to give it another attempt.
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."
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 Jenkinson. She stepped off the chair to go to her and was rewarded 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 drawing room, 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 embroidery.

"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 a 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 to 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.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote the phrase "let out a breath she hadn't realised she had been holding in" back before it became infamous as a badfic cliche, and I'm keeping it. It's not a badfic cliche about dress fittings, after all.
"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 William 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 Longbourn.

"I see that Mary has been making new friends in Kent," she said cheerfully, looking at a particularly large and shiny specimen.

Lady Catherine frowned. "Indeed, I have explained to your sister repeatedly that her time would be much better spent in more feminine pursuits, but she 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 Longbourn," 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 Miss de Bourgh's 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."

"Truly?" said Elizabeth. She reached for him, trailing her fingers down his chin, now gently rough with stubble. "What woman of good sense could ever resist your charms?"

Darcy smiled and put his hand on hers. "It has been known to happen."

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."

"And does Miss de Bourgh treat you with respect? She does not make you feel misused or put upon?"

"She treats me with every respect."

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 Longbourn 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 am sure you have 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 Longbourn 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 Longbourn."

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

"And do you agree, Mary?" It was remarkable how everyone around Lady Catherine seemed to magically agree with her opinions.

"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."

"How generous of you. Will she also be allowed to voice her own opinion on her fate?"
"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."

"As if she were a member of the family! How condescending of you, to include her so."

Elizabeth reminded herself 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 defence, 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." Signalling 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_, thought Elizabeth. "It is good to see her, and Charlotte as well. And little William! 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."
Yes, the chapter quote is a very cheesy 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 13

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 Longbourn.

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 Longbourn would feel after spending so long in the splendour of Pemberley and Rosings, but she did not find it so. In fact, she 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 grow fonder, and perhaps it is 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 the 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 will 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 William 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. She had once hoped of finding a more affectionate companion than a man she could not love, but it had been a long time since she had believed that possible either. 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." Anne had mostly managed to let go of the affectionate leanings that had made her friendship with Charlotte so consuming and strange. But she was still very fond of her.

"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?

They 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.

"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, but 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. 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 William 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 Longbourn, 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 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 had 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 year or two 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 they 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 buoyant, praising the quality of her boiled beef and responding cheerfully 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 that 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 14

To say the truth, women are, in general, too familiar with each other, which leads to that gross degree of familiarity that so frequently renders the marriage state unhappy.

--Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

"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 Bourgh'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."

"Thank-you 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. Also, of late she had become more forthcoming about her opinions on marriage in general and its unbalanced treatment of women. Despite the polite fiction that she would marry "when she found the right man", Mary had her doubts that any man would ever be good enough to convince Miss de Bourgh to give up her freedom so completely. This idea did not bother as much as it once had.

"Good heavens, no. 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—I...I truly want what is best for you Miss de Bourgh. Whatever that may be."

"Thank you, 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 Longbourn 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."

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 its 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 not make an at least moderately happy match with Anne, he 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 Jenkinson," he said, "but Miss Bennet seems agreeable 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 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 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. Thank you."

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 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. What was he thinking, dredging up those old memories? Anne had spent the last decade trying to forget her friendship with Miss Finch, and all the implications it had about Anne. And to bring her up in front of Miss Bennet!

"Miss de Bourgh? May I talk to you about something?" Anne tensed for her reaction.

"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, if one allowed for a female spouse (and Anne was more willing to allow it than most), Miss Bennet was as good a choice 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 charming 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. Curse her damnable cousin.

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 marvellous 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 Jenkinson, 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 its 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 offence," 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, "for at this time of year these beetles are all the tree has to offer. Are you feeling better now, Miss de Bough?"

"Much, thank you."

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

"Thank you, 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. Though no treatment exists to cure my condition, there are some which make my symptoms more bearable. And 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 is 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 cannot say for certain."
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."
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 agreeable enough. However, 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. 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 the maid."

"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 she 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.

Chapter End Notes

And here we are at the end of the original "Wedding is Destiny"! The chapter used to end a little more shippily as an apology for stopping so suddenly, but I think it works better stopping here.
Let bucks and let bloods to praise London agree,
Oh! the joys of the country, my jewel, give to me
Where sweet is the flow’r that the May-bush adorns’
And how charming to gather it, but for the thorns

-- The Joys of the Country, Charles Dibdin

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. Doting on your rich protector was all well and good, but there was no reason for Lydia to care. Not that Mary had been any less dull when she talked in nothing but quotes from Improving Literature. 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 young lady 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 strange rich 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, as well some other, less savoury insinuations. Lydia knew better than to treat
anything George said as unvarnished fact, but it certainly did not look like Miss de Bourgh was
going to be much more fun for Lydia awake than she had been asleep.

"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, proving that her affection for Mary must run deep indeed. Interesting.

"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?" she asked.

"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 book 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. Kitty 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, Lizzie, 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, Lizzie?" 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 agreeable. 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."

"Petty bickering is neither moral nor endearing," said Elizabeth, with a heavy sigh, "so this seems like an argument neither of you can win."

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 do not 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.

Chapter End Notes

This was the first chapter of "London". Here's the original 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 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 back to being about Mary and Anne.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For Mercy has a human heart;
Pity, a human face;
And Love, the human form divine:
And Peace the human dress.

-- The Divine Image, Songs of Innocence, William Blake

"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 mellowed her somewhat, but she had still not attained maturity or propriety, and seemed as determined to torment Mary as ever.

And she was still on friendlier terms with Mary than Miss de Bourgh was with Lady Catherine. Lady Catherine had opposed the move to London at every stage and when it was regardless achieved had sent both Darcy and Miss de Bourgh very strongly worded letters exhorting them to send her daughter home for her own good. For a while they had worried that she might try and force the issue, though for now she seemed content to be disapproving from afar.

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 comprehension 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. Georgiana, perhaps, although in that case it had been almost a matter of course, since they were sisters. This felt quite different.

"And you may call me Anne, if you wish." Anne 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

This was the second and last chapter of London, and the last I wrote about Mary and Anne for a long time. Next chapter: entirely new content!

There's a few places where Mary is quoting from various contemporary books, but I forgot to take note of which.
Chapter 18

Children of the future age,
Reading this indignant page,
Know that in a former time
Love, sweet love, was thought a crime.

-- A Little Girl Lost, Songs of Experience, William Blake

"Sooo....," said Lydia, "have you kissed him yet?"

Kitty blushed bright red and burst into giggles, covering her face. "I...we..." But she was too overcome with laughter to finish her sentence.

Visiting Lydia and Kitty at Jane's London residence was far more agreeable than living with them at Longbourn had ever been, but neither of them had entirely outgrown their silliness.

"Lydia," said Mary, "Mr Hewitt is a priest. He would never..."

Kitty gave a final cough and then stopped laughing. She sat up primly and gave Mary a disapproving glare. "We have kissed, actually," she said. "And why should we not? We are engaged to be married."

"You are not married yet," said Mary. It was hard to accept that she was to be married at all, she still so often acted like a child. "Many is the young woman who has been left in disgrace by a man she intended to marry. We need not look far to find an instructive example." Mary looked significantly at Lydia, who stuck out her tongue. Lydia's husband's long threatened visit to London had been cancelled on short notice, and she had become more energetically cheerful at the news. Unfortunately, this good cheer largely manifested as silliness.

Mary looked to Georgiana, who could be relied upon for much more sensible behaviour. She was horrified to see that Georgiana looked almost on the verge of tears. Was her sensitive heart hurting at the reminder of Lydia's shame? Mary was trying to be kinder to Lydia these days but it was difficult. She tried to undo the damage. "Of course, we must not blame such women, it is understandable to wish to express an innocent affection to the one we love. And Mr Hewitt sounds like an honourable young man, I am sure he intends no harm. But even when our intentions are pure, we must ever guard against the temptation of..."

Lydia gave a harsh sigh, unimpressed by Mary's attempt at kindness. "Oh, leave off, Mary. As if you and Miss de Bourgh are any better."

Mary gaped. "Miss de Bourgh and...but that is not at all the same! We are women! And she...I..."

She was overcome, as Kitty had been, but with much less pleasant feelings.

"That hardly makes it less of a sin," said Lydia. She sniffed. "Do not mistake me, unlike some people I do not judge what others do when they are alone. As long as it does not hurt me I do not consider it my business. But do not pretend that you are better than Kitty and me, Mary. For you are not. Always whispering secrets to each other and blushing, and holding hands under the table. And I have seen the way she looks at you when she thinks nobody is watching; you cannot tell me it is innocent."
Not...innocent? The idea that there was anything sordid or improper about her relationship with Anne was so alien to Mary that she could not think of how to even begin to refute it.

To Mary's surprise, it was Kitty who came to her defence. "Come now, Lydia. Do not say such shocking things." Her eyes flicked towards Mrs Annesley, who sat doing embroidery a short distance away. "True or not, it is no topic for teasing. We should..."

"It is not true! It is entirely ridiculous!" said Mary. "There is no way two women could...ever..." Attempting to finish that sentence headed towards topics Mary was not supposed to know anything about, and largely didn't. She pushed away the vague but alarming mental images produced and faced Lydia's accusations with the stout heart of one who knows they are in the right. "Even if you were to judge our behaviour by the more stringent standards expected of a man and a woman I can see no fault with it. I do not wish to know what you imagine we do when we are alone, Lydia, but it is much the same as our behaviour in company. We talk, we read together, we sometimes...we sometimes embrace, but in an entirely innocent manner. Anne does not...does not even like to kiss. But if she did it would be entirely appropriate for two female friends as close as we are."

"Close in a platonic sense," said Kitty, firmly.

"Yes, exactly," said Mary. "To suggest anything else is beyond perverse."

"Your friend Anne might say different," said Lydia. It pained Mary to hear her use Anne's given name in such a familiar way. "Wickham tells me she got up to all sorts of mischief when she was young, but it all got hushed up."

Georgiana gasped, sounding as horrified as Mary felt.

"Wickham," said Mary. "Well that it explains it! I know he is your husband, Lydia, but...well. You must not trust everything he says."

"I know the evidence of my own eyes," said Lydia, petulantly. She gave an exaggerated sigh. "Yet I suppose I must believe you. For your denial has the ring of sincerity to it, and you were never any good at lying."

That was hardly the heartfelt apology Mary would have hoped for. "I am glad we can agree that your accusations are baseless. And you must not speak of such things; I am sure you would not wish for Miss de Bourgh or I to suffer any scandal."

"It might do you some good," muttered Lydia.

"No!" said Georgiana, speaking for the first time since the conversation had turned tawdry. "Lydia, you must not...you must keep these things to yourself, whether or not you think they are true. Surely you understand how much it can hurt...how much..." Her eyes pleaded silently as her words trailed way.

"Yes of course," said Lydia. "Of course I know, I was never...I am not stupid. I was only teasing." She looked truly ashamed now, it was an unusual sight. She reached out and patted Georgiana's hand and then turned to Kitty, all smiles. "Tell me, what kind of dress are you going to wear?"

Mary submitted to embraces and kisses from her younger sisters with practiced patience, and even managed to give Kitty a small kiss on the cheek. Georgiana was just as awkward, but whether she actually minded or was just shy was hard to tell.
"Farewell," cried Kitty over the sound of the carriage wheels rolling over the cobblestones. "We will miss you!"

Mary gave a final wave and settled back into her seat with relief. It was not that she did not feel affection for her sisters, it was just that she would rather express that affection from further away.

Now that she was away from Lydia's constant stream of conversation, Mary had an opportunity to puzzle over the conundrum of her earlier insinuations. What did she think Mary and Anne did when they were alone that was so awful? There were many possible sins, of course, but she was fairly sure that Lydia was not accusing them of heathenistic ritual or excessive gambling. No, it was something equivalent to the many sins a woman must guard against with men. But what equivalent could there be?

And then there was the scandal in Anne's youth. Assuming that Wickham's report could be trusted in any way, what exactly had she done? Mary could not imagine Anne doing anything truly immoral. No, she was sure that at worst, Anne had been the innocent victim of speculation and gossip.

"Mary?"

"Yes, Georgiana?" she replied, trying not to resent the interruption.

"You will not.\" Georgiana leaned close and whispered, prompting an expression of curiosity to flicker across Mrs Annesley's face before she turned to stare out the window with an expression of calm indifference. "You will not tell my brother what Lydia said, will you?"

"Of course not," said Mary. "He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.\" She was not whispering, but there was no reason to keep such universal sentiments a secret.

"Yes," said Georgiana, with uncommon fierceness. "Yes it is. I am glad that you agree. I would not want him to think poorly of Lydia."

"Of Lydia?" said Mary in surprise.

"Yes," said Georgiana. "I know you have not always been the best of friends. I was not sure I would like her myself. But I would not want...oh!\" She whispered even softer than before. "But of course I did not believe her, Mary. I know better than to trust...than to trust that kind of hearsay. And I would not think ill of you if it were true, though I would of Anne if she were to take advantage of her position."

"It is not true," said Mary. "And Anne would never abuse my trust."

"Of course," said Georgiana. "I only meant that – it does not matter. I am sorry Lydia's words hurt you, it was not very kind of her to say."

"I do not allow myself to be hurt by such words," said Mary.

"Then I am happy for you," said Georgiana.

When they arrived back, Mary found herself staring at Anne, trying to imagine her through Lydia's eyes. But she could find no fault with her.

Anne touched her hand briefly to Mary's arm. "Is something wrong, Mary?"

"I am fine," said Mary. "What of yourself? Are you improved since this morning?"
"Yes," said Anne with a smile. "As you see, I am out of bed. And you have just missed a spirited discussion between Darcy, your sister and myself about a bill before parliament. But they have left now, and will not be back before dinner." Anne led them away from the door and towards the drawing room, sitting down on a settee and taking a moment to catch her breath. Mary sat down beside her. "Your sister is remarkably clever," said Anne. "I see why Darcy likes her."

"Yes," said Mary, trying not to feel jealous. She was clever too, but not the kind of clever that let her keep up with Elizabeth when she was having spirited conversations. "I am glad that you are becoming friends."

"As am I," asked Anne. She looked at her hands. "But...I must admit to enjoying her occasional absence." She looked up at Mary. "You must understand, I mean no disrespect to Mrs Darcy. She is a lovely woman! I could not ask for a more generous and patient host. But...she is just so quick, and so talkative, that I feel stupid and shy."

This made Mary happier than it probably should have. "I entirely understand," she said.

"I am sure you do," said Anne. "To have four such sisters! Not that they are all the same, of course but...they can be quite overwhelming."

"Yes," said Mary. "Very much so."

"I suppose I should not be surprised that you returned from Mrs Bingley's house looking a little wan. But I did not ask you about your visit! Did you have an agreeable time? Are they all well?"

"Quite well," said Mary. "As is Bingley. They have installed a new dining table and it is very fine."

"...And did you have an agreeable time?" Mary squirmed under Anne's perceptive gaze.

"Pleasant enough," said Mary. Anne stared a moment longer, but did not press her for further details.

"Is there anything more you wish to discuss?" asked Anne. "I am fatigued at present, and would like to rest quietly for a while."

"That sounds ideal," said Mary. "Would you like me to read to you?" As an experiment, Mary put her hand on Anne's knee. Anne looked down at her hand briefly and then back up at Mary.

"No, thank you," said Anne. As she spoke, she shifted her knee slightly so that it moved out from under Mary's hand. "But it would be pleasant for you to sit beside me, if it would not interfere with your plans for the afternoon."

"Not at all," said Mary.

They sat quietly for some time, Mary reading and Anne resting her head against the back of the settee before slowly slipping into a doze and sliding down to rest against Mary. It felt very companionable.

After a half hour or so Mary felt Anne beginning to wake. At first she shifted around without purpose, her body rubbing against Mary's, but then as she came back to consciousness she pushed herself away from Mary. She then settled back onto the other side of the settee so that they no longer touched at all.

This was not the first time she had behaved in this manner. A suspicion was brewing in Mary's mind. "Anne?" she asked.
"Mmm?" replied Anne muzzily.

"Why do you not touch me?"

"What?" Anne sat up and pulled her hands to her chest, as if protecting her heart from a blow.

"We are friends. And yet, you do not touch me with affection. You do not embrace me, and when I embrace you, you move away, or say you are not feeling well. Is it that you do not like to be touched?"

"No. Yes. I...why do you ask?"

"It has occurred to me that perhaps...that perhaps it is not your preference, not truly. That you are trying to protect me, protect us both, from what others might think." Mary paused to gauge Anne's reaction, but she was staring silently. So Mary ploughed on. "Lydia...Lydia made some very suggestive remarks, and said that she had heard of some scandal in your youth."

"Oh no," said Anne, her face white.

"I did not believe her! I am sure, whatever she has heard, it is untrue. Her insinuations about you and I were certainly quite baseless. But if you were the subject of scandal, if others have made such insinuations in the past...it is only natural that you would be cautious."

"...Yes," said Anne. She stood up, unexpectedly, and went to the door. She called for a servant. "Miss Bennet and I are not to be disturbed," she said. She closed the door and sat back down, not next to Mary this time but in a chair a few steps away.

She curled up into the chair, back bent and eyes downcast. "I suppose...I suppose in essence you are right. I have been cautious, trying to avoid a repetition of...of the events of the past. If I have seemed cold or distant—" She looked up at Mary, eyes wide and sad. "Oh, Mary I had hoped it would not come to this. If your reputation suffers because of me I will not forgive myself."

"It was only Lydia," said Mary. "Kitty and Georgiana did not believe her. Nobody of sense would."

"They were there as well?" Her voice was very small.

"Yes but...Anne, it was ridiculous. She said..." Mary spent a moment trying to untangle the vague statements Lydia had actually made from her own more detailed imaginings. "She said our friendship was not innocent, and implied that...that inappropriate things happen when we are alone. I am not sure quite what she meant to imply, but I made it very clear that our behaviour is at all times entirely above reproach, and she was forced to admit that I was right and she was wrong. So you see, there is nothing to worry about."

"Oh, I wish that were true," said Anne. She stared at her hands, face distraught. "Mary, this is Wickham's doing, I am sure of it. And if he has decided to cause trouble for me there is not much I can do to stop him. Perhaps it would be better for you to distance yourself from me."

"No," said Mary, "Anne, you cannot...I will not leave you. I do not care what Lydia says. I do not care what anyone says. You would have these lies part us when we have come so far?"

"Oh," said Anne. "Oh, Mary. No, I would not gladly part from you. And I have little concern for what the world thinks of me. But I would hate to cause you harm. And I do not know..." She looked so sad. "Mary. You are my best and truest friend. But there is something I must tell you, and I am not sure that you will wish to be my friend when I am done."
Anne silenced Mary's protestations with a raised hand. "Please," she said, "let me finish. If I do not say it now I may never get it out, and I would have everything be honest between us." She stared into space, as if reading from a letter only she could see. "You said Lydia mentioned a scandal from my youth, and that you were sure that it was all lies. Scandal is too strong a word for it; my mother was very thorough in keeping a lid on the situation. And I cannot know exactly what Lydia told you. But there was probably some truth to it."

"She told me very little," said Mary. "But whatever it is, I am sure I will forgive you."

"As you have forgiven Lydia?"

"But she..." Mary gasped. "Anne, tell me you did not...did you let yourself be seduced by Wickham?"

"Wickham?" Anne laughed. "No! Though not for lack of trying on his part."

Mary sighed in relief.

"But what if I had? What would you think of me then?"

"I...but you would never..." Mary tried to imagine how she would feel. It was unpleasant. "I would...if you were truly sorry for what you had done..."

"What if I was not? You know my opinions on Free Love."

Mary made a face. "Anne...I cannot..." She shook her hands in frustration, but Anne simply stared at her calmly, willing her to answer the question. She sat in serious thought until she could come up with an answer. "I would need to know your reasons. You are a sensible, moral woman. I cannot imagine you debasing yourself with a man like Wickham. Not unless you were mistaken about his nature, or were other than the person you are now."

"Or other than the person you think I am."

"Yes."

Anne sighed. "Well, you are not entirely wrong. I never fully warmed to Wickham, for all his charm. As a young woman, I might have let myself be fooled into thinking myself in love with him, but it seems I am not...predisposed to that particular kind of foolishness. Not with men."

Mary smiled.

"But I am with women. Do you understand me?"

"No," said Mary.

Anne made a sound of frustration. "I suppose I must tell you it all then. Perhaps after that you will understand. And it will be good--good to have it all out. Do you remember when my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam visited, he made reference to a woman named Amelia Finch?"

"No," said Mary, feeling increasingly stupid.

"No, I suppose it would not have seemed significant to you," said Anne. "Well, she was one of my few friends growing up. She was one of the rare local young people my mother considered a suitable playmate for the great Miss Anne de Bourgh. By lucky happenstance, our personalities were as well matched as our fortunes, and we became good friends."
"I always had a deep affection for Amelia. When we were very young I declared that I would marry her instead of Darcy, until it was explained to me that this was impossible. As we reached adolescence, our friendship became...changed. Stronger, more passionate. We wrote each other poetry and declared our eternal devotion, vowing that even when marriage separated we would always be first in each other hearts. Our parents found this charming.

"What they did not know is that...we..." Anne coloured. "We became intimate. I cannot remember who initiated what. But by the time we were seventeen we were engaging in amorous congress." She looked to Mary to see her reaction, but Mary continued to be baffled. Surely only men and women could engage in amorous congress, or the term lost all meaning. It was as if people kept describing some strange and fearsome creature everyone but her could see.

"I was the happiest I have ever been. Amelia often spoke of finding a husband, but somehow I still believed we could stay together forever, married in all but name. But of course it could not last." She sighed. Married? thought Mary. Another word that made no sense when applied to two women. Yet Anne kept talking, as if the events she described made perfect sense and it was Mary's understanding that was at fault. "It was Amelia's mother who found us, and the uproar was overwhelming. Amelia's parents blamed me for corrupting their daughter, and Lady Catherine blamed her for corrupting me. It was agreed that the Finches should move elsewhere, and that we would not be allowed to see each other again."

"There was never any scandal. As you have seen with your sister, enough money can soften even the most shocking of revelations. But it cannot make people forget entirely. It took a long time before the mutterings in the village stopped when I drove by. I imagine that is how Wickham found out. And things were worse for Amelia, since she was not as insulated by wealth and influence. I think it was the gossip that made her family decide to leave as much as anything. I found out her address and tried writing to her, but she never replied. A few years later I heard that she had married. And so ended our great love affair." Shen looked up. "Do you hate me now, Mary?"

"No," said Mary. "The things you have told told me are strange and confusing, but I do not hate you. Did you truly think I would?"

Anne replied by bursting into tears. "I have worried...for so long," she sniffed. "I have told no one, not even let myself think of it--and with the way you judge Lydia..."

"But that is entirely different!"

"No, it is not!" said Anne. "It is exactly the same. Except that I had less excuse and my--sin--was never sanctified in the eyes of the church. I am as guilty as her of falling in love injudiciously, just as guilty of giving in to desire. If you despise her you must despise me also."

"Do you want me to despise you?"

"I want you to understand!" said Anne, her voice loud and hoarse. "I am attracted to women as other women are to men. I have lain with a woman as a husband lies with his wife. Others know this! When they see us together, they will think that you are like me. That you have done these things with me. Do you accept this? Can you still really be my friend, knowing what I am? What others will think?"

Mary's mind whirled. "I cannot...I cannot imagine not being your friend. But I..." She escaped towards the door. "I must think."

She opened the door to see Elizabeth and Darcy standing in the hallway outside, having recently returned to the house.
The thought of facing them now was more than Mary could bear. "I am going to my room," she said, and ran.

Chapter End Notes

Finally, a quote from a "book" I have read all the way through. Mostly because it is incredibly short, but it still counts.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As my rival, she would on certain ground have beat me hollow; it was therefore good policy to make her my friend.

-- Belinda, Maria Edgeworth

Mary was gone a long, long time.

Dinner had been the typical small talk, trying to pretend to care about inconsequential things when her heart was entirely elsewhere. It was hard to tell how much Mr and Mrs Darcy had heard, but if they were coming to terms with their houseguest being a pervert they hid it well.

But perhaps they already knew. Perhaps everyone knew. Maybe this was why Darcy had always seemed as ambivalent about marrying her as she had been about marrying him. As Mary would say, that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.

Anne had sometimes wondered what would happen if Mary found out the truth about Anne. Unlikely as it had seemed, part of her had hoped that Mary would understand, and accept Anne for who she was. Anything beyond that had seemed foolish, even disrespectful, yet she could not pretend she had not sometimes imagined something more than just understanding. Anne had become very fond of Mary, more fond than she could ever have predicted when they met. Mary was stubborn, often obtuse, and sometimes selfish, but she was also kind, loyal, and brave, and the only true friend Anne had ever really had. Without Mary, Anne might have never taken her first cautious steps away from life under the thumb of her mother, and would not wake each morning looking forward to the day.

And now the best she could hope for was that Mary would not abandon her entirely.

After dinner Anne stood at Mary's door, her hand poised to knock, but she could not bring herself to do it. Instead she went to bed and lay, staring at the ceiling, until her heart stopped beating too fast to sleep. It took some time.

In the morning Mary was gone.

"She went to visit Jane," said Mrs Darcy. "I am sure she will be back soon. Would you like me to read to you instead? I have no plans this morning."

"But you are the lady of the house," said Anne in surprise.

"I am Mary's sister," said Mrs Darcy. "If it is no indignity for her, it should be none for me." There was a determined edge to her even tone. Anne had come to realise that Mrs Darcy shared Mary's stubborn and idealistic nature, but without anywhere near as much respect for Anne's opinion. It could be very inconvenient, especially since she was the mistress of this house.

One of the things Anne liked about Mary was the way she challenged her. Until Mary moved to Rosings, Anne had not realised how accustomed she had become to everyone in her daily life quietly anticipating and fulfilling her desires, whether it be to let her win at cards or withhold censure on her less conventional views. Lady Catherine had not been so accommodating, of course, but she had still made Anne's welfare her first priority, and it was only with Mary that
Anne had discovered the joy of an honest friendship.

Moving away from Rosings had been a harsh lesson in how much more challenging people could be. The name de Bourgh still held significant sway outside the London house, but within it ultimate power layed with those who bore the name Darcy. Her hosts were very polite, of course, and despite herself Anne was starting to like her cousin's warm, witty wife. Neither of them would dream of bullying Anne in their house the way Lady Catherine had bullied them in hers. But once Miss Lydia Bennet left to stay with Mrs Bingley and Georgiana arrived with Mrs Annesley, Anne had been forced to adjust to the realisation that she was near the least favoured of the house's six inhabitants. She had been too distraught to pay much attention when they were all together at Pemberley, but even Mrs Annesley was given significant respect and notice, and it gave Anne pause when she remembered how her own companions had always been treated. While Anne had been quite happy to see Mary as an equal, it was quite another for her to actually be one.

"You are entirely right," said Anne. The idea of being read to by Mrs Darcy was mortifying, but not quite as awful as the prospect of being alone with her own thoughts. "I would very much appreciate you reading to me, thank you. We were reading Belinda, if you do not object to it."

"Ah!" said Mrs Darcy with a smile of genuine pleasure. "So you like Mrs Edgeworth as well?"

If she was honest, Anne had found the book a trifle silly thus far, but she was in no humour to argue, so she smiled and nodded.

Mrs Darcy found the book and opened it to the marked place.

"Mary will be behind now," said Anne, staring at the open book. "I hope she does not mind." To her horror, she heard her voice crack. She willed herself not to cry.

"You are quite fond of my sister," said Mrs Darcy.

Anne looked at her sharply. Mrs Darcy looked back with a clear, knowing gaze, and Anne felt herself flush.

"Yes," she said.

"She seems quite fond of you as well," said Mrs Darcy. Anne was less sure of that. Mrs Darcy gave a rueful laugh. "This was not what I expected when she became your companion,"

"Nor I," said Anne. "Do you... Does it trouble you, to have your sister associated with me, she thought, but could not bring herself to say.

"What matters to me is Mary's happiness," said Elizabeth. "If I thought you likely to harm her, or bring her into disrepute, then I would naturally object. But...my husband speaks highly of you, and of your honour. And Mary is of age; she must be mistress of her own fate." She frowned and tapped her finger against the hard cover of the book. Though she was barely older than Mary, she had all the bearing of a protective parent. Given how lax their actual parents were, it was probably good that someone felt responsible for Mary's welfare. Anne wondered how long Darcy had discussed the situation with his wife, and how hard it had been to persuade her to accept it. She felt an uncommon burst of affection for her cousin. Mrs Darcy looked at Anne. "Do you consider her your companion, still? I know you intend to find your own house in time, and I assume you will invite Mary with you."

"If she...if she wishes to go," said Anne. "And she is...she is my friend, not just my companion."

"I hate to be vulgar," said Mrs Darcy, with a sympathetic expression. "But...do you not still pay her an allowance? Will that not make any friendship strange?"
"Of course I pay her an..." started Anne, and then she stopped, remembering that she had forgotten to pay Mary any allowance once they left Rosings until Mary reminded her. "I do intend to pay her an allowance," she continued. "But...I see no way to avoid it, unless you were to support her, and that would be most irregular. And...I also do not mean to be vulgar, but does not Darcy pay you an allowance?"

Mrs Darcy blinked at her, and then laughed. "Yes, I suppose he does," she said. "And it does make our friendship strange, but we remain friends regardless. I cannot expect you to be a better friend than that."

"Thank you," said Anne. "Though I cannot say for certain whether Mary will wish to remain my friend."

"Neither can I," said Mrs Darcy. "But I think she likely will. She has an affectionate heart under all her moralising. And whatever happens, you will always be welcome as a guest in our house."

"Thank you," said Anne.

"Now that I have thoroughly interrogated you, shall I read to you as promised?" asked Mrs Darcy. Anne nodded, and Mrs Darcy opened the book again and began to read.

In the end, continued interrogation might have been preferable.

Elizabeth Darcy was an intelligent, well bred woman, and seemed to be settling well into her role as mistress of Pemberley and the rest of the Darcy estate. But if her circumstances had been very different she could have had a fine career on the stage. In contrast to Mary's calm, measured tone, she had a quick, expressive way of reading, and invested each character with their own voice and mannerisms, from the soft voiced Lady Percival to the extravagant and loud Mr Hervey. It was certainly distracting, but probably better suited to the future Darcy children's tastes than Anne's. She found herself developing a headache.

By the time her sister returned, Mrs Darcy was pretending to be a small boy, wearing an innocent expression and raising her voice as she read, "Here are all the muses for you, Mr. Hervey: which do you like best?"

"Mary," said Anne.

"Actually, Miss de Bourgh, I believe he chooses the tragic muse," said Mrs Darcy, "although I suppose that...ah, I see! Mary!" She smiled at her sister and put down the book at last. "How are Jane and the others?"

"Well," said Mary, looking distracted and a little flushed. "Excuse me, but may I speak with Anne alone?"

"I think I understand now," said Mary.

"You do?" The door had been shut and locked, and Mary's happy expression boded well. But Anne still felt very vulnerable. She had been cracked open to the quick, and all her instincts told her to hide away until she could mend the gap and pretend everything was as it had been.

"Yes, I spoke to Jane – no, I did not tell her that you...I did not explain the specific circumstances! But I asked her...she was the only person I could think of, who I could ask about such matters and know that she would not pry, or make assumptions. And I am sure she will not, Anne, and if she did somehow find out I am sure she would not judge you, or make things difficult. She is a very
understanding woman, too understanding really..."

It was rare to see Mary babble like this. She must be embarrassed, thought Anne. A rare sight indeed.

"Jane has not...she has only been with men, obviously. A man. But she explained...things, and I have extrapolated. I think I understand now how two women can behave in ways which are...not innocent, and not suitable between friends. And why it might cause a scandal, and why...why someone might think it was a terrible sin."

"And do you?" asked Anne.

"Yes," said Mary, with a small frown.

"I see." Of course she did. Anne wished she could hate Mary for it, but she could not; she only felt very sad and tired. Perhaps it was a sin. Even those who spoke of Free Love still meant love between men and women, and it had been a long time since Anne thought of Love as it related to herself with anything but despair and shame. Could Anne be sure she was right, when the whole of the world said she was wrong?

"But Anne, it is all right!" Mary clasped her hand and Anne had to stop herself from pulling it back in anger. How dare she touch Anne now, when she was about to take everything away? Mary smiled at her as if she was not grinding Anne's heart into the floor. "We are all sinners. I had it figured out last night, and talking with Jane has just solidified my certainty. You are a good person, Anne, and there is no reason we cannot continue to be friends."

"Is there not?"

"No, indeed!" said Mary. "In fact, it would be unchristian of me to abandon you, when instead I can act as a moral guide and example. Who else knows your struggle and can support you through it?"

"My struggle?"

"Against sin! And you are not so terrible a sinner, really. As you explained it to me, you loved...your friend, and would have married her if you could. As long...as long as that does not happen again, you will be safe from temptation. And if you are tempted I can help you remember why acting on that temptation would be unwise."

"So you will counsel me to remain lonely and without love? How kind of you."

Mary's face fell. "Anne, I do not wish...would it really be so lonely? I see why you do not wish to marry, but surely the comforts of friendship, and a loving family..."

"Please, do not continue," said Anne. Her head ached fit to bursting. "I understand you, now, as you understand me."

"I have upset you," said Mary sadly.

"Did you expect me to be happy? Am I to be glad, to have you watching me for–sin–and counselling me to ignore any love I might find?"

"Oh," said Mary, sadly. "Do you...do you not wish to be my friend?" Tears sprang up in her eyes. "I will not pretend not to believe what I know is right, but your friendship is so very dear to me. Must things change between us, Anne?"
"They cannot be exactly as they were," said Anne. "Words cannot be unsaid, and truths cannot be unknown. It seems..." she tried not to waver. "It seems very unlikely that I will ever find another woman who...that I will ever have the chance to face such temptation again. But what if I do? Would you stay my friend if I...if I took a lover?" Anne felt herself flush.

"Yes," said Mary. She seemed surprised at herself. "Yes," she said again, her voice more certain. "Anne, I cannot...I cannot imagine living without you. If you took... a... lover," she coughed out the word like it was poison, "then I would not approve. I would tell you it was wrong, and I would not...I might not wish to receive... her as a visitor." The idea made Mary visibly uncomfortable, her face contorted as if the poisonous word had left a nasty taste. She looked away. "Are you likely to do so?"

Anne gave a short bitter laugh. "No," she said. It felt laughable to even consider such a possibility. Who could she court, with her life like this? Who did she even like asides from Mary? Which brought forth the awful, impossible thought of Mary herself, in a different world where she could see Anne as anything but a friend, a friend whose desires she found abhorrent and sinful. But such thoughts were futile and disrespectful, so she put them aside.

Anne wiped her eyes.

"Mary, I do not wish for us to part. But you must promise not to lecture me; I could not bear it. If I somehow find a lover, we will have to revisit this topic again, but until then may we...simply forget about all this, as well as we can?"

"Gladly," said Mary, "if it means we can be friends again."

"I hope so," said Anne.

Chapter End Notes

Elizabeth is reading 'Belinda' by Maria Edgeworth aka "The Jane Austen of Ireland", another author Jane Austen was a fan of. Apparently Edgeworth snubbed Austen when she tried to give her a copy of Emma.
A prejudice is a fond obstinate persuasion for which we can give no reason; for the moment a reason can be given for an opinion, it ceases to be a prejudice, though it may be an error in judgment: and are we then advised to cherish opinions only to set reason at defiance? This mode of arguing, if arguing it may be called, reminds me of what is vulgarly termed a woman's reason.

-- Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Women

It was, as far as she could tell, a lovely ball.

"I almost wish my mother was here to see this," said Anne.

Darcy smiled. "I could always ask Bingley to invite her to his next ball."

Anne laughed at the thought of Lady Catherine deigning to be seen at an assembly organised by anyone as lowly as the Bingleys. "But that would not be my great coming out. She had it all planned out, you know. I would be presented at court at the start of the season, and go to all the best parties, where I would dance with only the most eligible of bachelors, but twice with you." She felt a moment of self consciousness at this reference to her mother's past expectations, but he did not seem to mind. "Alas, it was not to be."

"It would be my pleasure to dance with you now, if you so wish it," said Darcy. "Although I must warn you that I am indifferent partner. Elizabeth has often complained of it." He said this with an affectionate smile that spoke of a private joke. The Darcys had many private jokes; Anne tried not to find it too obnoxious. And it was kind of him to ask, even if he knew the answer would almost certainly be no.

"Thank you, but not tonight," said Anne. "Coming out is exertion enough for one evening. Dancing can wait for another ball." She was determined that there would be another ball, even if she had to sleep after this one for the rest of the season.

"Very well. I am regardless glad to see you here. I know that your health prevents you from many things, but we always missed you in town during the season, and I am glad you have had the chance to experience it."

"Yes," said Anne, trying not to let herself be overcome with regret for a youth spent waiting until she was well enough for the proper coming out Lady Catherine had been so determined on. She was not sure Darcy and the rest of the family had truly missed her, but as Miss de Bourgh of Rosings she would never have lacked for introductions or invitations. She certainly did not lack for them now, she was forever having to decide which of the many possible engagements she was invited to she should spend her limited energy on. If she had had a coming out ball, even now, there was no doubt it would have been popular, and no-one would have dared complain that she was too old or sickly to be a debutante.

But all she would ever manage, and all she needed, was simply this: to go to a ball. The denizens of the royal palace would happily go on without ever making her acquaintance, and avoiding a gala in her honour meant that she was free to leave whenever she wanted, or call off sick entirely, and no-one would mind.
And she was at a ball. The room was large, and hot, and bursting with more people in evening wear than Anne had seen in one place since she was a girl and her parents stopped hosting balls of their own. Dancers bowed and whirled to jigs and airs, and the conversation was so loud it was difficult to make out the words of the person next to you. And this was a small ball! Anne was not sure how much more of it she could take, but she was very glad to have seen it. She was out at last, and it had only taken her twenty nine years to get there.

Darcy was eventually dragged off to dance by Bingley's sister, and Anne was left to consider the room in solitude until the next well meaning soul or social climber tried to make conversation. She could see Mrs Darcy talking to Mrs Bingley and some other friends, while Miss Kitty Bennet danced with her fiancé, recently arrived in London. Anne had not had much of a chance to speak to Mr Hewitt, but he seemed a decent man, as did the friend he had brought with him. Mrs Wickham was dancing with the latest of a string of young men Anne did not recognise. She was less sure that the young man in question was decent, but Mrs Wickham seemed happy all the same.

Mary was dancing too, with Mr Bingley. She did not look entirely happy about it. As she had told Anne earlier, she would much rather have been playing the piano, but Bingley had hired professional players. Anne watched the white beads in Mary's dark hair glint in the candle light as she wove between the other dancers, arms swaying as she grasped Bingley's hand and then let it go, eyes focussed at a point midway between them. She was concentrating so hard on remembering the steps perfectly that the tip of her tongue had stuck out. Anne flatly refused to find this endearing, or feel sad that she could not dance with Mary herself. It was not as if Mary would want to dance with her even if she could. Such things were not part of the natural order, after all.

Anne frowned and looked away. She spent a moment wondering where Georgiana was before remembering that she was not yet out. Darcy was very protective of his sister, and did not want her attending balls until he was sure that she felt up to them. But it would not be forever for Georgiana, just a year or so. Darcy was not Lady Catherine.

The music ended, and the dancers bowed and scattered. Servants replaced a large bowl of punch just in time for Mary to pour herself a glass, drink it, then pour herself another.

"Would you like some punch, Anne?" she called across the small space between them. "It is quite refreshing!"

Anne usually avoided punch, her stomach not being much in favour of fruit juice or spirits. But though she could not dance she was determined to still take some part in the festivities. "Just a little," she said.

Mary sat beside her and handed over a pretty cup filled with a pungent smelling yellow liquid. Anne took a sip and then grimaced at the taste. "This is very strong," she said. She took another, larger sip on principle then gave up.

Mary took a swig from her own cup and swirled it around in her mouth before swallowing. "I suppose it is," she said. "Would you like some water instead?"

"Yes please," said Anne. Mary poured Anne's drink into her own cup and emptied it, then left for the refreshment table. Before she had time to return Anne had started to regret her decision to be festive. Her throat was burning and she could feel the stirrings of dyspepsia.

Anne took the glass of water from Mary gratefully. "I think it may be time to retire for the evening," she said, and felt her voice already starting to go hoarse. "Could you please thank the Bingleys for me? I must call for the carriage."
"You are unwell? But I will go with you," said Mary.

Anne shook her head. "The ball has barely started," she said. "You should stay and have fun."

"It is a ball," said Mary. "I only came to be polite, and be with you." It was hard to argue with that.

"Then shall we thank the Bingleys together?"

Thankfully, Anne had had the foresight to leave a bottle of medicine in their carriage for just this eventuality. The chalky liquid did not taste pleasant but it soothed her throat enough for speech. She sat back in the seat with a sigh, and smiled across at Mary. "I believe I shall classify this as a success," she said. "Though I may feel differently tomorrow."

"Better than a success," said Mary. "A triumph! Now everyone in London knows how pretty and wonderful you are. And you can go to balls whenever you like! Next time I will play. What is your favourite dance?"

"I do not know," said Anne, a trifle wistfully.

"Then I will play you all of them," said Mary. She gave out an unladylike cackle and then rested her head against the wall of the carriage as if the sound had taken all her energy to make.

"Are you quite well, Mary?"

"Very well," said Mary. "Did I mention that you are pretty? That dress suits you very well. And your hair is...all..." She swirled her fingers at her temples in the shape of Anne's ringlets. "You look as if you were a princess in a fairytale. If you had been willing to dance, I am sure all the men would have asked for your hand." She leaned towards Anne and added, sotto voce. "And all the women too. I know I would much rather dance with you than with Mr Bingley."

"I thought we agreed not to speak of such things," said Anne, discomforted. She did not know what to do with Mary in this mood.

"Very true, very true," said Mary seriously. She gave a heavy sigh and looked out the window.

As they travelled across the city a light rain started, and Anne's condition worsened. She shivered as they left the carriage. "You are cold!" said Mary. "I shall give you my coat."

"We shall take two steps and go indoors," said Anne, impatient to do just that.

"You are so wise, Anne," said Mary. "It is one of the things I love about you." She clasped Anne's hand and smiled at her dopily.

That did not sound right at all. What could have gotten into her?

They stepped inside.

"You have returned early," said Georgiana, rising from a chair near the entrance. Mrs Annesley had gone out for the evening, leaving her to manage the household alone. "Are you unwell, Anne?"

"Yes," said Anne. "But I had a delightful evening."

"Oh good," said Georgiana. "Next season, if I am out, I would be so happy if..."

"Is Anne not beautiful, Georgiana?" interrupted Mary.
"Yes?" Georgiana gave Anne a weak smile.

"She was the prettiest woman at the ball. Far prettier even than Jane. Or Elizabeth. Or Lydia. Or Kitty. Or Miss Bingley. Or Mrs..."

"I believe that Mary is drunk," said Anne.

"Oh dear," said Georgiana.

"Drunk?" cried Mary, loudly and in a tone of great offence. "I am never drunk. Drunkenness is a sin."

"You are drunk," said Anne. "How much of that punch did you drink?"

Mary pursed her lips in thought, and counted on her fingers. "I do not recall," she said at last. "The room was very warm, and dancing makes one remarkably thirsty. But I am not drunk."

Anne sighed. Her throat was still sore, her head swam, and her stomach had not forgiven her the insult of the punch. "Let us go to bed, and in the morning we will see if you also never suffer the after-effects of drink."

"And again you are wise," said Mary.

Anne said good night to Georgiana and left Mary in the hands of Mary's maid before returning to her own. Anne gave a relieved sigh as Jackson undid her laces, grateful to be finally out of her ball dress and free of the forest of pins holding up her hair.

"Should I have done up something simpler, Miss de Bourgh?" asked Jackson. "I did want you looking proper for your coming out, such as it was, but it's no good if it's made you too sick to stay."

"No, I do not regret it," said Anne. "I am sore now but it was a lovely evening. Thank you for your help."

When Jackson was gone Mary smiled to herself. Drunk or not, Mary had called her pretty. What a fool I am, she thought. But that was hardly a new revelation. She closed her eyes and started drifting off to sleep.

She was woken not long after by a creaking sound, and the sensation of the mattress shifting as someone got into bed. Half asleep and with her throat still hoarse, she managed to croak out a weak "What?"

"It is only me," said Mary. "I was falling sleep, and I thought about how lonely it was, to sleep alone. And I thought you might be lonely too. Especially because it is so cold. So I have come to keep you warm." She rolled over and gave Anne a kiss on the cheek.

Anne groaned. God save her from a well meaning, drunk Mary. "Go away," she said.

"Oh," said Mary. "Oh I thought you...but of course. If you do not wish...I am sorry." She sat up. Then she curled in on herself and started to cry.

Anne groaned again and sat up herself. A crying, drunk Mary was even worse. "Do not cry," said Anne. "Just go back to bed."

"I am sorry," said Mary, sniffling. "I just...I feel sad sometimes, that I cannot touch you. I know
you worry what others will think, and I suppose...I suppose for you it is different. Since you see
women as...as I do men. And so you only wish to embrace them in the context of marriage, or
something like it, and you do not wish to embrace them as friends. But I wish to embrace you as a
friend very much."

"It is not different for me," said Anne, too irritated by Mary's poor logic to think very hard about
what she was saying. "That makes no sense. I enjoy embracing women far more than I enjoy
embracing men! And I am sure I wish to embrace you just as much as you wish to embrace me.
Why would I not? It is not a matter of wishes, it is..."

But before she could explain why it was a bad idea for Mary to embrace her, she had already done
so. Mary pulled her close with a happy sigh.

"Oh, that makes me so happy!" said Mary. "I thought you did not like me to touch you, and I
want to touch you so much. Do you also wish to kiss me as a friend?" Mary kissed her on the lips,
leaving behind the taste of pineapple and tooth powder, then kissed her on the forehead and chin.
The kisses were loose and wet and Anne's skin was left feeling sticky and tingling.

"No," said Anne, wishing to kiss her very much. "Go to bed."

"Oh," said Mary. "That is a pity. For I wish to kiss you a great deal. But embracing is also
agreeable." She smiled at Anne and put her hand on Anne's thigh under the blanket. Her hand
was warm through the thin fabric of Anne's nightgown.

Anne put her hand on Mary's shoulder and pushed her away. "Mary...," she started, then lost her
nerve. Did she really have to explain this? Mary smiled at her again and started running her fingers
down Anne's hair. Anne sighed and cleared her throat, wincing at the painful way it rattled.
"Mary, you are being a terrible moral guide," she said in a disapproving tone, feeling very put
upon. "This is not helping me avoid impure thoughts about women at all."

"But of course it is," said Mary. "If you have innocent, friendly embraces with me you will feel
less lonely, and thus less tempted to engage in impure acts with other women. It is only logical."
Mary embraced her again, and gave her a squeeze, nuzzling her head into Anne's hair. "There is
no way you would impure thoughts about me," she said. "So it is perfectly safe."

"Yes, I would," said Anne. "Trust me, I...Please, Mary, this is every kind of inappropriate. You
must go back to bed."

Mary stiffened and shifted away, looking at Anne with wide eyes. Well, that was that. Maybe she
would forget in the morning and they could go back to pretending everything was fine.

"You have impure thoughts about me?" asked Mary. "You would like to--do--sinful things? With
me?" Her eyes were very bright and Anne could still taste the memory of her kiss. Anne had to
look away, sure the answer to Mary's question was written all over her face.

"I am sorry," said Anne. "Knowing your disinterest I would never consider..."

"I would be willing," said Mary. "I had not considered the possibility before, but it solves
everything. As your friend, I would be willing to help you resist temptation by lying with you. I
have spent some time considering the method, and it does not sound disagreeable."

"No," said Anne, horrified. This was like some strange, shameful dream. "No that is...Mary, that is
perverse. How is that any better than me simply taking a lover in the first place?"

"Because..." Mary frowned in concentration, seriously considering the question. "Because nobody
should touch you that way but me," she said, in a wondering tone, as if it was some great truth that
had just been revealed to her. "They will not love you as I do. It would be impure and sordid. With me it would be a pure, transcendental expression of friendship and love." She sighed happily and lay back on the pillow, closing her eyes. "We would be like Diana and her acolytes, bathing naked together after a hunt," said Mary. "How agreeable it would be..."

"Oh my God," said Anne.

Surely Mary could not—not really be attracted to her? There had been many times Anne had thought she saw something beyond friendly affection in Mary's fondness for her, but had chided herself for wishful thinking, and then had chided herself for even having such wishes. But the thought of Mary reciprocating Anne's affections made Anne suddenly aware of how deep those affections ran. How had she ever thought her plain, or dull? She was an angel, even in the darkness she radiated a warmth that melted the ice that had paralysed Anne for so long.

"Do not take the Lord's name in vain," mumbled Mary.

And if the Lord had sent an angel to punish and tempt Anne he could not have done much better. For Mary was still Mary, and she still thought Anne's preferences were a sin. The fact that she shared those preferences changed nothing, if anything, it just made the situation more awful.

"Mary Bennet you are the most incredible hypocrite I have ever met," said Anne, affectionately. She let herself touch her fingers to Mary's cheek, and just for a moment imagined that Mary really meant what she was saying, and would still mean it in the morning.

Mary did not reply. Instead she started to snore softly.

"No, no, no, you are not falling asleep in my bed," said Anne. "Wake up." She poked Mary in the side. "Wake up!"

Mary was not a light woman, and Anne was not strong, but somehow she managed to push her out of Anne's bed and send her stumbling out the door. At which point, Anne encountered a very surprised footman.

"Are you having trouble, Miss de Bourgh?" he asked, with the expression of a servant not sure if he should be pretending not to see what his betters were up to.

"Miss Bennet sleepwalked into my room," said Anne. "Can you please make sure she gets back to her own room safely?"

"Of course," he said. Anne watched Mary to see if she was about to repeat her previous sentiments, but she just blinked sleepily and went where she was led.

Anne sighed gratefully and went back into her room, though she had her doubts about getting any sleep.

There are many stories of weak minded people who drink to forget their troubles. Mary was not tempted to join their ranks.

Being drunk had caused her to forget many things: her dignity, her principles, her self respect. But it had not erased her troubles, and the morning brought nothing but the stark, cold knowledge of what she had done.

Mary winced at the sunlight streaming across the carpet as she stumbled out of her chambers.

"Oh dear," said Elizabeth in a concerned tone that did not quite hide her amusement. "Did you
drink the bad punch?" She stepped over and closed the curtains, and immediately became Mary's absolute favourite sibling.

"Bad punch?" replied Mary.

"As far as anyone can tell, an entire bottle of brandy somehow got exchanged for one of the bottles of champagne. Someone noticed quickly and the tainted bowl was taken away, but more than one guest inadvertently overindulged in the meantime. Poor Mr Brown fell and twisted his ankle after trying to dance on the piano." Poor Mr Brown indeed. Elizabeth looked more amused than sympathetic. "Bingley is distraught, but the ball was otherwise so charming that I think he shall be forgiven."

"Ah," said Mary. "Yes, that would explain my current and previous state."

Elizabeth poured her a drink. "A little hair of the dog that bit you?" She was likely remembering, as Mary was, the many times their mother had used this phrase in the morning after a rowdy night. Elizabeth herself had always been too careful to need it herself, and until now so had Mary.

"Thank you," said Mary. The wine (or was it brandy? You would think the difference would be obvious) burned as it went down, but did help a little with her headache. Why anyone would choose to get drunk was beyond her, this was awful. "Have you seen Anne?"

Elizabeth directed her towards the sitting room. Mary thanked her and went to face her fate.

"You remember, then," said Anne, seeing Mary's expression. "I was not sure that you would." Her voice was still hoarse, and for some reason this was intensely attractive.

Everything about Anne was intensely attractive. It was like a screen had been removed from Mary's mind, and all the feelings she had labelled as friendly affection and aesthetic admiration were now clear in their nature as love and desire. Realisation that she felt this way had felt like a glorious revelation last night, and Mary had felt buoyant with truth and joy. The thought was no longer joyful but the attraction remained. Looking at Anne set off a sharp yearning in Mary's chest.

"Not everything," said Mary. "But I know that...that I was unforgivably forward. No, beyond forward. Obscene. The things I said! I cannot forgive myself. I can only express my deep sorrow and penitence."

"You were drunk," said Anne. "I know you would never say such things in your right mind." She frowned.

"That excuses nothing! Drunkenness itself is a sin," said Mary. "To be drunken and...and lustful is the worst sin I can imagine."

"Neither of them are sin to me," said Anne. "In my opinion, your worst sin was bothering me when I was trying to sleep." Yet she was curled up in on herself, clearly miserable. There was no doubt that Mary's actions had upset her, whatever she might say.

"That is very kind of you," said Mary. "But I cannot agree. And to think I claimed to be a moral guide to you. I have always considered myself chaste and virtuous, yet in the end I am...I am no better than Lydia. No, I am as bad as Wickham. I tried to seduce you! If you had not resisted..."

"But I did," said Anne. "For you are no rake, and I am no innocent young girl. Mary, you must not...it was a moment of weakness. If you must see your actions as sinful then...you have repented. Now you can move on, wiser and more careful."
"Yes," said Mary. "You are right, as always. You are so good, Anne. I have pretended to moral purity but my purity is base and hypocritical. It is you who truly virtuous. We shall be two brave soldiers together, fighting the call of sin."

Anne made an irritated noise. "If you must see it that way," she said.

"Would you rather I did not?" asked Mary. "Would you rather we...no, I must not ask that."

"Indeed," said Anne. "You must not."

Did she mean to imply that she was interested in Mary? But she had pushed her away. As was right and good, and only logical. Yes, Anne was interested in women, but that did not mean she would be interested in her. Why would anyone as beautiful and wise as Anne look at someone as plain and dull as Mary?

And why did Mary feel so sorry for it?

Chapter End Notes

Mary has apparently been looking at the art of François Boucher (NSFW).
Chapter 21

Be it far or nie, wedding is destiny
And hanging likewise, sayth the proverbe, sayd I

-- John Heywood, Proverbs

Mary was not usually plagued by extended self doubt. Whenever the universe contradicted her point of view, she either changed her point of view or, if necessary, simply ignored that part of the universe. In either case she saw no need to dwell for too long on the fact that she had been mistaken, or the possibility that she might be again.

But she could not reconcile her attraction to Anne with her view of herself as a good, moral, appropriate person, nor could she ignore it. Every time she saw Anne, she was overcome with a deep, bittersweet yearning. It was the first time in her life that her personal preferences and morals did not align, and she found it most uncomfortable. Self sacrifice had been much easier when it had involved giving up things she didn't really want in the first place. She had been so self righteous about her moral fortitude, including to Anne, yet it was Anne who had stayed strong and Mary who had strayed. Even now Mary had to struggle against the desire to try again, to find out what Anne would be willing to do when Mary's mind was not clouded by drink. This desire was a constant reminder to Mary of her own hypocrisy and sinful nature, and since she could not change her nature, her only relief from self reproach was to try to make up for her hypocrisy.

She was thus faced with an awful task.

"Lydia," said Mary, "I would like to apologise. I have been quite unfair to you."

"So you admit you owe me two shillings," said Lydia. "For it did rain on Sunday, just as I said it would."

"Indeed I do not," said Mary, annoyed. "I never agreed to your bet and in fact consider gambling a..." She reminded herself of her purpose, and modified her tone. "I speak of my treatment of you regarding the circumstances surrounding your marriage. I was too unkind; I should not have blamed you for being misled by Mr Wickham, for you were very young and did not know he was false."

"Oh," said Lydia. Then she laughed. "But that was years ago, Mary; nobody cares about that now. It is not as if I ever listen to anything you say anyway."

"Be that as it may," said Mary, "I apologise."

"Then I accept your apology," said Lydia, with an affectionate smile. She smiled often, but not usually at Mary, and almost never with such affection. Perhaps Anne was right, and their unfriendly state was not entirely Lydia's fault, but might be mended through more kindness from Mary. Lydia gave a small curtsey. "And in return, I shall forgive you my two shillings."

"...thank you, Lydia," said Mary.

Mr Fletcher poured the tea and sat quietly as Kitty and her fiancé told Mary all their plans for Mr Hewitt's parish once they were married. These plans were more focussed on saving the parishioners from starvation or illiteracy than saving their souls, but that was important work too, and Kitty and Mr Hewitt's optimistic enthusiasm was infectious. Many of these plans also
involved Mr Fletcher, a friend of Mr Hewitt's who had recently bought a house near the vicarage. He seemed an amiable fellow, a handsome gentleman in his early twenties with a soft voice and gentle disposition. What Mary couldn't figure out was why he was here.

"You should hear David...Mr Fletcher play hymns; it is quite inspiring," said Kitty. "He is very fond of music. Books as well. He is always reading. And he has offered Mr Hewitt so many clever suggestions for sermons, for he is deeply pious. I believe he also likes beetles, is that not right, Mr Fletcher?"

Mr Fletcher responded to the question with a look of surprise, and then a softly spoken "Yes?"

Mary was not always very good at noticing when people were trying to manipulate her, but Kitty was not very good at manipulation. Even she could tell that Kitty was trying very hard to get her to like Mr Fletcher. This impression was strengthened when Kitty took Mary aside after the gentlemen had left and asked, "Do you like Mr Fletcher? Please tell me you do."

"I have no objections to him," said Mary.

"Really? Oh, that is wonderful," said Kitty.

Mary could think of only one reason Kitty would be so determined to make Mary like this young man, and she was not pleased about it. "Kitty, I am sure that Mr Hewitt and yourself are well suited. He seems a sensible, moral young man and I am sure you will be very happily married. But you must not assume that just because you have found happiness in marriage, every other person should therefore be pushed into marriage as well. I do not mean to shock you, but I...I have recently been of a mind to stay unmarried indefinitely. My friendship with Anne..."

Kitty laughed. "Oh, Mary. Of course I am not shocked. And I do not intend Mr Fletcher for you. I understand your friendship with Miss de Bourgh, and why you have become so much more free thinking of late. For you see, Mr Fletcher and Mr Hewitt and I...we are friends in the same way." Kitty smiled at Mary bashfully.

Mary stared at her. Friends in the same way? Forever on the brink of an unspoken desire? It was a tenuous way to maintain a friendship, but no way to maintain a marriage. Unless Kitty thought that Anne and Mary were something other than what they were. But how would such a relationship contain a third?

"Oh dear, now I have shocked you," said Kitty. "I knew I would explain it wrong!"

"Kitty...," said Mary slowly. "Either I am misunderstanding you, or you are quite mistaken about my relationship with Anne." To her surprise, she was not offended or worried that Kitty would think that she and Anne were lovers, if that was indeed what she was implying. Mary felt only an intense melancholy about the fact that Kitty was wrong.

"Oh no," said Kitty. "Am I really? Does that mean...oh, tell me you are not too shocked, Mary. And do not tell Papa or the others, they would never understand, and Mr Hewitt and Mr Fletcher could go to prison. Oh, oh, I have ruined everything, I should never have told you." She put her hand over her mouth and made a soft cry.

Mary had spent her whole life trying to be virtuous via the meticulous following of rules: the rules of the church, of her parents, of the books she had read. But these rules had played her false. They told her that there was no way to not break the rules, that her very nature was unacceptable. Mary's nature included a fair portion of self respect, and it rebelled at the idea of giving up on virtue as an impossible goal. So she was forced to rely on the more nebulous guidance of her own conscience. It was difficult, and confusing, and frightening, but the more she did it the easier it
"Do not be distressed, Kitty," said Mary. "You have nothing to fear from me. I am surprised, but if you are truly happy then can have no strong objection. In fact I have been reconsidering the correct theological stance on such matters, on a rereading of Leviticus..."

"Oh, Mary, we are so happy!" said Kitty. "At first it was only flirtation, and none of us thought anything would come of it. I could not decide between them, you see, and it turns out they could not decide what to do about me either! For they have been in love with each other for ever so long, and had promised to never leave each other for a woman, is that not romantic? But then they met me, and they both found they liked me very much, and I liked them, and for a while we all felt terrible about it, for we did not wish to cause each other pain. But then one day we sort of...fell into talking about it, I suppose, and in the everything worked out for the best!" Kitty beamed, so perfect an image of a young girl in love that the strangeness of the nature of that love seemed almost irrelevant by comparison.

"My goodness," said Mary. She could not help but be reminded of Anne and her Miss Finch. If they had found an accepting bridegroom, would Anne have been as happy with her lot as Kitty was now? What if she found a lover, as she had said she might? Neither thought brought Mary joy, yet Anne's current, lonely state was hardly preferable. "And do you not mind that Mr Hewitt and Mr Fletcher are in love with each other as well as with you?"

"No," said Kitty. "I found it strange at first, but now it feels the most natural thing in the world. They are so darling together, how could I mind it?"

"I cannot imagine feeling such a lack of jealousy," said Mary. She felt envious enough of Anne's imaginary groom.

"I cannot imagine being happy with only one man or--" Kitty paused "One person."

She poured herself another cup of tea and smiled at Mary. "What of you, Mary? So you really do plan to remain single in truth? I apologise for assuming the wrong thing about you and Miss de Bourgh, before."

"You need not apologise," said Mary. "You were..." Mary felt overcome with emotions she could not express. "You were not entirely wrong." Her voice cracked and she felt her eyes burn with unshed tears.

"Oh," said Kitty. "Would you like to talk about it?" It occurred to Mary that she was possibly the only person in the world who she could trust to understand her situation, and not think badly of her or Anne about it.

"...Yes," said Mary. "But I may first require another cup of tea."

Anne tired of London. She liked the people, the fashion, and the culture, and loved having the freedom to decide which of them she would see or not at any given time. But she did not like the dirty air or the filthy streets, and as much as Kent had been figuratively stifling, at least when she lived there she had found it easier to breathe.

She tired too of being a houseguest, and longed for her own home to be mistress of. There was no question of ruling Rosings, not while her mother lived, but her needs were small. A country
house, helpful staff, the capacity to host her own guests, and she would be content.

Content, but possibly alone.

Before they left Rosings, there had been much discussion between Anne and Mary about the logistics of finding a new house. At first Anne had thought perhaps to stay in London permanently, but that had quickly been rejected once Anne experienced the reality of city life. They had then been faced with the more challenging task of deciding on a location for a country house: near Rosings? Near Pemberley? Neither had suggested living near Longbourn, but it had still gone without saying that Mary would come to live with Anne, and that their life would continue on as it had before.

It did not go without saying now. Anne had continued to investigate possible new homes, but without Mary, and without the assumption that Mary would be coming to join her. Their friendship had been strained of late. In some ways it had been easier when Mary simply disapproved of Anne; now that she also disapproved of herself, and her reactions to Anne, things had become awkward.

It had been worst just after Bingley's ball. Mary had barely been able to stay in the room as Anne. Now it was almost the same as it was before. Almost, but not quite. They still talked, and read books together, and offered each other a refuge of calm and understanding when the rest of the world became too much to bear. But they were never entirely relaxed in each other's company. Not any more. It was as if a chasm had formed in the very centre of their friendship, and they were constantly, silently stepping around it, afraid of what might happen if they tumbled in.

And that was when they shared a busy household with many other people to distract them. What would it be like if they lived alone? Would Mary even be willing to accept such a situation?

Anne had become reliant on Mary to give her courage when she was afraid; what was Anne to do when it was Mary she was afraid of? But she could not wait forever: the season was coming to an end, and soon the Darcy family would be returning to Pemberley. Anne did not wish to be forced to go with them, not without at least trying to find a home of her own first.

And so she found the courage, in the end, somehow.

The two of them sat in silence for some time. They did not sit in the same chair any more, and the settee felt very large with only her on it. Anne wanted to speak, but found herself unable to do so. In the end it was Mary who broke the silence.

"I am glad you asked me to speak with you alone," she said. "For there is something...that is..."

"Please wait," said Anne. "For I must..." She trailed off, and there was an awkward pause. Mary looked at her with mute confusion. Yes, it was ridiculous to sit here without speaking. Anne steeled herself.

"I have found a house," she said. "It is near Reading, in Oxfordshire. And...and I was wondering if you wanted to come with me. You are most welcome, of course, but am not sure that your previous role...that is, I am not sure that companion is quite..."

"Indeed," said Mary. "That is what I wished to speak to you about." She seemed nervous. It was hard not to take that as a bad sign.

"It need not be the house I have chosen; we could find a different house, if you like," continued Anne, quickly. "And you would be my equal in every way. Free to come and go as you please, and with the same power as me over the servants and so forth. I would pay you an allowance, still,
but you would not be...reliant on me. In fact, I had thought...thought to settle an annuity in your name, and make you my heir. So you need not worry about...about me liking you, if we were to quarrel. You would always be free."

"Your heir?" said Mary, eyes wide. Was it too much? Anne was sick of being cautious, but did not know how to be brave without being foolhardy.

"I will have no children," said Anne, "and Rosings is not entailed. I would rather it to go to you than..." she muttered to her shoes "...than anyone else. Is that something you would like, Mary? To come and stay with me and be my friend? You need not say yes." Say yes, she thought.

"Anne, I...that is very kind of you," said Mary. But her face was sad. Anne felt her tenuous mental strength begin to fail her. She had to resist the urge to crawl back into her bed and never leave it.

She forced out the words "...And what do you say?"

Mary looked away. "I had hoped that...that is to say, I have been considering our situation, and I would prefer..." Mary straightened her dress and frowned before taking a deep breath. "Anne. I know you have said you do not believe in marriage." Anne's heart sank. "You have said that it is an oppressive institution. And given your past experiences, I understand that you would not be quick to...to be so united with another. But I wonder if you might, under the right circumstances, be persuaded to consider a marriage where..."

This, again? After everything? "No," said Anne, firmly, desperately. "Not under any circumstances. Mary, you know I cannot marry, how can you even suggest such a thing?"

"I am sorry," said Mary sadly. "I thought perhaps...but of course I cannot ask you to abandon your beliefs any more than you have asked me to abandon mine. In that case, yes, I would be happy to accompany you to your new house, as your friend."

It seemed impossible. Had she really said yes? "Oh, thank goodness," said Anne. "You frightened me when you spoke of marriage!" Though that fear had quickly evaporated in the face of the knowledge that Mary was to live with her.

"My apologies," said Mary. "I did not mean to frighten you. I will not mention it again."

"Thank you," said Anne, heart energised with joy and mind full of daydreams. "Do you like the sound of Reading then? It is near London, so we could visit for the season without too much trouble. And it is an easy distance to Hunsford and Meryton without being...too close. I have not been there, but it sounds a charming city, and the village of Caversham where the house is located is known for its fine woods."

"I like the sound of that very much," said Mary.

"I am so glad to hear it!" said Anne. "Oh, I do hope you like the house. It is very small...well, I suppose it may not seem small to you, but I assure you that my mother will be quite shocked by its humility. But I think it will suit us perfectly. We would have a bedroom each, with room for several guests besides, there is a sitting room facing South which will be warm even in winter, and room for a library..." She laughed happily and grasped Mary's hand. "Oh, I am so happy," she said.

"As am I," said Mary. But there was still some sadness to her smile.

"Mary?" said Anne. She searched her face, and Mary turned from her again.

"Anne," she said. "I have one more question." Her hand twitched nervously under Anne's palm.
"As I have said, I would be happy to stay with your as your friend. But I was wondering, if I became comfortable with the idea, if you would be willing to...that is, if there is any chance that you would wish for me to...be...your..." Her face had gone beet red.

"Your..." Anne could not think of any end to that sentence she found credible.

Mary had gone entirely still, except for her hands, which twitched slightly as she frowned at the floor. "I know I cannot expect that you would care for me as I do you," she said. "I know that the fact that you like women does not mean that you would ever like me, not that way. I have been so cruel to you, and you have been so patient. You are so elegant and wise, and I am so...so..."

Anne had been happy already, but she began to feel the beginnings of an even greater happiness, tinged with concern that Mary would think herself so unworthy.

"Mary," she said, gently placing her hand on the tense knot of Mary's fingers. "When mentioned marriage, did you mean that I should marry you?"

"Yes," said Mary, looking at her in surprise. "Who else would I have meant?"

Who else indeed?

They fell silent again, but the silence now felt full of possibility. Anne waited until her heart had stopped beating too fast for her to think clearly. She rubbed Mary's hand gently, and leaned her face towards her. She kissed Mary lightly on the lips. "Mary," she said. "Mary, I am not wise. My mind spins in circles and keeps me paralysed while you have the strength to step forward and speak the truth. And while I am not quite sure what it will mean...my answer is yes."

"Oh," said Mary, and her face lit up slowly with a smile. She looked so lovely that Anne took her head in her hands and kissed her again.

_I can kiss her whenever I like_, she thought.

Mary must have thought something similar, for she pulled Anne close and kissed her back, leaving a trail of light kisses across Anne's face and down her neck. Anne gasped.

"Was that bad?" said Mary.

"No," said Anne, catching her breath. "Far from it."

"I am glad to hear it," said Mary. "I know I am plain and inexperienced, but I hope I will not be a disappointment."

"I love you," said Anne. "That is all that matters. And you are entirely beautiful."

"You love me?" said Mary.

"Of course I do," said Anne. "I would not marry you if I did not! Mary, you are dearer to me than anything."

Mary smiled and blushed. "Ah," she said. "I was not entirely sure – I thought perhaps you only intended to take me as a lover."

"No!" said Anne. "I would never expect...is that what you thought I was agreeing to?"

Mary did not answer. Instead she rested her head on Anne's shoulder. "You are dear to me as well," she said, her breath warm on Anne's neck. "I do not have the words to express my
affection. It took me so long to admit to it, to even understand that it was possible. But I think...I think that I have loved you for a very long time."

Anne kissed Mary's shoulder, and put her hand softly on her head. "I as well."

"But do you really mean to say that you will marry me?" said Mary in a small voice. "You were so adamant against it."

"I thought you meant that I should marry a man!" said Anne. "But to pledge myself to you, to promise to love you for as long as I live, without priest or judge to watch over us, that I would do gladly." The more she thought of it, the more she liked the idea. For once you removed the oppressive laws that gave husbands so much unearned power, what was marriage but a promise to share one's life with another person? And what had Anne wished for with Mary, but to do exactly that?

She started imagining how they could perform the rite. Her first thought was a forest glade, as part of nature, but many experiments had proven that however much Anne liked forest glades in principle, she did not actually like them much in practice. Indoors then. Just the two of them, exchanging vows of their own design. Or perhaps even with witnesses: Darcy would be willing, she was fairly sure, and perhaps Mrs Darcy as well. Then they would be as married as any farmer of old to his common law wife.

And after that, they would be together for the rest of their lives. No mothers or sisters or cousins to control them, no shame or uncertainty about their love. Just their own little household, and their own two hands held together. Anne gave Mary a kiss and smiled at her affectionately.

Mary smiled back. "Anne," she said. "I have one more question."

"Yes?" said Anne, wondering what she could possibly ask next.

"Do you mean to say you would not be willing to be married by a priest?" She looked very serious. "For that...that is what I meant by a marriage. If you would not then...then I suppose it will be all right. But I would prefer..."

What an exasperating woman Anne had fallen in love with. "It is not a matter of wanting," she said. "I see no reason I would object, were the priest willing. But there is not a priest in the country that would marry two women. I doubt there is one in the whole world."

"Ah," said Mary, with an even larger smile. "But there is."
And all that evil might, with God's blessing, be happily prevented by an early and diligent application to Female Accomplishments.

-- Sermons to Young Women, Dr. James Fordyce

Sunlight streamed through lace curtains to paint the flowers on the sitting room carpet in yellow and orange. The house felt much larger now that it was empty of guests. Not that there had been many guests, a wedding between two women is not the sort of social engagement you put in the newspaper. But there had been enough friends and family to fill the little sitting room with conversation and good cheer. Soon the servants would finish tidying up the food and it would be almost as if the wedding had never happened. But it had.

Mary sat, watching the bees buzz around the roses in the garden through the window, and played with her wedding ring. It felt smooth and strange against her fingers, like the familiar shape of her hand had changed ever so slightly.

"I am sorry I am so tired," said Anne. She had been visibly flagging as the breakfast went on, and now flopped half asleep next to Mary on the settee. The pretty curls her hair had been coaxed into this morning were beginning to unravel, and she had loosened the buttons on her fancy silver gown. She had looked so lovely during the ceremony, but she looked just as lovely now. *My wife*, thought Mary, happily.

"Since you are tired as a result of marrying me," said Mary. "It would be unfair to hold it against you." She brushed the limp curls off Anne's head and kissed her forehead.

"Hmm...yes, I married you," said Anne, smiling. She leaned up and gave Mary a kiss, then rested her head against Mary's shoulder.

"Shall I have Jackson come help you prepare for sleep?"

"Sleep?" said Anne, moving her head up again. "It is my wedding ni...afternoon. If I sleep now I may not wake until tomorrow, and thus miss my chance to ravish you." She gave Mary a half lidded look that aimed for seductive but mostly just made her look more drowsy.

Mary blushed, regardless. "I am not sure you have the energy to ravish me," she said, softly.

The maid cleaning the table pretended not to hear. The staff had been chosen in part for their discretion, and seemed happy to let their mistresses do as they wished as long as all the bills were paid on time. Mary found it strange to be anyone's mistress, to have a responsibility over the household instead of passively accepting whatever was chosen by the head of the house, but she found she liked it, liked sharing that role with Anne and deciding how their lives would progress together.

"That is..." Anne attempted to sit up and flopped back down. "That is possibly true. But I am determined regardless to make the attempt."

Mary helped her up, and gave her a kiss. The kiss deepened. Mary liked kissing. She suspected she would like other things too, but Anne had been quite insistent they not anticipate their wedding vows. *I shall be your moral guide*, she had said, solemnly. *For I know it is important to
you to remain chaste while an unmarried maiden. Which it was, but Mary might not have minded if Anne had let her betray her principles a little.

There were no principles stopping her now.

"I will help you to your room," said Mary. "Shall I...shall I visit you there anon?"

"Yes," said Anne.

Mary sent for Jackson and her own maid, Taylor, then sat by her mirror feeling very self conscious. She usually did not pay much attention to the ways servants knew all aspects of her life, but it felt strange to involve them in this.

"Shall I ready you for bed?" asked Taylor.

"Yes, please," said Mary, trying not to feel entirely transparent. People sometimes went to bed at three in in the afternoon, did they not?

Taylor smiled and helped Mary out of her wedding dress and into her nightgown. It was one she did not wear very often, for she found it impractically thin. Taylor brushed out Mary's hair and then twisted it around the end of the hairbrush to make it curl into loose waves. She had never done that before. "Let's have you looking nice," she said.

Mary was too embarrassed to reply. Was it to be like this every time? How did other women cope? She almost wished she were a commoner, and not expected to rely on maids to help her every time she wished to undress.

But then she was through the door to Anne's bedroom, and all thoughts of embarrassment vanished.

Anne was a formless lump at the head of her bed. Mary walked towards her, and saw Anne watching her from under the bedclothes. "I thought you might have fallen asleep," said Mary with relief.

"Of course not," said Anne, stifling a yawn. "It was only that I became little cold."

"Then I shall warm you up," said Mary, feeling daring.

Anne coloured and coughed out "Please do", before moving over to make room.

Mary joined her under the covers. Without thinking, she took Anne's hands as she had when they shared a bed at Rosings, and rubbed them to make them warm. Anne smiled. The curtains had not been fully closed, and Mary could see Anne clearly in the rich autumn sunlight. They lay there looking at each other.

"I am not sure how to begin," said Mary.

"As we have before," said Anne, moving closer, "but without the part where we stop."

That sounded logical. Yet Mary found herself paralysed with anxiety nonetheless. "I am sorry I am so inexperienced," she said.

Anne leaned forward and kissed her. "There is no solution for that but practice," she said, softly, and her breath on Mary's cheek made her shiver. "If you find yourself completely at sea there are books, but I am sure that..."
"There are books?" said Mary. "I could have studied?"

Anne widened her eyes. "Yes, but..." She frowned. "Mary are you saying you would rather read a book than simply kiss me?"


Pulling Anne closer, Mary felt her hands become lost in a froth of lace and ruffles. And then she became distracted by the feeling Anne touching her, her cold fingers pressed up against Mary's side and running, tangling in Mary's hair.

Being in bed removed the usual difficulties associated with being different heights, but it introduced the complication of bedding. The sheets got tangled in Mary's feet and made it difficult to move. There was too much fabric in general. She wanted to touch all the parts of Anne she had only touched in passing, or imagined. She felt a flush of shame to think such lewd thoughts, but then reminded herself that she and Anne were married, and that such thoughts were now only right and natural.

That did not make them easy to express.

"Dearest," she said. "Would it be appropriate to remove, um..."

Anne blushed. Had Mary been too forward? But then she smiled, and sat up. "That would be entirely appropriate," she said. She was wearing a short, ruffled nightdress with sections of translucent lace. It was very pretty, but Mary still wished very much to see Anne without it.

Anne reached down to pull off her dress, and then stopped halfway through.

"Mary," she said, voice muffled, "Could you..."

"Gladly," said Mary, and dug her hands amongst the ruffles until she could find a handhold. She carefully pulled off the nightdress and placed it on the bed. Anne emerged from looking a little disheveled and entirely naked.

Was it rude to stare? Because Mary really, really wished to stare. She had seen Anne naked before, but only briefly, and never like this. She was pale and delicate, her small breasts tipped with pink. Anne blushed and self consciously covered herself. "You should remove your clothes as well," she said.

So Mary did so. They both stared at each other.

"You are so beautiful," said Anne. "May I..." She placed her hand on Mary's chest. Though her hands were cold, it made Mary feel very warm.

They embraced again, now with nothing between them. Mary could feel Anne's whole body pressed up against her, soft and sharp and moving in so many places she could not keep track. Kisses on her lips, her throat, her bosom, hands running across her hips and pulling at her back. It was intoxicating. Mary fell backwards onto the bed and pulled Anne on top of her. Anne let out a delighted laugh and gave her a short, sharp kiss, then rested her head on Mary's chest, lightly making circles on Mary's shoulder with the tips of her fingers. Mary ran her hands down Anne's back, fascinated by the bumps and moving muscles. Her skin was smooth and warm, not so different than Mary's own yet far more satisfying to touch.

After a while, Mary noticed that the sensation of Anne's fingers skimming against her skin had slowed and then stopped.
"Anne?" she said.

"Mmm?" said Anne, into Mary's chest.

"Are you falling asleep?"

"No," said Anne. She sighed, causing Mary's skin to tingle. "Which is to say, not any more." She pulled herself up onto her hands and looked down at Mary. She looked very tired, but also very happy.

"I am so glad I found you," she said.

"As am I," said Mary.

Anne leaned down and kissed Mary again. Then she moved her legs and shifted her weight backwards and suddenly Mary's awareness of Anne contracted to a single intense point of contact. Mary gasped.

"Hmm?" said Anne, with a knowing look. Mary was reminded that she had done all this before. She desperately wanted to ask Anne to do whatever she'd just done again, but it felt too nakedly wanton.

Mary settled for saying, "That was nice."

"That," said Anne leaning close, letting her hair brush against Mary's chest, "was only the beginning."

Goodness. Mary regretted again the lost opportunity to study.

Anne leaned closer, and then lay down on Mary entirely. She made a long, low, sound of frustration. "Except it is not," she said, in an irritated tone, "for I find myself entirely too fatigued to move a moment longer."

"Oh dear," said Mary.

"I am so sorry, Mary," said Anne. "This is not what a wedding night should be."

Mary could not pretend not to be a little disappointed, but mostly she felt a deep affection for Anne and gratitude for being able to lie with her at all, even in sleep. "I will still be married to you tomorrow night," she said. "And the night after that."

Anne sighed again. "That is true," she said. She kissed Mary one last time and then slowly rolled over onto her back. She smiled at Mary sleepily from her pillow. "I will see you tomorrow, then," she said, "wife."

"Until tomorrow," said Mary. She rescued her nightgown from the tangle of blankets and went to go warm herself by the fire that always burned in Anne's room.

The sun had set and Mary was having to read by candle light before she heard any movement from the bed again.

"You are still here," she heard Anne say in surprise. Mary looked towards the bed. Anne had pulled the blanket up to cover herself but the pale skin of her shoulders reflected the flickering firelight.

"I did not like to leave you," said Mary. "And I was not ready to sleep myself." Changing back
into her day clothes had seemed too much trouble, and she had quite enjoyed watching Anne sleep while there was still light to do it.

"Are you tired now?" said Anne. "I am not sure what time it is. But I...I find I am much refreshed myself." She smiled self-consciously and fiddled with the edge of her pillowslip.

"I am not tired," said Mary. She put down her book.

And in the end Mary turned out to be a very fast learner, even without the chance to study in advance.

Chapter End Notes

Some of you may remember that this quote used to be at the start of the story, but I think it suits this chapter better ;)

Anyway, here we are at the end! I hope you liked the story, and if you've been with me since the earlier versions I thank you for your patience.

And this isn't quite the very end, there's a deleted scene I turned into an extra little story, to be posted once this is up and I've made sure everything is in order.

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