



# Elizabeth's Good Fortune

**Author:** *Grace Belton*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Three unexpected paths to love, three chances at understanding, three ways to discover that first impressions aren't always right...

Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy find their way to each other through surprising circumstances in this collection of three *Pride and Prejudice* variations. Each story offers a fresh perspective on Jane Austen's beloved characters while weaving new tales of misunderstanding, growth, and romance.

**Mr. Darcy's Dilemma** When Elizabeth becomes a companion to Anne de Bourgh, she discovers there's more to the proud Mr. Darcy than she initially believed. But will Lady Catherine's interference doom their budding romance before it can truly begin?

**Elizabeth's Gratitude** A secret journey to thank Mr. Darcy leads to an unexpected illness, proving that sometimes our most carefully laid plans must go awry for our hearts to find their way home.

**Elizabeth's London Season** A surprise inheritance opens new doors for Elizabeth in London society, but only letting go of old prejudices can open her heart to true happiness.

From drawing rooms to country inns, from quiet moments of understanding to bold declarations of love, these three romantic adventures prove that there are infinite ways for Elizabeth and Darcy to find their happily ever after. Perfect for both longtime fans of *Pride and Prejudice* variations and readers just discovering the joy of reimagined Austen romance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 3

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

I stand before De Bourgh House, my small trunk already whisked away by a footman whose name I have yet to learn, and find myself seized by an uncomfortable awareness of my own insignificance. The house—nay, mansion—towers above me, its Georgian splendor making Longbourn appear a mere cottage in comparison. The windows, reaching from floor to ceiling on each of its four stories, gleam in the weak London sunshine, and I cannot help but count them: twelve across on each level, their symmetry speaking to a precision I suspect I shall find echoed in every aspect of life within these walls.

My father's words echo in my memory: "My Lizzy, are you certain you wish to take this position? You need not leave home."

But I did need to leave, though I could scarcely explain it to him. After Jane's marriage to Mr. Bingley and their removal to the North, Longbourn had grown stifling, my mother's nerves more pronounced than ever, and my younger sisters' behavior increasingly mortifying. When my mother heard that Lady Catherine de Bourgh was seeking a companion for her daughter during the season in London, it seemed Providence itself had provided an escape.

The morning of my departure still weighs heavy in my mind: Kitty and Lydia barely stirring from their beds to bid me farewell, Mary offering a few words on the virtues of honest labor, and my mother alternating between lamentations over my lowering myself to take a position and pride that her daughter should be employed by such an esteemed personage as Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Only my father's quiet "Remember who you are, my Lizzy"

gave me the strength I needed to step into the hired carriage.

Now, as a uniformed butler opens the massive front door, I straighten my spine and lift my chin. I may be entering this house as a paid companion rather than a guest, but I am still a gentleman's daughter, and I shall comport myself with dignity. "Miss Elizabeth Bennet,"

I announce, my voice steady despite the flutter in my stomach. "I believe I am expected."

Mrs. Jenkins, the housekeeper, appears almost immediately, her iron-gray hair and austere black dress lending her an air of authority that brooks no argument. "You are punctual, Miss Bennet,"

she says, and though her words are merely factual, I sense approval in them. "That will serve you well here. Lady Catherine insists upon strict adherence to schedules."

As she leads me through the house, I struggle to maintain my composure in the face of such overwhelming grandeur. The entrance hall alone contains more wealth than all of Longbourn, with its marble floors and gilded mirrors reflecting the light from crystal chandeliers. Mrs. Jenkins maintains a running commentary as we proceed, her voice carrying the weight of someone who has seen decades of service. "The blue morning room is reserved for Lady Catherine's personal use. Miss de Bourgh takes her breakfast in the small dining room at precisely eight o'clock. You will be expected to join her. The large dining room is used only for formal occasions. The music room—Miss de Bourgh no longer plays, but Lady Catherine insists the pianoforte be kept in perfect tune..."

Each doorway we pass reveals another scene of elegance. There are drawing rooms with silk-covered walls, a library whose shelves reach to the ceiling, and parlors furnished in what I imagine must be latest London fashion. The paintings alone must be worth a king's ransom, looming from every wall panel with their heavy gilt frames. I find myself creating a mental map, knowing how essential it will be to

master the geography of this place that is to be my home for the foreseeable future.

Mrs. Jenkins' litany of rules continues as we ascend the grand staircase. "The third floor is strictly for family and guests of appropriate rank. The servants' stairs are located at the back of the house. You, Miss Bennet, as companion, may use the main stairs when accompanying Miss de Bourgh, but otherwise..."

She leaves the sentence hanging, but her meaning is clear enough. I am neither fish nor fowl in this household—above the servants but below the family. It shall require all my wit to navigate these waters successfully.

The first sight of my new charge nearly stops me in my tracks, though I manage to maintain my composure. Miss Anne de Bourgh sits in a richly upholstered chair by the window of her private sitting room, her slight frame nearly swallowed by the fabric. She is pale—paler even than I expected from Lady Catherine's letters—but as I enter, she turns to face me, and I see an alertness in her eyes that takes me by surprise.

"Miss Bennet,"

she says, her voice soft but clear. "I hope Mrs. Jenkins has not overwhelmed you with too many rules and regulations all at once."

There is a hint of humor in her tone that I would never have expected from Lady Catherine's daughter, and I find myself warming to her immediately.

"Not at all, Miss de Bourgh,"

I reply, though in truth my head is spinning with the multitude of instructions I have received. "I have an excellent memory for detail."

This draws a smile from her—a real smile that transforms her face from merely pleasant to genuinely pretty.

The room itself reflects its occupant in ways I find intriguing. While the furniture is as fine as any I have seen thus far, there are personal touches that speak of a private nature at odds with Lady Catherine’s overwhelming presence. There is a small writing desk with well-used items arranged just so, a shelf of books that show signs of frequent handling rather than mere display, and a delicate watercolor of what I recognize as Rosings Park hanging in a simple frame. Most telling of all is the embroidery hoop resting on a side table, the work within showing far more creativity than the standard flowers and birds young ladies are expected to produce.

“You are examining my sanctum, Miss Bennet,”

Anne observes, and I detect no censure in her voice. “What do you make of it?”

My conversation with Miss de Bourgh is interrupted by the sound of quick, purposeful footsteps in the hallway. I notice immediately how Anne’s posture changes—straightening yet somehow diminishing at the same time—before Lady Catherine sweeps into the room like a galleon under full sail. Her ladyship is dressed in rich purple silk, and her cap is adorned with ostrich feathers that bob with each decisive movement of her head.

“So, Miss Bennet, you have arrived.”

Lady Catherine fixes me with a penetrating stare that I suspect is meant to remind me of my place in her household. “I trust Mrs. Jenkins has made clear the expectations we have of our companions? We have been most fortunate in securing someone of your... connections... for Anne.”

The pause before “connections”

speaks volumes, and I feel my chin lift slightly in response. “Indeed, your ladyship. Mrs. Jenkins has been most thorough in her explanations.”

“Good. Now then, tell me, what experience have you in the management of a young lady’s schedule? I require complete attention to Anne’s needs. Her constitution, you understand, is delicate.”

Lady Catherine settles herself in the largest chair in the room, arranging her skirts with practiced precision. “I must know everything about your qualifications. Your father is a gentleman, I understand, though your mother’s family...”

She lets the sentence hang meaningfully in the air.

I stand my ground, keeping my voice level despite the flush I can feel rising in my cheeks. “My education has been comprehensive, your ladyship, including music, French, and Italian. I have assisted in the education of my younger sisters and have always taken an active role in managing our household affairs.”

What follows is an interrogation worthy of the most zealous magistrate, covering everything from my knowledge of proper letter-writing to my ability to read aloud “in a manner that will not aggravate Anne’s nerves.”

Throughout it all, I catch occasional glimpses of Anne’s face, which shows a mixture of resignation and—unless I am mistaken—amusement.

After what feels like hours but must have been only thirty minutes, Lady Catherine finally deems the interview complete and directs Mrs. Jenkins to show me to my quarters. We climb to the fourth floor, where the housekeeper unlocks a door that opens into a surprisingly generous suite of rooms. The sitting room is furnished in shades of green and cream, with windows overlooking the garden behind the house. A door to the left leads to a modestly sized but well-appointed bedchamber, while

another door opens into what Mrs. Jenkins informs me is a private staircase connecting to Miss de Bourgh's apartments.

"This arrangement allows you to be available to Miss Anne at any hour,"

Mrs. Jenkins explains, demonstrating the bell pull that connects directly to Anne's room. "Her previous companion found it most convenient."

The housekeeper pauses, then adds in a lower voice, "Though I should mention that Lady Catherine has been known to check these rooms personally when she feels the need to ensure all is in order."

I survey the rooms with mixed feelings. The furnishings are far more luxurious than anything I have known at Longbourn, yet the knowledge that my private space might be invaded at any moment by Lady Catherine casts a shadow over their elegance. Still, the view from the windows is charming, and I can already envision myself reading in the window seat during what free time I might have.

At last, I am left alone to unpack my modest belongings and collect my thoughts. My small trunk looks almost apologetic sitting beside the magnificent mahogany wardrobe, but I refuse to let that intimidate me. Instead, I busy myself with arranging my few possessions. My books go on the shelf, dresses in the wardrobe, and my mother's old writing desk is set upon the small table by the window.

As I work, I find my mind returning to the contrasts I have observed in this household. Lady Catherine's overwhelming personality seems to fill every corner of the house, yet in Anne's sitting room, I detected a different atmosphere entirely. There is more to my young charge than her mother's description of a sickly, docile creature would suggest. The spark of intelligence I glimpsed in her eyes, the subtle humor in her manner—these hint at depths that Lady Catherine either cannot or will not see.

The sound of carriage wheels on the street below draws me to the window, and I watch as a handsome curricule passes by, its occupant a well-dressed gentleman whose bearing speaks of both wealth and good breeding. This, I remind myself, is London, where such sights will become commonplace. Yet I cannot help but wonder what other surprises await me in this new chapter of my life. Jane would tell me to look for the best in everyone and every situation, while my father would advise me to find amusement where I can.

I am determined to do both, though I suspect it will require all my wit and patience to navigate the complexities of my position in this household. At least, I think with a small smile, I shall not want for entertainment in observing Lady Catherine's magnificent ability to direct everyone's lives but her own.?



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

I am examining the estate accounts when Peters appears at the door of my study, bearing the familiar sight of my aunt's cream-colored stationery upon a silver salver. I find myself suppressing a sigh, as these missives from Lady Catherine have grown more frequent since our removal to London for the Season.

“Shall I wait for a response, sir?”

Peters asks, though he knows as well as I that Lady Catherine's invitations are never truly invitations—they are summons, and they brook no refusal.

The letter contains exactly what I expected. I am to present myself at De Bourgh House this evening for dinner. The phrasing, as always, leaves no room for prior engagements or personal inclination. “My dear nephew, your cousin Anne has expressed particular interest in discussing the new landscaping at Pemberley, and I insist you join us...”

I know full well that Anne has expressed no such thing. My cousin barely speaks three words together in company, and I cannot recall her ever showing the slightest interest in landscape architecture.

I glance at the stack of correspondence yet to be addressed—letters from my steward at Pemberley, business matters requiring my attention, and an invitation to a musical evening that actually holds some appeal. But those must now wait. My aunt's dinners invariably stretch long into the evening, filled with her pronouncements on everything from the proper management of servants to the appropriate matches for every family of consequence in Kent.

“Please inform Lady Catherine that I would be delighted to join them this evening,”

I tell Peters, the social lie falling easily from my lips. The butler bows and withdraws, leaving me to contemplate how many more of these evenings I must endure before my aunt finally accepts that her plans for Anne and me will never come to fruition.

Rising from my desk, I move to stand before the window overlooking the garden, where the first hints of spring are beginning to show in the carefully tended beds. The familiar irritation rises within me—not at Anne, never at Anne—but at the relentless pressure of my aunt’s expectations. Since my father’s death, Lady Catherine has taken it upon herself to guide my path in life, despite my having reached an age and position where such guidance is neither necessary nor welcome.

These matchmaking attempts grow more transparent with each passing month. It began subtly enough when I first came of age—casual mentions of Anne’s accomplishments (few though they are), and hints about my mother’s supposed wishes for my future. But lately, Lady Catherine has abandoned all pretense of subtlety. Each dinner becomes an exercise in diplomatic evasion as I navigate her increasingly pointed suggestions about the natural union of Pemberley and Rosings.

The worst of it is the position in which it places Anne. My cousin, delicate in both health and spirit, seems to shrink further into herself with each of her mother’s pronouncements. I have never seen her display any particular interest in marriage—to me or to anyone else—yet Lady Catherine persists in speaking for her, planning for her, arranging her life as though she were a chess piece to be moved at will.

My fingers drum against the windowsill as I consider my position. The ton already whispers about my apparent reluctance to marry, though I have not yet reached an age where such speculation is warranted. Bingley, with his characteristic good humor, jokes that I am too fastidious in my requirements, but the truth is far simpler. I refuse to enter into a marriage of mere convenience or family obligation. Having witnessed

my parents' genuine affection for each other during their too-brief years together, I cannot satisfy myself with less.

A marriage to Anne would certainly simplify many matters—the joining of our estates, the continuation of both family lines, the satisfaction of my aunt's ambitions. Yet I cannot help but think that such a union would slowly destroy us both, with Anne withering under the weight of responsibilities she has neither the health nor the inclination to bear, and I watching helplessly as we both live out my aunt's dreams rather than our own.

The memory of our last such dinner party rises unbidden in my mind. It was barely a fortnight ago, yet already Lady Catherine has deemed it time to make another attempt. I recall too clearly the oppressive atmosphere of the formal dining room, the way the candlelight caught the elaborate gilt frames of the family portraits that seemed to watch our every move with disapproving eyes.

Lady Catherine had arranged the seating with her usual tactical precision, with Anne at my right hand and herself directly across to better observe our every interaction. The soup had barely been served when she began her campaign. "Darcy, you must have noticed how well Anne is looking these days. I have engaged a new physician, at great expense, who has prescribed a most effective tonic. Soon she will be strong enough for all the duties of managing a large estate."

The implication hung heavy in the air as Anne stared fixedly at her soup bowl, her complexion even paler than usual. Lord and Lady Metcalfe, the only other guests that evening, exchanged knowing glances that set my teeth on edge. I had made some noncommittal response about the challenges of estate management in general, but Lady Catherine was not to be deterred.

"It is fortunate indeed,"

she had continued, “that Anne will have no need to learn these duties from the beginning. To step into a position where everything is already properly organized, under the guidance of someone who knows the correct way of doing things—that is the ideal situation for a young woman of Anne’s delicate constitution.”

The rest of the evening had proceeded in similar fashion, each course accompanied by fresh hints about the propriety of marriage between cousins and the importance of maintaining family connections. By the time the port was served, even Lord Metcalfe had developed a sudden interest in examining the pattern of the carpet.

The soft knock at my study door pulls me from these unhappy reflections. “Come in, Georgiana,”

I call, recognizing my sister’s particular way of announcing herself. She enters with her usual quiet grace, though I detect a hint of mischief in her expression as she spots Lady Catherine’s letter still lying upon my desk.

“Another summons from our aunt?”

she asks, settling herself in the chair beside the fireplace. “I observed Peters carrying her response just now, and you have that particular look about you.”

“What particular look might that be?”

I ask, though I cannot help but smile at her perception. Since her recovery from last summer’s unfortunate events at Ramsgate, Georgiana has grown more confident in teasing me, a development I find I quite enjoy despite being a frequent target.

“Oh, the one where your forehead creases just so, and your mouth takes on that stern set that makes you appear at least ten years older than you are,”

she replies, her own smile widening. “I suppose we are to lose you to De Bourgh House this evening?”

“I am afraid so.”

I move to join her by the fire. “Though you need not look quite so amused by the prospect. One day, sister dear, you too will face the trials of our aunt’s matchmaking endeavors.”

Georgiana’s laughter fills the study. “Perhaps, though I doubt any of her schemes for me will be pursued with quite the same dedication and enthusiasm as her plans for you and Anne. Poor Anne! Did you know she writes to me sometimes? Such careful little notes, full of the sort of things she thinks her mother would approve of, yet occasionally I catch glimpses of a different Anne entirely. In her last letter, she mentioned reading a novel that Lady Catherine would certainly not approve of—though she swore me to secrecy about the title.”

I raise an eyebrow at this revelation. “It seems our cousin has hidden depths.”

“Indeed,”

Georgiana replies, her expression growing thoughtful. “Sometimes I wonder if any of us truly know Anne at all, or if we know only what her mother allows us to see. It makes me grateful, brother, that you have always encouraged me to speak my mind, at least in private.”

Later, as Fletcher assists me in dressing for the evening, I find my thoughts returning to Georgiana’s words about Anne’s letters. My valet maintains a steady stream of quiet commentary about the weather, the state of my cravat, and which waistcoat might best suit the occasion, but I barely register his words. Instead, I contemplate how many others might hide their true selves beneath a veneer of proper behavior, all

to satisfy the expectations of others.

“What do you think about this one, sir?”

Fletcher asks, presenting various options for my attire.

Though I generally pay little attention to such matters, tonight I find myself particularly fastidious about my appearance. “Perhaps the blue waistcoat,”

I suggest, surprising Fletcher with my sudden interest in the selection.

“An excellent choice, sir,”

he responds, though I detect a hint of curiosity in his tone. “If I may say so, I understand from Harrison that Colonel Fitzwilliam is expected this evening as well.”

This news brightens my outlook considerably. My cousin’s presence always makes these gatherings more bearable, his easy manners and quick wit providing a welcome buffer between Lady Catherine’s pronouncements and the awkward silences that tend to follow them. Richard has a particular talent for steering conversations away from dangerous waters, though even he sometimes struggles to deflect our aunt’s more determined matchmaking attempts.

“I believe Mr. and Mrs. Collins are also expected,”

Fletcher continues as he adjusts my cravat with practiced precision. “They have lately arrived in town from Kent.”

I suppress a sigh at this intelligence.

Mr.

Collins's excessive obsequiousness toward both Lady Catherine and myself makes any conversation with him an exercise in patience.

Still, his presence might at least divert some of my aunt's attention from her usual topics.

Once Fletcher has finished with my attire, I spend a few minutes in my study attending to urgent correspondence before the carriage is announced.

The familiar routine of sealing letters and organizing papers for tomorrow provides a welcome distraction from thoughts of the evening ahead.

Yet all too soon, Peters appears to inform me that the carriage awaits, and I can delay no longer.

As my carriage makes its way through London's crowded streets toward De Bourgh House, I find myself contemplating the evening ahead.

The presence of Colonel Fitzwilliam offers some hope of sensible conversation, though I know from experience that Lady Catherine will likely monopolize much of the dinner discussion.

At least with Mr.

Collins in attendance, she will have a fresh audience for her opinions on the proper management of a parish and the importance of clerical dignity.

The carriage passes through increasingly fashionable streets, each turn bringing me closer to what promises to be another lengthy evening of careful social navigation.

I find myself wishing I had accepted Bingley's invitation to dine with his sisters

tomorrow night—at least then I would have had a legitimate excuse to leave early.

As it is, I expect to be detained until well past ten o'clock, subjected to endless discussions of Anne's supposed improvements in health and the many advantages of joining our estates.

I check my pocket watch—still ten minutes before I must arrive, though anything less than precisely on time will draw comment from my aunt.

The streets here are quieter, the houses larger and more imposing.

De Bourgh House, with its classical facade and perfectly maintained front garden, stands as a testament to my aunt's insistence on proper appearances.

I straighten my cravat and adjust my coat, preparing myself for the usual formalities.

A thought occurs to me as the carriage draws to a stop that perhaps I might engage Mr.

Collins in conversation about his parish early in the evening.

While the man's conversation is far from stimulating, detailed discussions of church matters are one of the few topics that might sufficiently distract Lady Catherine from her matchmaking schemes.

With Richard present to assist in directing the conversation, we might actually succeed in avoiding the usual pointed hints about marriage and family duty.

It is, I reflect as I ascend the steps, not much of a strategy, but tonight it will have to suffice.?



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:03 am*

The rustling of silk fills Anne's dressing room as I carefully lay out three evening gowns for her inspection. Though I've been at De Bourgh House barely a day, I'm already learning the intricate dance of being a companion—knowing when to offer opinions and when to hold my tongue, when to step forward and when to fade into the background.

“The blue silk, perhaps?”

I suggest, running my fingers along the delicate beading at the neckline. “The color would complement your complexion.”

The gown in question is a masterpiece of subtle elegance, far finer than anything in my own modest wardrobe, yet somehow less ostentatious than I would have expected given Lady Catherine's preferences.

Anne approaches the displayed gowns with careful steps, her movements precise but not entirely as fragile as her mother's constant fretting would suggest. “You have an eye for fashion, Miss Bennet,”

she observes, touching the blue silk's sleeve. “Though Mama will likely insist on the burgundy. She believes darker colors lend me a more substantial presence.”

I bite back a smile at her tone—there's that hint of dry humor I noticed earlier. “And what do you believe, Miss de Bourgh?”

She looks at me sharply, perhaps surprised by the direct question, before a small smile graces her features. “I believe the blue would indeed suit very well for tonight's

dinner. We are expecting my cousin, Mr. Darcy, and Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

She pauses, studying my face. “Do you know either gentleman, Miss Bennet?”

My heart gives an uncomfortable lurch at Mr. Darcy’s name, but I maintain my composure. “I had the pleasure of making their acquaintance in Hertfordshire last autumn,”

I reply, keeping my tone carefully neutral as I begin gathering hair pins for Anne’s coiffure.

“And Mr. and Mrs. Collins will be joining us as well,”

Anne continues, settling herself at her dressing table. “Mr. Collins is one of my mother’s favorites among our parish clergy at Rosings. Though I sometimes wonder if she enjoys his company precisely because he never offers an opinion that might conflict with her own.”

As I begin arranging Anne’s hair, she shares more details about the expected guests and the complex web of London society I must learn to navigate. I listen carefully, noting the subtle hierarchies and unspoken rules that govern this world. It is fascinating how much vital information can be conveyed in the space between words, in the lift of an eyebrow or the particular phrasing of a seemingly innocent observation.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam usually manages to lighten these dinners considerably,”

Anne confides as I secure another pin. “He has a talent for steering Mama’s conversation away from her favorite topics when they become too... overwhelming.”

I find myself wondering what topics those might be, though I suspect I shall soon find out. The dinner party tonight will be my first real test in this new position, and I am

determined to acquit myself well, regardless of any personal discomfort I might feel about certain guests.

“I suppose I ought to warn you,”

Anne says quietly as I fasten the last button on her gown, “that Mama will likely spend much of dinner making rather pointed remarks about the advantages of marriage between cousins.”

She turns to face me, her expression a mixture of resignation and embarrassment. “She has long had her heart set on a match between myself and Darcy.”

The confession catches me off guard, though perhaps it shouldn’t. I remember all too well Mr. Collins’s effusive speeches about the anticipated union of two great estates. “And... your own feelings on the matter?”

I ask, careful to keep my tone light as I adjust the fall of her skirts.

Anne’s laugh is soft but genuine. “Darcy is my cousin and my friend—nothing more. We played together as children, and he has always been kind to me, but...”

She shakes her head. “I could no more marry him than I could marry Colonel Fitzwilliam. Besides,”

she adds with another flash of that hidden humor, “I believe Darcy would make a rather terrible husband for me. He would feel obliged to protect me as fiercely as Mama does, and one such guardian is quite enough.”

I turn away, ostensibly to collect her fan and gloves, but really to master the sudden surge of emotions her words provoke. Memories of that terrible afternoon at Hunsford flood back—the shock of his proposal, the anger in his eyes at my refusal, the contents of his letter that forced me to question so many of my cherished notions.

How strange that I should now be preparing his intended bride (however unwilling) for dinner.

“Miss Bennet?”

Anne’s voice draws me back to the present. “You’ve gone quite pale. Are you well?”

“Perfectly well,”

I assure her, though my smile feels forced. “I was just thinking... that is...”

I hesitate, then decide that some degree of honesty might be wise. “Mr. Darcy and I are... not entirely comfortable in each other’s company. There was a misunderstanding during his stay in Hertfordshire.”

“Ah.”

Anne studies me with surprising shrewdness. “Darcy can be rather difficult to read if one doesn’t know him well. He has built such high walls around himself that sometimes I think even he forgets how to lower them.”

I busy myself with arranging her shawl, trying not to reveal how accurately her words strike home. “Your mother’s hopes for a match between you must make things rather uncomfortable.”

“For everyone concerned,”

Anne agrees with a sigh. “But Mama sees only what she wishes to see. I learned long ago that disagreeing with her directly serves no purpose. One must be... creative... in managing her expectations.”

The quiet confidence in Anne’s voice as she speaks of managing her mother catches

my attention. This is not the meek, sickly creature I was led to expect. “If I may ask, Miss de Bourgh... what do you wish for yourself?”

The words slip out before I can reconsider their propriety, but Anne does not seem offended.

Instead, she sinks into her chair by the window, her expression thoughtful. “Do you know, Miss Bennet, I do not believe anyone has ever asked me that before.”

She traces a pattern on the armrest with one finger. “My mother knows what she wishes for me. My physicians know what they think best for my health. Even my cousins, kind as they are, make assumptions about what would suit me.”

I take a seat across from her at her gesture, our preparations for dinner temporarily forgotten. “And yet you must have dreams of your own?”

“Dreams?”

She smiles, looking out at the London streets below. “I dream of choosing my own path. Of having the strength—both physical and mental—to stand up to Mama’s proclamations. I dream of traveling, though perhaps not as far as some might wish to go. I would love to sketch the Lake District, to visit Bath without being confined to a sickroom.”

She turns back to me, her eyes bright with something that might be defiance. “I dream of being well enough and brave enough to say ‘no’ when I mean no, and ‘yes’ when I mean yes.”

The simplicity and power of her wishes strikes me deeply. How many of us, I wonder, are trapped not by iron bars but by the silken threads of others’ expectations? “Those sound like worthy dreams,”

I offer quietly.

“They do to my ear as well.”

Anne’s smile turns rueful. “Though I suspect they sound rather tame to someone like you, Miss Bennet. I have heard stories of your walks across muddy fields and your spirited debates. You seem to have mastered the art of being true to yourself while still maintaining propriety... mostly.”

I cannot help but laugh at this, remembering my mother’s horror at my muddy petticoats. “I am not certain everyone would agree with that assessment. And being true to oneself can come at a cost.”

Again, unbidden thoughts of Mr. Darcy surface—of harsh words exchanged and painful truths revealed.

“Perhaps,”

Anne agrees, “but is it not a cost worth paying?”

She glances at the clock and straightens in her chair. “We should finish preparing for dinner. Mama will expect us to be precisely on time, and we would not want to give her any cause for complaint, would we?”

As I help her rise, I find myself reevaluating everything I thought I knew about Anne de Bourgh. There is steel beneath that delicate exterior, and wisdom in her quiet observations. I wonder what Mr. Darcy would make of this Anne—so different from the sickly young lady depicted in Lady Catherine’s letters.

“Darcy was the one who taught me to ride, you know,”

Anne remarks as I help her with her necklace. “When we were children at Pemberley,

he insisted I could manage a quiet pony despite Mama's protests. He spent weeks teaching me in secret, showing endless patience when I was frightened or frustrated."

Her words stir an uncomfortable feeling in my breast. This picture of a patient, caring Darcy stands in stark contrast to the proud, disdainful man I encountered in Hertfordshire. Or does it? I think of his careful guardianship of his sister, his loyal friendship with Mr. Bingley, and even his intervention—however misguided—in my sister's romance.

"He has always been like that,"

Anne continues, unaware of my inner turmoil. "Taking care of everyone, though he hates to draw attention to his good deeds. When I was particularly ill three winters ago, he relocated his entire household to Rosings for a month, just so his physician could attend me. He never mentioned it was an inconvenience, though it must have been terribly dull for him."

I adjust her necklace, using the moment to compose my thoughts. How easily we form opinions, I reflect, and how stubbornly we cling to them. Had I not just been surprised by Anne's hidden depths? Yet here I am, still holding onto my first impressions of Mr. Darcy, despite evidence that might suggest a more complex character.

"He can be rather reserved in company,"

Anne observes, reaching for her fan. "Especially with those he does not know well. I sometimes think he has built such high walls to protect himself that he has forgotten how to lower them."

The parallel to my own gradually shifting perceptions is not lost on me. "It seems,"

I venture carefully, "that first impressions are not always to be trusted."

“No indeed,”

Anne agrees with a small smile. “Though I suspect you have already learned that lesson, Miss Bennet, given your earlier mention of misunderstandings.”

Before I can respond to this rather too-perceptive observation, the door bursts open with the force of a small gale. Lady Catherine sweeps in, already speaking before she has fully crossed the threshold.

“Anne, you must be particularly careful about the seating arrangements tonight. I have placed you beside Darcy, of course, and you must endeavor to discuss the new plantings at Pemberley—I have made certain he will expect the topic.”

Her ladyship fixes me with an imperious stare. “Miss Bennet, you will be seated between Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr. Collins. I trust you can maintain suitable dinner conversation without drawing undue attention to yourself.”

I curtsy, murmuring my understanding while mentally noting the careful social choreography at play. Of course I would be seated safely away from Mr. Darcy—a companion must know her place, after all.

“Anne, you look pale. I knew the blue silk would not do—it washes out your complexion entirely. However, there is no time to change now.”

Lady Catherine adjusts her daughter’s shawl with precise movements. “You must be sure to mention your progress with the new physician. Darcy will want to know you are growing stronger. And do try to show some animation when he speaks of Pemberley—a wife must take interest in her future home.”

I catch Anne’s eye in the mirror and notice her almost imperceptible wince at her mother’s words. The urge to speak in her defense rises within me, but I check it quickly. I am here as a companion, not a champion, and my position is precarious



enough without challenging Lady Catherine's assumptions.

"Miss Bennet,"

her ladyship continues, "I expect you to ensure Anne does not overtire herself during dinner. If she shows any sign of fatigue, you must signal the butler immediately. And do remember that a companion's role is to facilitate conversation, not to dominate it."

As Lady Catherine finally sweeps from the room in a rustle of expensive silk, I release a deep breath. My hands, I notice with some annoyance, are trembling slightly as I make final adjustments to Anne's hair.

"Are you quite all right, Miss Bennet?"

Anne asks softly. "You seem... unsettled."

"Perfectly well,"

I respond with forced lightness, though in truth my heart is racing at the prospect of the evening ahead. I have spent so much energy focusing on Anne's comfort that I have barely allowed myself to contemplate my own feelings about seeing Mr. Darcy again.

Our last meeting plays in my mind with mortifying clarity—his proud stance as he handed me that letter, the controlled anger in his voice, the way his fingers had tightened on his hat brim.

How will he react to finding me here, employed as his cousin's companion? Will there be disgust in his eyes? Anger? Or worse, that cool indifference he showed to those he deemed beneath his notice in Meryton?

"You know,"

Anne remarks casually, though something in her tone suggests the comment is anything but casual, “Darcy has been rather different since his return from Kent this spring.

More subdued, perhaps. Or thoughtful. Even Mama has noticed, though she attributes it to his growing awareness of his duties to the family.”

I busy myself with needlessly rearranging the items on her dressing table, hoping my face does not betray the effect her words have on me. “Indeed?”

I manage to say, striving for a tone of polite disinterest.

“Indeed.”

Anne rises from her chair with careful grace. “Well, shall we go down? As Mama noted, we would not want to keep anyone waiting.”

She pauses at the door, turning back to me with that surprising perceptiveness in her eyes. “Remember, Miss Bennet, you are not the only one who might be feeling... uncomfortable... this evening.”

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Please continue following [lok\\_epub](#); the other chapters will be updated soon.