



# Mary's Wealth (The Bennets' Fortune #3)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** In this third installment in the Fortune Series, it is Mary's turn to take center stage. At the tender age of sixteen, Mary is married off to the richest man in the neighborhood, Mr. Allen, a man who is ten years older than Mr. Bennet. Contrary to what one might expect, Mr. Allen turns out to be an excellent husband, patiently teaching the young Mary how to gradually become more independent and decisive.

Though she does not love her husband in any romantic sense, Mary respects him a great deal and is therefore devastated when he passes away only a year into their marriage. Using the knowledge and experience she gained from him, Mary establishes her independence and even offers a home to her older sister, Elizabeth.

As the story unfolds, we see how Mary's fortune and status, gained from her marriage, affect the path of our dear couple, Elizabeth and Darcy. We also see how Mary gains the love and respect of a very good man and learns to love him in return.

Warning: since a portion of this story is about Mary's married life, there are a few scenes where adult topics are alluded to, though there is nothing explicit.

**Total Pages (Source): 27**

# Page 1

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Mary Bennet was the plain sister, the boring sister, the awkward sister.

Even at age sixteen, she knew this about herself.

She tried to be kind like her eldest sister, Jane, but her sympathy and advice always came out as pedantic and trite.

She tried to be musical like her next older sister, Elizabeth, but somehow, even though Mary practiced far more, everyone preferred Elizabeth's performances better.

At one point, Mary even attempted to emulate the vapidness and liveliness of her younger two sisters, Kitty and Lydia, but that fell so flat so quickly that she never attempted such a thing again.

Mary was not formed for thoughtless behavior.

In fact, she was quite the opposite, frequently overthinking things to the point where she could not respond quickly when in conversation with others.

Mrs. Bennet quite doted on her oldest and youngest daughters, Jane and Lydia, because they were quite clearly the most like her. Papa's favorite was clearly Elizabeth, because they shared the same cynical, critical sense of humor.

Mary and Kitty were often left to their own devices, neither receiving much in the way of parental attention.

As children, the two of them often played with dolls together, but as Mary grew older

she developed an interest in religion and morality which Kitty decidedly did not share.

So, Mary lost her only companion and somehow had to make her way through the confusion of youth with little in the way of companionship.

Mary knew she was loved, but it was a distant sort of love born of the obligation that comes with being part of a family. It was a lukewarm sort of caring that provided little in the way of emotional support and nothing in the way of sympathy.

Knowing her own weaknesses but being unable to fix them, Mary fully expected that she would never marry anyone.

What man in his right mind would choose a plain, awkward, moralistic girl when he could instead choose kind Jane or witty Elizabeth?

Even though her younger sisters were not yet out, Mary knew that when they were, she wouldn't be able to compete with fashionable Kitty, or lively Lydia either.

One day, in the summer of 1809, a few months after Mary turned sixteen, she was called into her father's study.

Such a summons was rare. Mary seldom caused mischief for which she needed to be punished.

Neither did she ever do anything particularly praiseworthy either, so there was seldom a reason for her father to seek her out.

Certainly, he never sought out her company simply to chat.

Papa appeared stern as she entered the room, and Mary's mind raced as to what she

could have done wrong that would demand reproof. Once she had settled in the chair across from him, he said, “I received a visit from my friend, Allen, this morning.”

“I assume he is doing well?” Mary asked politely.

Mr. Allen was a widower who lived alone on the very outskirts of their community.

Mary had never met him, since he hardly ever mingled in society since his wife died five years ago, and Mary had only been out for a few months.

All she really knew about him was that he was the wealthiest man in the neighborhood of Meryton, with an estate that was twice as large as Longbourn.

“Mr. Allen is well enough,” responded Papa, waving away her concern as if it had no bearing on the topic at hand. “He came asking for advice. You see, he wishes to marry again.”

“Isn’t he older than you, Papa?” asked Mary.

He looked annoyed at her question, as if it was again off-topic. “He is ten years my senior,” said Papa, “but that has little bearing on the matter. There are many reasons a man has to wish for a wife, and very few of them have to do with his age.”

Mary nodded and said nothing. She did not wish to annoy him further. “He is looking for a pious, obedient wife, one who can manage the charities his late wife started. He is also hoping for another heir, since his own son died last year. Additionally, he needs someone who can manage his servants.”

“And does he have anyone in mind?” asked Mary, nervously. She was not foolish or stupid. There was only one reason her father could have to mention all this to her.

“He didn’t, which is why he came to me,” said Papa.

“We talked it over and eventually settled on two options for him. The first option is Charlotte Lucas. She is a very managing sort of young lady and would certainly take good care of his home and his late wife’s charities. The other option is you.”

Mary was confused. While she admitted the truth of what he said about Miss Lucas, she could not understand why Papa and Mr. Allen would settle on the two plainest young ladies in the neighborhood. “Does he not wish for a beautiful bride?” she asked.

Papa’s mouth twisted in distaste and his expression grew a bit angry.

“First of all, neither you nor Miss Lucas are unpleasant to look at. Your mind has been poisoned by your mother’s habit of comparing everyone to Jane, who is unusually pretty.

I will tell you something that I have never told your mother, for she would not believe me.

“A young man may easily fall in love with a beautiful face and figure, but it is never beauty that keeps him in love. To keep a man’s love, one must have more substantial traits, such as honesty, responsibility, grace, virtue, etcetera.

The list is extensive, and each man needs something different.

Your mother’s habit of only emphasizing beauty and liveliness in her daughters is reprehensible and self-destructive in the long run. ”

“Then, why do you let her do it?” The question was out of Mary’s mouth before she even realized she had formed it in her head.

“Because convincing her otherwise would be as impossible as tearing down a brick house by hand,” said Papa.

“Besides, she is not entirely wrong. Beauty and liveliness are all that some younger men can see. After all, that is all I wanted when I married your mother. Mr. Allen, however, is not a young man, and he needs a steadier sort of wife. Her appearance matters little to him as long as she is presentable.”

Surprisingly, Papa’s explanation made sense to Mary. She had always found it odd that Mama insisted that only great beauty could attract a husband when all Mary had to do was look at the wide variety of married ladies in her own neighborhood to see that such was not the case.

“So, who did Mr. Allen choose?” asked Mary.

Papa shook his head. “He could not decide on my mere say so,” said Papa.

“He said he may have met Miss Lucas many years ago, but he couldn’t remember anything about her, and he certainly hasn’t met you before.

So, he will be inviting both of you to dinner soon, along with myself and Sir William Lucas. He will make a decision afterward.”

“Does Miss Lucas know about this?” asked Mary.

“How can she?” asked Papa. “We only just decided it, though Allen did say he would stop by Lucas Lodge on his way home.” Papa looked piercingly at Mary for a few moments.

Then, he added, “I thought you would be far more upset by this news. I am certain any of your sisters would be throwing a fit right now at the idea of marrying a man

older than your own father.”

“I never expected to marry anyone,” said Mary, “so the entire idea is completely new to me. Now that it is presented as a possibility, however, I can see no reason to reject a man who is specifically looking for a pious lady who can manage the charities his wife left behind. What greater calling can a woman have than to be a good wife, good mother, and a charitable woman?”

Papa simply looked at her for a few moments, then the corner of his mouth quirked up in his familiar mocking half-smile.

“I suppose I should expect nothing else from a naïve, foolish young lady,” he said.

Mary felt a prick of pain at his insult, but she concealed it completely.

After all, she could expect nothing else from the father who had never even attempted to teach her anything.

“In this case,” Papa said, “I believe naivete is just what is called for. At least old Allen is not a vicious man, nor is he prone to drinking, gambling, or wastefulness. His late wife may not have been the happiest woman in the world, but she was well taken care of, and if you should suit his fancy, the same will go for you as well.”

Mary nodded, not knowing what to say. She did not understand the situation well enough to know whether she should even hope that she was acceptable to Mr. Allen.

“Well, if you have no questions, you may run along,” said Papa. “I shall let you know when your invitation to dinner arrives.”

Mary left the study, but instead of returning to the drawing room where she had been working on some sewing from the charity basket, she fetched her pelisse and headed

outside.

Mary was not much of a walker, but she appreciated the peace that fresh air and a pleasant landscape could bring, and she felt very much in need of such peace.

Though she stayed in the garden of Longbourn, a well-manicured area on one side of the house, she paced backwards and forwards across the length of the entire area many times.

A half hour later, she was no more enlightened as to how she should feel than she had been when she left the house, but she was tired.

So, she went back in and picked her sewing back up.

It was a little dress for one of the girls of a family from Meryton that had lost everything in a fire a week ago.

Mary was the only one of the Bennet family that was even attempting to help the family.

Everyone else claimed that they would receive plenty of assistance from other quarters.



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In Mary's experience, it was that precise attitude that led people who needed the most help to not receive any help whatsoever. At her young age, she could do little on her own, but she had spent a small portion of her pocket money on some fabric to make a dress for the youngest daughter.

Two days later, an invitation arrived for Mary and Mr. Bennet to dine at Braydon Hall. Though Mary had not been nervous before, suddenly the idea of going to dinner with only her papa to accompany her specifically to be assessed as to her suitability to be a wife made her quite anxious.

Mama questioned them both extensively as to why only the two of them had been invited, but Papa gave no answers.

Mary followed his lead and claimed ignorance.

Though she didn't like to lie, she assuaged her conscience by reminding herself that she did not know much, and she certainly did not know if the whole experience would result in anything.

The more Mary thought about it, the more she was convinced that Miss Lucas would be a better choice anyway.

Charlotte Lucas was eight years older than Mary, though still a perfectly acceptable age for marriage, and she was far more capable at nearly everything than Mary was.

She was a good friend to Elizabeth and the two of them were among the most popular ladies in the area. Everyone liked and respected them.

Mary, on the other hand, was only good at two things: playing piano and studying scripture.

Even there, she was not nearly as good at the piano as she wished.

In the end, she calmed her own nervousness by reminding herself what she had always known.

No man in his right mind would want her as a wife. So, it would all end in nothing.

On the night of Mr. Allen's dinner, Mary and Papa took the Bennet carriage to Braydon Hall.

Mr. Allen's home was more than two miles outside of Meryton on the exact opposite side of the town from Longbourn, making the journey almost four miles.

For most of the journey, Mary sat in silence with her father, but her nervousness made itself plain by the way her hands twisted round each other.

She began to worry that she might tear her gloves before she even arrived at their destination, but she could not stop herself.

The oddest thing about it was that she didn't even know what she was nervous about. She did not know if she wanted the evening to be a success or a failure.

In the last couple of minutes of the journey, Papa finally spoke. "I can see you are nervous," he said. "Do you want to marry Mr. Allen that much?"

With his comment, Mary finally managed to force her hands to be still.

"I have never met the man. While I know he has a great fortune, that is of little

consequence to me. I honestly do not know if I want to marry him or not. What is making me nervous, I suppose, is the idea of being judged solely on the events of this one evening. I know I do not give a particularly good first impression.”

Papa reached across and patted Mary’s hands, which though still were now folded together on her lap.

“Do not distress yourself, my dear. You need not pretend to be anything other than what you are. If he likes you, you will have a decision to make, but as of right now, there is nothing that is set in stone.”

Papa’s words did not truly calm Mary down. While it did relieve some of her concerns over whether she could make a good impression, it reminded her of what she had effectively forgotten, that this could all end in a wedding that would change her life and the lives of her sisters.

Nevertheless, to please her father, she exerted herself to at least appear calmer. “Thank you, Papa,” she said. She tried to hide the hint of sarcasm that attempted to wrap itself around her words. She was not entirely certain she succeeded.

With one final pat to her hands, he leaned back in his seat.

Not long afterward, Braydon Hall came into view.

Mary had never seen it before, but she felt rather awestruck.

It was larger than any other home in the neighborhood, more than twice the size of Longbourn.

Oddly, Mary’s first thought was wondering how expensive it would be to heat the whole house.

The carriage drew to a halt under a portico that stretched out from the front of the house. Though it was not raining at the moment, Mary imagined that such a thing could be quite handy, given how often it rained in England.

They were greeted at the door by an older lady, who Mary assumed was the housekeeper, and were shown into a drawing room. Miss Lucas and Sir William were already there, but their host was not yet present. Mary went to sit next to Miss Lucas. “Good evening,” she said.

“Good evening, Miss Mary,” replied the older lady.

Mary did not know how to start a conversation.

Miss Lucas was Elizabeth’s friend, but Mary barely knew her.

Mary had only been out for a few months, and her natural awkwardness meant that she had not yet made any friends of the other young ladies in their neighborhood.

After a while, Miss Lucas said, “I hope you had a pleasant journey here. It is a bit of a drive, is it not?”

“Yes,” said Mary. “It is a bit warm today, but Papa was kind enough to allow the top of the carriage to be put down. He hesitated at first, because he said we would get dirty from the dust, but in the end comfort won out.”

Miss Lucas looked her up and down and smiled a bit. “Not to worry, Miss Mary. You show no hint of dust whatsoever.”

After Mary thanked her, another brief silence descended between them. Then, Mary gathered her courage and asked what she really wished to know. “Are you hoping that Mr. Allen will choose you?”

Miss Lucas looked genuinely surprised. “Of course,” she answered quickly. “He is the wealthiest man in the neighborhood, and everyone knows he treated his first wife remarkably well. Why would I not wish for such an excellent match?”

“I don’t know,” said Mary. She looked back down at her hands.

“Are you as insistent on a love match as Elizabeth and Jane?” asked Miss Lucas.

Before Mary could answer, she continued.

“I love them both as dear friends, but I find their idealism entirely impractical. There are so few gentlemen in our sphere that it seems likely that if they haven’t met someone they could love by now, they aren’t going to, especially Jane.

She has been out for four years now, after all. ”

Mary shook her head. “I am not so impractical as that,” she said. “All I ask is that I can respect my husband, which will make it easier to submit to him as we are instructed to in the scriptures.”

Miss Lucas almost snorted in disbelief. “You can’t tell me that his wealth has nothing to do with it,” she said.

Mary shrugged her shoulders. “Believe what you will. I find such excessive wealth as is displayed in this overly large home to be a little disconcerting. The only thing that mitigates it is that I know the late Mrs. Allen had many charities that she created which used some of the excess funds to help those who have no opportunity to improve their own lives.”

“I have heard of those,” said Miss Lucas. “I understand she started a little school for the children on the estate to teach them basic arithmetic and how to read. I never

understood it myself. It seems to me that their parents should be able to teach them anything they need to know.”

“But if the children can only ever learn what the parents know, then they can never become anything other than what the parents are,” said Mary, feeling her passion on the subject rising within her.

“Not every son of a farmer can become a farmer for himself. There is simply not enough land in all of England for that to be practical. So, children sometimes need to be educated beyond what is easy and convenient. Otherwise, they end up heading for the city and working in factories, if they are even so fortunate as to find any work at all.”

Again, Miss Lucas shrugged. “I see nothing wrong with that. We need factory workers almost as much as we need farmers. Where do you think that muslin you’re wearing comes from?”

Mary knew she was not eloquent enough to carry her argument. If she were Elizabeth she could come up with some clever way to make her point, but she was just plain Mary. She decided to change the subject. “Speaking of muslin,” she said, “I do like the dress you are wearing this evening.”

Miss Lucas seemed content to allow the subject to shift to that of clothing and fashion as they waited for their host to join them.

## Page 3

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Mr. Allen was a cantankerous, greedy old man. At least, that was what his son had always called him. He preferred to think of himself as a slightly taciturn man who had little patience with greedy fools or foolish greed.

The loss of his wife five years ago had made him a little lonely but not enough to force him out of his comfortable home and into other people's crowded drawing rooms, not in Meryton at least. He visited his nearest neighbors once a week, and that was enough for him.

He saved his socializing for London where he could be comfortable with his lifelong friends.

His wife's death had few other consequences than mild loneliness.

He had never been particularly fond of her nor she of him.

They had rubbed along well enough, but once Allen's son had been born they rarely interacted other than at dinner.

Several times a month, he demanded his husbandly rights, though there was nothing special about it.

The only purpose of that activity was to keep him from having to spend money on a mistress.

He fully expected at least one more child to result from it, but his wife never again fell pregnant.

Despite their emotional distance, Allen had always provided well for her.

Her housekeeping budget was generous enough that she was able to entertain almost as often as she wished, and her clothing budget kept her better dressed than any other lady in the neighborhood.

He had even funded several charitable projects of hers such as the school for the estate's children and the donations to the free hospital in London.

He had heard her talk so much about how much good these did that when she passed, he didn't have the heart to cut them off, but he also had no interest in handling them personally.

Lately, simply keeping the school on his estate open had become a headache, and he had been getting more and more solicitations for charitable donations in London.

He had been on the cusp of simply shutting everything down when his son was stupid enough to die last autumn by breaking his head in a drunken revel.

The day after the funeral, Allen's cousin, Eustace, and his son showed up on Allen's doorstep, asking to see the place since they were now the most likely heirs to the estate.

Of course, he showed them around and even allowed them to stay for a couple of days, but he eventually kicked them out when they would not take a hint and leave of their own accord.

In the months since, Allen had looked into Eustace's financial habits and was appalled at what he found.

Neither Eustace nor his son seemed to have any inkling of the idea that money, no



matter how wealthy one is, is a finite resource.

They seemed to think that since they were gentlemen they were automatically entitled to anything they desired.

Both of them had significant debts, though Eustace's estate was not yet in danger.

At the rate they were going, however, that was a certain eventuality.

Allen had absolutely no desire to leave his earthly possessions to two such idiots who would squander it all away in a decade.

At the same time, he did not wish to leave it to just anyone.

Though the property was not entailed, it seemed both cruel and foolish to let it go to someone outside the family.

Allen had never intended to replace his deceased wife, but the dual needs of keeping Braydon Hall away from his foolish cousins and keeping the charities going without driving himself barmy drove him to seek someone, anyone, who could help him deal with these two issues.

Finding a lady who could sire a son was simplicity itself. Any lady less than thirty would do, and most of them in the neighborhood would jump at the chance to wed the wealthiest man in the area.

Finding a lady who could manage his charitable projects was a bit harder, but since most young ladies were taught to be charitable in some way from a young age, it was certainly a manageable prospect.

Finding a lady who was not greedy or foolish? Well, that was a challenge.

Allen waited a suitable amount of time until he was no longer in mourning for his son.

Then he sought out the one man in the neighborhood who likely knew the most about the ladies, Mr. Bennet.

While Bennet was almost as taciturn as Allen was, Allen was certain that, since Bennet's wife was the biggest gossip, and his five daughters were known to be both friendly and sociable, Bennet was the man who would know the most.

So, on a summer's morning in 1809, Allen called on Bennet.

At age forty-seven Bennet was not a young man, but Allen was ten years his senior.

Though they had both grown up near Meryton, they had never been close friends.

Yet, they were longstanding neighbors, so they shared a certain frankness which was refreshing and relaxing.

Allen made it clear that he cared very little about what his future wife looked like as long as she wasn't hideous enough to disturb his dinner when they ate together. He told Bennet that he was looking for someone who could manage the household and the charities.

What he did not say was that he hoped for a young lady who had no aspirations of being particularly wealthy.

Allen had enjoyed having his full income to himself after his wife was gone.

He realized that she, alone, had spent nearly a thousand pounds a year.

With her gone, he had been able to invest more and get more enjoyment out of his visits to London.

He did not want to give it all up again just because he needed to produce another heir.

Allen came away from Longbourn with the name of two ladies.

One was Bennet's own daughter, which was not surprising.

What father would not wish to promote his own daughter under such circumstances?

The other suggestion was the eldest Miss Lucas, who he vaguely remembered since she had been out in society when his wife was still alive.

He was fairly certain he had seen her at an assembly or something like it, but he didn't remember anything about her.

Between the two, Allen suspected he would choose Miss Lucas. She was older, and probably more responsible. Additionally, he mistrusted Bennet's motivation for suggesting his own daughter, especially since it was not even his oldest daughter.

On the night of the dinner where he was to meet the two ladies, Allen prepared something a little unusual.

He had his housekeeper show the guests into the front drawing room while Allen waited in the second drawing room.

The wall between the rooms was paper thin, so he could hear everything that was said.

Once all the guests had arrived, Allen sat right next to the wall and listened.

Bennet and Lucas chatted a bit. Well, Lucas chatted, and Bennet listened.

That was no surprise. What was surprising was the conversation he heard between the two young ladies.

If Allen was to believe what he had heard, Miss Lucas was the avaricious one and Miss Mary was the charitable one, the exact opposite of what Allen had assumed.

Even as he listened to the young ladies chatting about clothing Miss Lucas seemed far more interested in her dress than Miss Mary did.

After a few minutes, Allen determined that it was time to greet his guests, so he headed to the front drawing room. Bennet and Lucas greeted him and then proceeded to introduce their daughters.

Miss Lucas was taller than average, but she did not have the figure or elegance to carry her height.

Her hair was thin and was a boring, flat brown color that did no favors for her complexion.

Her eyes were of a similar boring light brown, and they were not exactly symmetrical.

Her only redeeming feature was that she had plump, pink lips which, surprisingly, looked better when she was not smiling.

Miss Mary was almost the exact opposite.

She was shorter than average with dark hair which was worn in a very plain style.

Her figure was decidedly flat. Her face was freckled and sallow, and her lips were thin.

Her one redeeming feature was the thoughtful look in her dark brown eyes, which seemed to be marred by either nervousness or fear.

Once introductions were complete, dinner was announced, and Allen led the group to the dining room. He placed Miss Lucas at his right hand and Miss Mary at his left so that he could easily converse with them both.

He spoke mainly to Miss Lucas during the first course. She was an intelligent conversationalist, though she was so well-spoken and so modulated in her tone that it was impossible to tell what her true interests and thoughts were.

During the second course he spoke with Miss Mary.

She seemed to be far less adept at conversation, but it was clear that both her words and her expressions were honest. He had no trouble discerning that Miss Mary was a compassionate, religious young lady, though she would likely be a rather poor hostess if she ever threw a dinner party.

Allen was a man of quick decisions and decisive action. By the end of the dinner, he was certain he did not want to let Miss Lucas anywhere near his money. She seemed to be the kind of woman who would demand the moon yet talk you into believing that you offered it to her in the first place.

After dinner, he bade farewell to Sir William and Miss Lucas, but he asked the Bennets to stay behind. If he had any doubts about his decision, Miss Lucas' sour expression upon hearing this would have laid them to rest.

In the drawing room, Mr. Allen turned to Miss Mary and said, "I believe your father

has told you the purpose of this dinner.”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“Well, I have decided that I would like to ask for your hand in marriage, Miss Mary Bennet. Will you accept?”

Allen expected her to answer promptly. After all, she had to have been expecting it, at least a little. However, she did not answer. Instead, she seemed to become even more nervous. He waited patiently, however. He knew, if he was going to marry such a young bride, patience would be necessary.

Eventually, she looked up at him, concern in her eyes. “Are you aware that I have no dowry until my mother passes away?” she asked.

Allen was not aware of such a thing, but now that he was, it was not particularly surprising. Mrs. Bennet was almost as big a spender as Mrs. Allen had been. “I did not know,” he said, “but it makes no difference to my request.”

Instead of clearing up her worry, his answer seemed to add puzzlement to her concern. “I do not understand, sir,” she said. “Miss Lucas would make a far better mistress for your home and hostess for your guests.”

It suddenly became clear. Her hesitance was not fear of him, but concern about her own inadequacy. “The fine qualities Miss Lucas has in abundance are not the qualities I am looking for in a wife,” he answered. “Instead, you have them in spades.”

When she still hesitated, he decided to put what he had overheard to good use. “Do you not respect me?”

Miss Mary's eyes widened in horrified surprise.

"No, sir," she said. "I mean, yes, sir." She shook her head in frustration.

"I mean, of course, I respect you. You place enough value on charity that you are looking for a wife specifically to manage those concerns instead of simply cutting them loose. Additionally, you have a very long-standing reputation of being a good master, landlord, and husband. How could I not respect you?"

"In that case, Miss Mary, let me assure you that I am certain you will make an excellent wife for me. If you have no other doubts, please say you will marry me."

Miss Mary looked at her father who was standing nearby, then she looked back at Mr. Allen. "May I speak with my father first?" she asked.

"Of course," he said and backed away a bit to give them some privacy.

Father and daughter spoke in low tones for several minutes. When they were done, she once again approached Allen. "I thank you for your generous proposal, sir, and I accept your offer."

She smiled nervously and Allen lifted her gloved hand and kissed the back of it. "Thank you, Miss Mary. You have made me a happy man." He looked to Mr. Bennet and added, "I shall come round tomorrow to discuss the arrangements."

## Page 4

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Once Mary agreed to the marriage proposal, she had little else to say in the matter.

Mr. Allen and Papa settled on the wedding date two months hence.

Papa, Mr. Allen, and Uncle Phillips, who was a solicitor, decided on the wedding contract.

Mary wasn't even given much say in her wedding clothes, because Mama was so excited that she took over all the shopping.

Mary did not like the feeling that every adult in her life was planning her future for her, but she had no power to prevent it, nor did she have confidence that she could make such decisions on her own.

Though she didn't like it, she didn't expect her new life to be much different than her life so far.

She would merely be exchanging being controlled by her parents to being controlled by her husband.

At least Mr. Allen was someone she could trust to take care of her.

Her assumption that Mr. Allen would make all her decisions for her was challenged, however, when two weeks after the proposal, Papa took Mary back to Braydon Hall to tour the place.

It seemed reasonable to receive a tour of her future home, and Braydon Hall was



large enough that its layout was not intuitive, so a tour was definitely needed. What surprised Mary was what Mr. Allen said as they began the tour.

“As we go around the various rooms, I want you to tell me if you want anything changed,” he said.

Then he gestured to the lady that Mary had assumed was the housekeeper.

“Mrs. Hampton will be following us and will make a note of your requests. She can also answer any questions you may have about how the house is managed.”

Mary nodded dumbly as she followed her future husband upstairs. He began by showing her the various guest rooms, which she had no qualms with. They were a bit more decorated than she preferred, but since they were guest rooms, she left them as they were.

Mr. Allen then guided the group to the nursery. He said, “I suspect you will wish to wait to make changes in here, but if you would like to look around, feel free.”

At first, Mary was confused. Why would she wish to wait before making changes to the nursery?

Then, she realized he was alluding to the need to wait until they actually had children.

She looked into every nook and cranny of the room in an effort to hide her blush, but she could feel that she was bright red even when there was nowhere else to look.

Mr. Allen definitely noticed, because he had a hint of a smile on his face as they headed back down the hall. He gestured to the two rooms they had not yet been in. “These are the master and mistress quarters,” he said. He opened one of the doors and added, “These will be your rooms, Mary.”

Mary hesitated. It was the first time her future husband had called her by her Christian name.

He had every right to do so, but it sounded odd in her ears.

Her hesitation lasted only a moment, though, because she gathered her courage and entered the room that would be hers for, hopefully, many years to come.

She walked into a sitting room, and her immediate reaction was that it was hideous.

The curtains were originally white with flowers printed on them, but they had yellowed with time and exposure to sunlight.

The sofa by the fire was similarly aged along with the pillows that adorned the back of the sofa.

The room itself was even more over-decorated than the guest rooms.

There were half a dozen small tables scattered around the room, most of which had an ugly empty vase on them, though there was one that was simply adorned with an old, lace doily.

The only thing Mary actually liked about the room was a comfortable looking chaise that had been shoved in the corner, though it too showed signs of age and was upholstered in a hideous faded pink.

She made no comment, however. Instead, she said, “May I see the bedroom as well?”

Mr. Allen opened the door to the bedroom, though this time he did not enter with her.

Instead, he stayed at the doorway. The bedroom was decorated mostly in pale pink

and white lace, which again had not aged well.

Additionally, that particular color scheme felt decidedly childish to Mary, who preferred darker colors.

“Thank you for showing me,” she said and made as if to exit the room.

Mr. Allen, however, blocked her way. He took her chin in his hand and tilted her head upward so he could look her straight in the eye.

“Mary,” he said sternly but gently, “I am certain you are not pleased with these rooms. I insist that you give orders to Mrs. Hampton for what you would like changed.”

Mary did not know what to do. She had never asked for anything in her life other than perhaps a doll or some sweets when she was younger.

She had learned long ago that even if she asked, her request would likely not be granted.

Now Mr. Allen was insisting that she give orders to have his house changed at his expense. It all felt so odd.

She reminded herself that she would soon be mistress of this house, and these rooms in particular would be hers. She thought about how her own mother easily gave orders for how she wished the house to be. Attempting to mimic that, she turned to Mrs. Hampton.

“I would like curtains in dark green with gold trim and a matching counterpane on the bed. The wallpaper should be replaced with a plain ivory paper, and I want every vase and every doily removed from my bedroom. The only tables that should remain

are one on each side of the bed, and the only thing that should be on those tables is a candlestick.”

Mary continued to give orders for the sitting room as well, requesting that the chaise be moved to a more prominent position and reupholstered, among many other things.

Occasionally, as she spoke, she glanced at her future husband, expecting him to be irritated at how much she wanted changed, but he seemed to be happier the more she spoke.

At least part of the mystery was solved as they left the mistress suite when Mr. Allen said quietly to her, “I am glad to see you can be decisive when the situation calls for it.”

Mr. Allen’s approval gave Mary enough courage to also request a few changes to the drawing rooms. She removed some of the overly ostentatious decorations, such as a statue of a swan that sat in one corner, and she requested a couple of paintings that had hung in the guest rooms to be moved into the drawing room.

She also gave orders to have a couple of the chairs reupholstered, because the fabric was showing signs of wear.

When she gave the last order, Mr. Allen asked, “Are you certain you wouldn’t like all the chairs renewed at the same time, so they match?”

Mary answered with confidence. “Truly, there is no need. If the new fabric is complimentary to that on the existing chairs, it will add interest to the room without the need for spending more than is necessary.”

“I see,” was his only response, though once again he seemed to approve of her decision.

The rest of the tour was without incident. When touring the servants' rooms, Mary noticed that a few of the sheets had holes in them, so she ordered them replaced, but other than that she gave no further orders for changes.

Before Mary and her father left Braydon Hall, Mr. Allen invited them into the drawing room for some refreshments. With Papa's permission, Mr. Allen pulled Mary to one side of the room so they could speak privately.

"Mary, there are a few things we need to discuss, so you know what to expect once we are married," he said.

"Thank you, sir," she said. "To be honest, I don't really know anything about what will be expected of me, so any clarification would be appreciated."

"First, I will need you to take over managing the household," he said.

"That includes keeping the household ledgers and making decisions on how the household budget should be spent. I expect you to take over that task from the day we come home as man and wife, so if there is any part of that role which you do not know, make certain to learn it in the next few weeks."

Mary nodded. She had expected this. Though she already knew quite a bit, she had begun asking her mother many questions to round out her knowledge, so much so that her mother had become quite irritated at times.

"Second, I will need you to take over managing the charities that I contribute to. For that, I will give you a budget, and it will be up to you to decide how it is spent. If any of your charitable works require action instead of simple monetary contribution, it will be up to you to take that action or find someone who can. I would like to be kept abreast of what you are doing, but all the decision-making will be yours."

Mary nodded again and said, "I look forward to it."

Mr. Allen gave her an approving look. "Your final responsibility will be your most important one," he said. "Together, we will need to produce an heir for this estate if at all possible. Has your mother told you anything of how that is done?"

Mary blushed furiously. "Not really, though I know it involves intimate actions that should be kept only between a husband and wife." She hesitated for a moment to express her next thought, but she pressed on. "I also know that there is no guarantee we will have a son."

Mr. Allen nodded. "I understand you are well aware of that, given that you have no brother," he said. "We can talk more on this subject after our wedding, but I need you to understand that this is the primary reason I sought to re-marry."

"Of course, sir," said Mary, solemnly. "I will do my best to raise any children we have."

"Thank you for understanding," he said. "One last thing. I would think this would be understood based on the nature of my proposal, but I think it should be said, nonetheless. I am not a particularly affectionate man, Mary. There will be no romance or adoration like what one finds in novels. This is closer to a business arrangement. I will provide for you to the best of my ability, and you will take care of the things I just mentioned in return. Is this acceptable to you? If not, now is the time to call it off."

Mary studied Mr. Allen's face. He was stern, and the slight wrinkles on his face indicated that he seldom smiled or laughed.

His eyes were serious, and he had been correct to say they held no affection.

Did she truly wish to tie her life to this man who would never love her? Did she even have a choice?

Truly, she did have a choice, but the alternative was much less pleasant.

No matter what Mary did, she would always be under someone else's control or guardianship, and she would never really be loved in any romantic sense.

That sort of nonsense was reserved for the pretty girls of the world, which Mary decidedly was not.

Her choice was to place herself in the hands of this man who would protect and provide for her or to hope that one of her sisters would marry a rich man who could provide for all of them. Otherwise, when her father eventually passed on, they would all have to subsist on Mama's small income.

When Mary reminded herself of this, the choice was so obviously clear. "I will marry you, Mr. Allen, and I will do everything in my power to be the wife you need me to be," she said earnestly.

Mr. Allen's serious eyes softened ever so slightly. "Thank you," he said.

Mary spent the following six weeks preparing for her new role as the wife of the wealthiest man in the neighborhood. She left all the clothes shopping to her mother, who had much more enjoyment in the process than Mary ever could, but she was busy in many other ways.

She spent hours poring over ledgers, trying to understand the various expenses associated with a large home, what expenses were essential and where economies could be made when necessary.

She started with Longbourn's ledgers. Once she felt she understood them, she asked Mr. Allen if she could study those of Braydon Hall.

He approved and added that should she have any questions about it, she could ask Mrs. Hampton.

Mary spent many hours at her future home, asking hundreds of questions and learning everything she possibly could about how it was run.

She got to know every single servant, both indoors and out.

Since she was there so often, she was also able to oversee the renovation of the mistress' suite, fine tuning it until she felt it was absolutely perfect.

During these six weeks, Mary grew in confidence as she repeatedly heard approval of her actions from both Mr. Allen and Mrs. Hampton. By the time her wedding day came, Mary was confident she could be the wife Mr. Allen expected her to be.



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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mary's wedding took place in early September, and her wedding breakfast was the social event of the year. Every member of every family of note in the neighborhood attended as well as a few friends of Mr. Allen who lived a little farther away.

Mary wore the dress her mother chose, and her hair was styled by Elizabeth and Jane who repeatedly asked if Mary was certain this was what she wanted.

Despite Mary's assurance that it was, indeed, what she wanted, Elizabeth and Jane still seemed as though they were mourning her marriage instead of celebrating it.

The memory of Miss Lucas' comment on how Elizabeth and Jane were hoping for a love match came to mind.

For her older sisters, who were everything that could be attractive to a man, Mary could understand their devotion to their ideals.

For Mary, however, a life filled with purpose, being cared for by a man who was responsible and reasonably kind, was the best she could hope for.

When Mary entered the church on the arm of her father, Mr. Allen was already standing at the altar waiting for her.

She took note of his gray hair and his weathered and slightly wrinkled face.

Despite his age he was still a handsome man.

Only a slight paunch marred his tall, trim, and upright figure.

For a brief moment, Mary wondered how many ladies had fallen in love with him only to be turned away by his self-proclaimed unaffectionate nature.

She quickly tossed the thought aside, however.

It did not matter. She was not marrying this man for love, at least not in a romantic sense.

She respected him, and that was enough to accomplish what was expected of her.

The ceremony proceeded, and the vows were said. Mary meant every word she said, and she could tell that Mr. Allen was serious and determined as well. Truly, that was all that mattered.

When it was over, Mary signed her name as Mary Bennet for the last time in the church's register. From now on, she was Mary Allen. From now on, she belonged to Mr. Allen instead of her father and mother.

As Mary signed her name, she looked at Mr. Allen's signature and realized that she had not even known his first name, which she could now see was Henry. Henry Allen, her husband.

She took his arm as he escorted her out of the church. They boarded his carriage and proceeded to Longbourn where the wedding breakfast was being held. There was not room inside the house for such a crowd, so Mama had served everything in the garden.

Mary received many congratulations from everyone she had ever known. She tried very hard to maintain her serenity and even reached for gracefulness, but after more than an hour of being surrounded by the celebrating crowd, she was quite fatigued.

Finally, Mr. Allen came for her and said, “I believe we are both quite tired of this celebration. Shall we leave?”

“Yes, please,” Mary replied promptly, and Mr. Allen gave her a brief, rare smile.

She then took his arm as they went to Mama and Papa to say their farewells.

Mary was grateful for her new husband’s way of naturally taking charge, for it meant that they didn’t linger over farewells for very long before they were in his carriage and heading for Braydon Hall.

Many of Mary’s belongings had already been delivered to her new home, so it was very little trouble for her to change out of her wedding dress and into one of her more comfortable day dresses.

Her new maid, Anna, helped her put on one of her new mob caps, showing distinctly for all to see that Mary Allen was a married woman.

After that, she wasn’t quite certain what to do with herself. She thought back to everything Mr. Allen had told her, and she remembered he had once said she was to take over running the household from the very moment he brought her home as his wife.

So, Mary went down to the front drawing room and rang for Mrs. Hampton.

They discussed what was to be served for dinner as well as meal plans for the next day.

When she was done talking to Mrs. Hampton, Mary went into the little office set aside for her use and looked over the household ledgers to see if anything had been added since she last looked.

When she was done, she headed back to the drawing room to see if her husband had come down yet, but there was no sign of him. He had hinted that they would usually only see each other at dinner, so she assumed he had begun as he meant to go on.

Seeking employment, Mary went to fetch the charity basket she had brought with her.

She always had some little article of clothing she was working on, so she pulled out a little nightgown for a newborn and began working.

After a time, Mary relaxed into the familiar rhythm of sewing.

Feeling comfortable in her quiet surroundings, she began singing softly to herself.

She was startled out of her reverie by her husband's deep voice saying, "That was a pleasant little song. What was it?"

He came into the room and sat in a comfortable armchair nearby. Mary blushed. "It was nothing," she said, "just a little ditty children sing to remember their numbers."

"Ah, I thought the tune sounded familiar, but I couldn't hear the words," he said. "I have not been around children much in many, many years. Not since my son was young."

Mary nodded but didn't know what to say. She had become more comfortable with Mr. Allen, but now that it was just the two of them, she didn't know what was expected.

"What are you working on?" he asked.

Mary held up the partially finished nightgown. "It is an infant's nightdress for one of the pregnant women on my father's estate. She has been rather ill with this baby, so I

thought I could help by making this for her.”

Mr. Allen nodded. “That is very kind of you,” he said. “I assume you will be visiting the tenants here in the coming days, getting to know them as well as you do the ones at Longbourn.”

Mary smiled. “Of course. It is one of the things I am most looking forward to.”

He grunted instead of making any response, but when Mary glanced up at him, he seemed pleased. His expression made her bold, so she asked, “What do you like to do with your time?”

He shrugged. “It depends on whether I am here or in London. Perhaps you did not know, but I go to London from January to May every year. When I am here, I visit my near neighbors once or twice a week, but I spend most of my time riding, hunting, and reading the paper. Of course, there are the necessary matters of business such as monitoring my investments and writing letters. I write and receive a great many letters, which is how I glean enough knowledge to invest wisely.”

“And in London?” Mary prompted.

“I am a much more sociable creature in London, but only among close friends. Most mornings I go riding in Hyde Park. Some of my afternoons are spent on business and letters, but I spend some afternoons at my club or visiting my friends. Evenings are often taken with social engagements, dinner parties and whatnot. Which reminds me, we will need to throw a dinner party of our own when we get there, so I can introduce you to my friends.”

Mary’s hands stopped moving, and she looked up at her husband. She could feel the fear showing in her face as her eyes grew wide.

“Do not fret,” he said in a calming manner.

“I know you will be able to handle this by the time we go. My friends will not judge you harshly, should you not be the perfect social butterfly. In fact, the reason we are friends is because we all share a certain lack of social inclination. You can get plenty of practice between now and then by inviting your family or your friends for dinner here.”

His words calmed her somewhat, but she was still filled with doubt as to whether she could accomplish this new task. “I shall do my best, sir,” she said.

At her response, Mr. Allen’s face took on an odd look. “You know, you can be a little less formal with me, now,” he said. “We are married, you know, and this is your home. It seems as though you are pushing me away when you refuse to even use my name.”

“I am so sorry,” Mary said. “I meant it as a sign of respect and to show you that I can defer to your judgment since, not only are you my husband, but you are also older and much more experienced of the world.”

“Very well,” he said. “Then, as the more experienced one, I will tell you that it is only the most beaten down of wives who refer to their husbands as ‘sir.’ When you do so, it makes me feel quite monstrous. Call me Henry, or if you truly cannot, call me Mr. Allen.”

Mary knew her mother and father usually referred to each other as Mr. and Mrs. so she was mostly comfortable doing so with Mr. Allen. Calling him by his Christian name seemed impossible, however. He was far too old, far too respectable, for her to presume to be his equal by calling him Henry.

“I shall call you Mr. Allen, then,” she said. “I apologize for causing you distress

before.”

He waved away her apology with his hand.

“Do not concern yourself,” he said. “I suspect you have much to learn, and I will do my best to be patient. At least you seem willing to learn. That is a characteristic highly in your favor. Now, I believe it is time to change for dinner.” He rose and made to leave the room. “I shall see you in an hour.”

Dinner was a little awkward, but the conversation flowed as the two newlyweds got to know each other, their likes, dislikes, hobbies, and many other little things. After dinner, they took turns reading to each other from a novel Mr. Allen had begun recently.

As the evening progressed, Mary became more and more nervous.

Her mother had explained the basics of what she could expect from her husband on their wedding night.

Mary considered that, of all the times when she had made something awkward, this was the one time she was sure to do so and therefore ruin everything.

After a couple of hours of reading, Mr. Allen closed the book, stood, and held out his hand.

Mary took it, and he led her to her room.

“Get your maid to let your hair down and brush it out, but do not re-braid it for the night. Change into your nightgown and wait for me.” He kissed her hand and caressed it in a calming manner. “Try to relax. I shall not harm you.”

He turned and headed for his own room. Mary took a deep breath and entered her chambers. She went past her sitting room and entered her bedroom, where Anna was waiting for her.

Mary's first joining with her husband changed something fundamentally within her.

He was a considerate lover, not particularly passionate, but appreciative of what she offered.

Since she had learned to respect and trust him over the previous weeks, she trusted that he would take care of her, and he did.

They joined together as man and wife at least every other day from then onward.

Mr. Allen always told her at dinner whether he would come to her room that night, and she was grateful for the forewarning.

As she learned more about him and what he liked, she learned more about herself as well, and she became more confident.

Gradually, the act became more enjoyable, but it was never something she actively sought.

The confidence she learned in the bedroom and by conversing with Mr. Allen at dinner every day somehow translated into Mary's daily life.

She had more confidence that she could manage people, and her housekeeping improved.

She had more confidence that she could talk to strangers, and her socializing skills improved.



She learned enough confidence to tackle the problems that the village's school was having, though she had to teach the children herself for a couple of weeks while she looked for someone who was willing to take on the task. Even so, it all worked out in the end.

Once a week, Mrs. Bennet and all of Mary's sisters would visit Mary at Braydon Hall, and not a single visit went by without at least one of them commenting on how improved she looked or how much married life seemed to suit her.

Surprisingly, Mary appreciated all the little bits of gossip they would bring her.

She had always assumed gossip was evil, but she now saw that it was an important way of staying connected to one's neighbors without having to visit them every day.

She still didn't approve of spreading lies or besmirching anyone's character, but it was interesting to know when the Lucas' pigs had got into their garden or when Mrs. Goulding was pregnant with her sixth child.

Once a month, Mr. and Mrs. Allen threw a dinner party.

The first one was only attended by Mary's family and the Allens' nearest neighbor.

Each subsequent one, however, was bigger than the last as Mary learned how to plan one properly and how to behave as a hostess.

She was never as good at the latter as she wished to be, but at the end of each party, the guests seemed happy and content, and that was what mattered the most.

On Christmas Day, the Allens spent most of the day at Longbourn, along with Mrs. Bennet's brother and sister, Mr. Gardiner and Mrs. Phillips, and their families.

It was a crowded but joyful time, and Mary was glad to be a part of the love that pervaded the house.

Even so, she was also grateful to return to her own home with Mr. Allen at the end of the day.

The first Monday in January, Mr. and Mrs. Allen made the short trip to their townhome in London.

It wasn't particularly large, and it wasn't in the most fashionable neighborhood, but it was more than large enough for Mary and her husband, and the neighborhood was neat and clean and clearly was occupied by respectable people.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mr. Allen must have sent letters to his friends to inform them of when he would arrive in London, because the very day after their arrival, Mary was visited by four different ladies, each of whom claimed to be wives of Mr. Allen's friends.

The day after that, she received two more callers of the same nature.

All six ladies were much older than Mary, even older than her own mother. They seemed to be in their late forties or early fifties. Despite the age gap, however, they eagerly welcomed her to their little circle and immediately claimed friendship with her.

What surprised Mary the most, however, was that her husband's friends were not just simple landowners like her father. Of the six ladies, Mary had actually read of four of them in the newspaper.

The two Mary had never heard of were wives of city landlords, Mrs. Carlton and Mrs. Peabody.

Mr. Carlton owned a great deal of property in Manchester which he rented out, and Mr. Peabody owned quite a bit in London.

One of the ladies she had heard of was wife to one of the wealthiest industrialists in the country, Mrs. Littleton.

Another was the granddaughter of a marquess, Mrs. Turner.

Though Mr. Turner was untitled, he was owner of a very large estate near Bath, at

least twice the size of Braydon Hall.

The two biggest surprises were Lady Matlock and Lady Ustbridge. The first was a countess and the second was a baroness.

Mary was beginning to think that, as wealthy as her husband was compared to the other residents around Meryton, he was likely the least wealthy of all his friends. She wondered how he had become friends with such men.

She decided to ask her husband just that at dinner. “Mr. Allen, your friends’ wives have all called on me since our arrival. They were very welcoming.”

“I am glad,” he said. “I don’t usually write ahead before coming to London, but I did this year, so they could be informed of your arrival and welcome you.”

“They are...much higher ranked than I expected,” said Mary, diplomatically.

Mr. Allen chuckled. Given that he hardly ever smiled, a chuckle from him was like an outright guffaw from others. “That is an interesting way to phrase it. I suppose you are wondering how we all became friends.”

“I would love to hear about it, if you don’t mind sharing the story,” said Mary.

“Not at all,” he said. “It is a simple enough tale.

We are all the same age and attended school at the same time, both Eton and Cambridge.

Back then, going to Cambridge had little to do with the learning of facts.

Rather, it was simply an excuse to make friends with others of a similar social class

and discuss revolutionary ideas in coffee shops.

“My friends and I formed out little group because we have a mutual abhorrence for politics, which was the main topic of conversation among almost everyone else,” he said. Then after a pause, he added with a quirk of his lips, “Well, that and ladies, of course.”

Mr. Allen gave Mary an odd look that she couldn’t interpret.

She thought, perhaps, he was expecting her to react to his comment, but there was nothing to react to.

She was well-aware by then that men, especially young men, were particularly interested in those acts that were supposed to be limited between husband and wife.

In truth, she was learning that in a society where marriages were arranged based on power and wealth, such restrictions were rather loosely enforced, if at all.

She had learned all of this, because as a married woman, she had been party to much more salacious gossip at home than she had known before, including many little tidbits from the London society pages, which she had not been allowed to read at Longbourn.

Mary didn’t approve of such wanton behavior, either before or after marriage, because it contradicted the holy vows that were spoken to create the marriage.

It seemed wrong to make a vow that one knew one would not keep.

At the same time, however, she had become resigned to the fact that not everyone did as they ought all the time.

“Have you ever had a mistress before?” Mary asked.

Mr. Allen had just taken a bite of food, but he almost spit it out due to shock at her question. Once he had cleared his throat and swallowed his food, he asked, “Why would you ask such a thing?”

Mary gave him a curious look. “Why would I not ask such a thing?” she said, calmly. “If anyone should know about it, it should be me, should it not?”

Again, he gave her a strange look. “I suppose you are right,” he conceded.

“I never took a mistress while I was married,” he answered.

“Though I am not particularly affectionate, I do take marriage vows seriously. I did have one mistress before I was married. About a year after my previous wife died, I took another one here in London, though she didn’t last long.

I found that, now that I am older and more jaded, she was more trouble than she was worth. ”

“I see,” said Mary as she went back to eating her meal.

“You are taking this discussion rather calmly for one as adamantly religious and as young as you,” Mr. Allen said. “I expected shock or censure. At the very least surprise. But you are as calm as always.”

“It has not escaped my notice that our joining fulfills a far greater need than simply that of creating an heir for you. I am also aware that the profession of prostitute is as old as humanity. Though I have not experienced it myself, there must be a driving need behind such behavior for it to continue despite all the social and religious pressure that has been brought to bear against it for centuries, if not millennia.

Therefore, I can only conclude that there must be something there I do not understand, which is why I asked the question. I still do not understand, but since I don't know enough even to know what questions to ask, I simply accepted what you said in the hopes that someday I will understand. ”

When Mary finished her explanation, she looked at her husband. His eyes were glowing in a way she had only seen when they were in her bedroom. “Would you like to understand?” he asked, his voice huskier than usual.

“If it will not lead me into immoral behavior, yes, I would like to understand,” said Mary.

Mr. Allen then shocked Mary by standing up from the dinner table. He took her hand and pulled her to her feet then led her quickly up the stairs to her room.

What followed was a joining unlike any she had experienced.

Through his touch, she learned just what kind of pleasure someone can have in such an act.

She realized that, if men experienced the same level of pleasure she had, it made a small measure of sense as to why someone might cross all bounds of propriety to experience it again.

Still, however, it was not something she would ever even imagine doing outside of her marriage.

In the days, weeks, and months that followed, Mary's husband was more enthusiastic about the marriage bed than he had been before.

He even became a bit more affectionate in their daily life, occasionally touching her

cheek or taking her hand when they were alone.

It was all a bit mystifying to Mary, but she could not deny that she enjoyed the attention.

A week after the Allens arrived in London, they hosted a dinner party for their circle of friends. Not only were Mr. Allen's six particular friends invited, but their wives and even a few of their relations, most of whom were closer to Mary's age than Mr. Allen's, were invited.

Since their townhome was on the smaller side, Mary had to scramble a bit to find seating for all of the eighteen guests plus herself and Mr. Allen. In the end, she had to open the folding wall that separated the dining room from the drawing room, where she set up a second long table.

Since the drawing room would be occupied by the gentlemen even after dinner, Mary prepared the parlor to receive the ladies during the separation of the sexes.

When the gentlemen were done with their port and cigars, the servants would take down the extra table and close the wall, and the ladies would then join the gentlemen in the drawing room for conversation and perhaps some cards.

Mary was happy to finally meet the gentlemen that meant so much to her husband. She was surprised, however, that of the relations that came, only one of them was female.

Miss Carlton was the oldest child of Mr. and Mrs. Carlton.

She was in her mid-twenties and had the kind of looks that Mary could sympathize with.



Her complexion was pale, but it was not brightened by rosy cheeks.

Instead, she looked almost as though she were perpetually ill.

The freckles that dotted her cheeks and nose stood out rather starkly on her pale skin.

Her hair, though brown, had a reddish tint to it that was not particularly popular.

At first, Mary thought she might have found a kindred spirit, a young lady who had lost all hope of love due to less than stellar looks.

She quickly learned her error and chastised herself for judging someone on their looks alone.

Miss Carlton was single by choice. Her parents had provided her with an independent fortune, and she had no intention of handing over her money to a man.

Additionally, she was fascinated by engineering and machinery, and she claimed that marrying would limit or eliminate her ability to continue to tinker and learn.

Of the younger gentlemen, the only one that stood out was Mrs. Turner's cousin.

When Mrs. Turner introduced him to Mary, she called him, Mr. Gregory Worsley.

The young man seemed surprised, though not displeased, to be addressed by that name, leading Mary to believe he usually went by a different moniker.

She couldn't imagine why such a subterfuge would be deemed necessary, but she let it slide.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mr. Worsley seemed to be in his mid-twenties and was very handsome.

Mary had to exercise a great deal of self-control to not simply stare at him.

His face was smooth and beautifully angular.

His eyes were the color of dark chocolate bonbons, and his dark brown, almost black, hair was smooth and glossy with just enough wave to make it interesting.

His figure matched his face. He wasn't particularly muscular, but he moved in such a way as to hint that he was quite strong for his lean frame.

In an effort to avoid staring at him, she simply avoided speaking to him more than absolutely necessary before dinner.

She also made certain he was positioned at a different table from her, so that she could not see him.

She had absolutely no intention of embarrassing her husband by staring at another man when she was supposed to be making a good impression among her husband's friends.

Fortunately, her efforts did not go to waste. The dinner went well with no real hiccups. Everyone seemed to enjoy the company, and Mary was pleased that her seating plans had not made anyone uncomfortable.

After dinner the ladies withdrew to the parlor. There was just enough seating for them

all, and the room felt full, but it was comfortable enough. Mary chatted with Miss Carlton for a time until her attention was taken by Mrs. Peabody then by Mrs. Littleton.

After about half an hour, Mary began to expect the gentlemen to join them, and she began glancing at the clock more often.

When Lady Matlock noticed her doing so, she said, "They will be at least another hour if not more. Every year when those men get together at dinner for the first time, they can't seem to stop talking.

I sometimes think they even forget about their wives when they are together.

Perhaps reminiscing about their youth somehow takes them back to those days when they had little to no responsibility. "

"It baffles me why they always do this at dinner," said Mrs. Carlton.

"You would think that they could just talk at their club, but Mr. Carlton says they always have other things to do at their club than reminisce. I can't imagine what that is, though.

Whatever goes on in a gentleman's club will always be a mystery to us ladies. "

"Perhaps their club is a place for the present, whereas this a time to think about the past," suggested Mary.

"You are most likely correct," said Mrs. Turner. "It doesn't change how irritating it is, though."

"Perhaps, while they reminisce, you could tell me what charities there are here in

London that I could get involved in,” said Mary.

All the ladies present were involved in at least one charitable concern, and their discussion on the subject was extensive and detailed.

Mary thought all of the organizations mentioned were worthwhile, but she knew she would have to limit her efforts to just one or two, so she filed all of her new information away in her memory to think about later.

Eventually, Mr. Allen came to the door and informed Mary that the drawing room was ready for them all. Mary was glad to see him so happy. Talking with his friends must have been very pleasant, indeed.

When the group reconvened in the drawing room, Mary continued her duties as hostess by circulation among the guests, chatting with each briefly, and attempting to learn more about the men who were such good friends to her husband.

She still had every intention of avoiding Mr. Worsley. Even with the pressure of duty forcing her to be more sociable that was natural, she thought that it would be impossible to carry on a conversation with such a handsome man without becoming embarrassed.

Her resolve was tested, however, when Mr. Worsley spoke to her as she was moving from one guest to the next. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Mrs. Allen,” he said.

“That is very kind of you,” she answered, suddenly nervous to be speaking to such a handsome man.

“I’ve known old Allen for almost a decade now, and I would have sworn he would never willingly marry again. He’s such a skinflint, I was sure he would not wish to

take on the cost of a wife again. You can bet we all grilled him a good long while about why he suddenly decided to marry,” he said

Mary was stumped. First, she was slightly offended at Mr. Worsley’s slight against her husband, calling him a skinflint.

Second, she didn’t know quite how to respond to his indirect request for more information.

Should she tell him that it was just so Mr. Allen could prevent his cousin from inheriting his property?

Mr. Worsley didn’t give her a chance to decide, however, since he continued.

“He told us all that it was just so he could have another heir, but old Peabody didn’t believe him, nor did Mr. Turner.

They questioned him extensively, but Allen shut up tight like a clam, and none of us could get anything else out of him.

The oddest thing was that the whole time he looked like he was about to burst out laughing.

I’m sure you know that he never laughs, so that just made me even more curious. ”

“I am afraid it truly is as simple as that,” said Mary, “at least as far as I know. He did mention at one point that he wanted someone to manage the charitable concerns his former wife had left behind, but I am certain that was not his primary reason.”

“So, you handle his charities?” he asked. When Mary nodded, Mr. Worsley asked, “Have you heard of the Marine Society?”

Mary shook her head. “Most of what I’ve heard of in London are various types of hospitals,” she said. “What is the Marine Society?”

“They take young city boys, at least thirteen years old, who want to earn an honest living but have no way of learning a trade, and they outfit them and train them to be sailors for the Navy,” said Mr. Worsley.

Mary felt a spark of interest, and she said, louder than she meant to, “But that is marvelous! Most of the charities I’ve heard of merely minister to the poor, but they do little to help them become self-sufficient.

This, however, gives these boys a chance at providing a better life for themselves, and at the same time it helps our country acquire the sailors needed to protect our shores. ”

As she thought about it, she added, “I suppose it does put the poor boys in danger. After all, a life at sea is never a sure thing. On the other hand, if they continued to live in London with no employment, they might not survive anyway. Can you tell me more about it?”

Mr. Worsley seemed surprised at her sudden enthusiasm, but she did not know why he should be, and she was too interested in the subject to care overly much.

Her nervousness disappeared as they talked.

She learned more about how the Marine Society operated.

It wasn’t something she could volunteer for, but she decided that it was a truly worthy cause for donation.

Eventually, she had to circulate among the other guests, but she kept wishing she

could go back to Mr. Worsley and talk with him more. She told herself that it was only because she wished to learn more of the Marine Society. She almost believed herself.

After some socializing, Mary ordered the card tables to be set up, and the party settled into the organized chaos of playing cards. The rest of the evening passed pleasantly, though Mary was grateful when the last guest left, and it was quiet.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mr. and Mrs. Allen stayed in London until the middle of May when the warming weather made the city a bit more smelly and a bit less comfortable. In the months she was there, Mary continued to learn about society and the world around her from her new circle of friends.

At first, it felt a bit odd that they were all significantly older than she was, except Miss Carlton, but she became accustomed to it quickly.

Their conversation was not boring drivel filled with gossip of people she didn't know.

Instead, they often discussed the state of the world around them and looked for ways they could make a difference.

It wasn't all seriousness, though. Mary's new friends insisted on taking her shopping often.

Her pin money was not enough for her to dress with the same expensive elegance as they did, but she learned how to make herself appear to the best advantage possible.

She also learned the joy that comes with simply browsing the shops and purchasing little items that struck her fancy.

Despite their relative closeness in age, Mary found she did not get along well with Miss Carlton, so they never became the good friends she had hoped for.

Miss Carlton seemed to carry a bitterness when it came to men, and she often belligerently espoused ideas about women's rights that Mary could not agree with.



Mary held firm to the idea that it was her legal and moral duty to submit herself wholly to her husband and his concerns.

Since they had such differing views on such an important issue, there could be no true meeting of the minds nor true friendship.

Mr. and Mrs. Allen were invited to many evening entertainments: dinner parties, musicales, card parties, and balls.

Mrs. Allen was grateful she was never even asked to help with musical entertainment.

Though she had been proficient on the piano before her marriage, she hadn't practiced much since, and she could hear that the ladies who did perform were much more pleasant to listen to than she had been.

When they attended balls, Mr. Allen always stood up once with his wife, even though dancing with one's spouse in public was not common.

He claimed it was because he had never danced with her before their marriage.

Aside from that dance, however, Mary was usually asked to dance at least half the time.

It was an odd feeling. Before her marriage, dancing always had the cloud of potential courtship hovering over it, so very few of the local men wished to dance with someone so clearly unattractive as Mary had been.

Now, however, since she was married, none of that mattered.

The gentlemen who requested her dances were merely pleasant and chatty, simply wishing to get to know her better or, more often, looking for a partner who would

have no romantic expectations from them.

Many of these events were attended by mostly the same people, often hosted by either Mr. Allen's friends or by their relatives, so Mary's social circle gradually widened, as she met and got to know gradually more and more people.

Mr. Worsley attended a great many of these functions. At each event, he made an effort to speak with her, though he certainly had other options for conversation partners. He also asked her for a dance at every single ball.

Mary gradually accustomed herself to his presence and his handsomeness, and she became gradually less awkward and less embarrassed in his presence.

She did, however, have to prevent herself from watching him too much.

It was a rather difficult task at times, for the man certainly drew the eye, but Mary's earnest desire to honor her husband gave her the moral fortitude to clamp down on her attraction to the man.

Gregory Worsley, Earl of Pendleton, age twenty-six, had stayed in London far longer than he had intended.

He had felt it necessary to circulate in society this winter, simply to keep up his connections, but as he was not in the market for a wife just yet, he had planned to return to Eastbourne in early March.

Instead, he found himself heading to his club on foot on a breezy, warm afternoon in early April.

The reason he had not returned to his responsibilities was simple. Mrs. Mary Allen, the very young wife of a man Gregory had admired and respected for over a decade.

She was fascinating, with her thoughtful brown eyes and her thoughtful approach to charity. In fact, thoughtful was the one word that seemed to guide all of her actions. She was thoughtful of other's feelings, thoughtful in how she responded to questions, and thoughtful in how she spent her money.

She was also thoughtful in the sense that she was contemplative. Almost everything they had discussed was something she had considered before. When he did manage to bring up a subject about which she knew nothing, she was almost avaricious in her need for new information.

Gregory was used to the slightly spoiled sort of young lady that was brought up to be an ornament to society and a good hostess but little else.

Some of the ladies he knew were quite devoted to their charities, just as Mrs. Allen was, but no one he had ever met truly considered the long-term consequences of too much charity or charity applied in a poor manner quite like she did.

Mrs. Allen was unlike anyone he had ever met, and every time he told himself it was time to leave London, he convinced himself to stay just a few more days, just long enough to attend another event with her.

Now, however, his time in London was truly up.

He had received a letter from his steward informing him that there was a dispute between two of his tenants that required his mediation.

He would be leaving tomorrow. He had decided to spend his last day in London relaxing at his club, hopefully finding a few friends that he could bid farewell to.

His only regret was that he couldn't have one last conversation with the intriguing Mrs. Allen.

When Gregory entered his club, one of the first people he saw was Mr. Allen. He was sitting in a comfortable chair reading the newspaper. Gregory sat down in the chair next to him and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Allen."

The older man lowered his paper. When he saw who was speaking to him, he folded it up and set it on the little table beside him. "Ah, Pendleton," he said. "Or perhaps I should call you Worsley, since that is the way you were introduced to my wife."

"You may call me either, of course," he said, though the tension in Allen's voice caused Gregory to brace himself.

"I've been meaning to have a chat with you, you know, but I could never seem to find you alone. Do you mind if we talk in one of the private parlors?"

Gregory immediately requested one of the private rooms. He was certain he would not wish the coming conversation to be overheard.

Once they were both seated at the table within, Allen said, "I've noticed you've been paying a great deal of attention to my wife."

Since this was exactly what Gregory had been expecting, he had an answer ready. "She is an intelligent woman, very interesting to talk to, but I assure you I have absolutely no designs upon her."

"Of course you don't," said Allen. "She would never allow it."

"You have such great faith in her love for you, then?" asked Gregory.

Surprisingly, this made Allen laugh. It was a short bark of a laugh, but even that was incredibly rare for the serious man.

“She doesn’t love me. What sixteen-year-old lady would love an old man like me.

No, I have faith in her sense of duty, honor, and morality.

As you said, she is a remarkable woman, but you need to remember that she is mine, body and soul, and I know her very well. ”

“It never even crossed my mind to think otherwise,” said Gregory. “Truly, I am not attempting to engage her affection or pull her loyalty away from you. Not in the least. I simply find her to be an interesting conversationalist.”

“So, you enjoy talking to her,” said Allen. “Is that why to make it a point to dance with her at every opportunity? Don’t think I haven’t noticed that your hand lingers on her longer than necessary.”

This surprised Gregory, for he hadn’t even noticed such a thing. Now that he thought about it, however, it had always felt as if his hand was reluctant to let go of her waist or her hand any time they touched during a dance.

“I apologize if I have crossed a line,” he said. “It was most unconsciously done, and it will not happen again.”

“You’re right it will not happen again,” said Allen, “because you will not be dancing with her again this season. In fact, if I catch you talking to her for more time than it takes to be polite, I shall run you back to Eastbourne myself.”

“You’re being a bit possessive, are you not?” said Gregory. Such jealousy from the older man shocked him. Gregory could well remember the former Mrs. Allen, and she had been a frivolous sort of lady, freely chatting with and even flirting with anyone she chose.

Allen leaned back in his chair and just looked at Gregory for several long moments. Finally, he said, “Do you remember when you and every other man at the table asked why I had remarried when we gathered at the beginning of the season?”

“Of course,” said Gregory. “You declared that you just needed a new heir. It’s a tale as old as time.”

“Yes, that is what I said,” said Allen, “and that is what I believed when I married her. All I was looking for was a woman who could bear me a son and who wouldn’t waste my money.

Mary was perfect for my purposes, since she was young, healthy, and she had no pretensions to wealth.

Even now, though I would gladly give her more, she never asks for anything.

What I got when I married her, was far more than I even knew was possible.

“Mary is, in every way that matters, the perfect woman. The care she shows for others is always tempered with practicality. The effort she put into learning how to be a proper hostess was astounding. Everything I have asked of her she has done in ways that exceeded my expectations every time. And I do mean everything. ”

The way Allen emphasized the last word implied that he was speaking of the more intimate aspects of marriage as well as the practical ones. The idea suddenly made Gregory very uncomfortable.

“Given all that, I am certain you can see that I would wish to protect her,” he continued. “I would not wish for your attentions, whether intentional or not, to cause her any pain or distress. I would prefer it if you were simply out of her life.”

Gregory scoffed. "You claim you own her with one breath; then with the next you claim you are simply protecting her," he said. "I think you are just jealous."

He expected his outburst to raise the ire of old Allen, but the man simply raised one shoulder nonchalantly.

"Believe what you will. I know my Mary, and I know that if you continue to court her attention, even if you are not trying to engage her affection, you will eventually hurt her. You need to back off."

Gregory took in a deep breath and let it back out.

He did not wish for his anger and resentment to color his speech.

"I will be leaving London tomorrow. I received a letter from my steward, and my presence is needed in Eastbourne to resolve a dispute. I was not planning to return to London until next winter."

"Then I wish you a safe journey," said Allen. He then got up from the table and went back into the main room to resume reading the paper.

Gregory sat in the parlor for quite some time, wondering what in the world had just happened.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

By the end of her time in London, Mary had grown quite comfortable with society, far more so than she ever imagined possible.

Though she still didn't like crowds very much, and she was always grateful to come home to their quiet little house, she could tolerate them longer than she had been able to in her own neighborhood.

She had been a little disappointed to find out that Mr. Worsley had left the city near the beginning of April and would not be returning until next year, but since such behavior was common enough, she let it go. There were plenty of other interesting people to talk to.

Just before Mr. and Mrs. Allen went home to Braydon Hall, Mary received promises of regular correspondence from all six of her new friends, and she promised to write back.

It only took a single day for Mary and her husband to settle back into their lives in the country. They were almost immediately visited by Mrs. Bennet and Mary's sisters. Kitty and Lydia demanded stories of the splendor of London, and Mary laughingly obliged, at least for a time.

Jane and Elizabeth didn't say much, but they listened and watched carefully. Just before leaving, Elizabeth pulled Mary aside and said, "I've never seen you so happy and comfortable. Did you truly enjoy London as much as you claim?"

Mary smiled. "Yes, I did. Mr. Allen has a close group of friends, and their wives readily welcomed me among them. It is amazing how much being accepted can boost



one's confidence and happiness.”

Mary had meant it as a simple explanation of why she was happier than she had ever been in her life, but she realized as she said it that it might have come across as accusatory.

As Elizabeth's eyes became a bit watery with sorrow, Mary was certain she had said something wrong, but she did not know how to take it back or fix it.

“I'm sorry, Mary,” said Elizabeth. “I am so sorry.”

She knew that Elizabeth was apologizing for ignoring her all the years they grew up together. She gave her older sister a hug and said, “Do not think on it. The past is the past and cannot be changed. The present and the future are what we have power over.”

“You are so very good, Mary,” said Elizabeth as she hugged Mary fiercely. “I truly am glad you are so happy.”

As Mary bade farewell to her family, Jane also gave her a quick hug and whispered, “I am sorry, too.” She didn't give Mary a chance to respond, however, as she slipped out the door, heading for the waiting carriage.

A week after arriving at Braydon Manor, Mary realized that she missed the hustle and bustle of all the activities of London. She found herself bored with the repetitive activities that filled her days, activities that used to be comfortable in their familiarity.

She pushed through for another week, trying to find satisfaction in her work, but it was not enough.

Mary spent many hours in introspection, trying to understand herself.

She did not feel like she was the kind of woman who needed to be constantly busy or entertained, so she had not expected to miss London so much. Yet, something was missing.

Eventually, Mary realized that what was missing was the opportunity to learn.

By this time, she had been married for nine months, and all of it had been filled with learning and growing.

Every day had been exciting, because every day there was something new to learn.

Now, however, she was thrown back into her usual waters, where she was comfortable but where there wasn't much left to learn.

That night at dinner, she said, "I was thinking about picking up a new hobby, perhaps learning something new, but I don't know what it should be. Do you have any suggestions?"

"A new hobby?" asked Mr. Allen. "Have you grown bored so soon after leaving London?"

"I don't think that is quite accurate," said Mary. "I don't miss London in particular, nor do I miss the constant socializing. What I do miss is the opportunities I have had to learn and grow. I thought that I could satisfy that by picking up a new hobby."

"I will think about it," he said. "In the meantime, tell me about your day. I believe you had a visit from your family. How are they doing?"

Mary told him about her family and all the news they had brought of the neighborhood.

They chatted amicably as they always did throughout dinner.

When the last course was served, Mr. Allen said, "I think I have an idea for a new hobby for you, but I am unsure if you will be interested. It is rather unorthodox, you see."

Mary's curiosity was naturally piqued. "What is it?"

"How would you like to learn about managing the estate and my other business concerns?" he asked. For the first time, Mary could detect a hint of hesitancy in her husband's voice.

"I would love that!" said Mary. "I have always been curious where our money comes from and where it goes, but I thought you wished to keep that to yourself, so I never asked."

"It is not so much that I wished to keep it from you," he explained, "but that I was under the impression that women didn't much care about the subject."

The few times I tried to explain to my first wife why her budget had to be limited to what it was, she quickly threw up her hands, declaring she could not understand me and had no need for details. "

"I am sorry you had that experience," said Mary. "I assure you I would very much like to know more about the subject."

Mr. Allen's expression softened a bit, and he covered her hand with his own. He said, "Then we shall begin tomorrow. Come to my study when you are done with your daily meeting with Mrs. Hampton."

Mary smiled widely. "Thank you. I shall."

That summer was just as full of learning and interest as the preceding months in London had been.

Mary's understanding continued to grow as her husband explained all the many details associated with managing a large estate like his.

Mary combined his information with what she already knew of the lives of their tenants to gradually gain a more complete picture of what an estate truly was.

When she had learned as much as she could about the estate, they moved on to the subject of his investments and business concerns. These were a bit harder for Mary to understand, for she had no prior knowledge upon which to build.

Gradually, she came to understand how investments worked.

His real estate investments in London were the easiest to understand, because it was not so different from an estate.

Mr. Allen owned several large townhomes in Mayfair which he leased out in one year leases to those who only wished to visit the city once in a while.

He also owned quite a few boarding houses in less affluent parts of the city.

His other investments were so varied that Mary had trouble wrapping her mind around it all. What she eventually came to understand, however, was that her husband had over one hundred thousand pounds wrapped up in his investments, and they earned a great deal more each year than his estate did.

In short, Mr. Allen's income was more than twice what she thought it was.

In late August Mary asked a question that had been burning in her mind for many

weeks. “Mr. Allen, if you have such a large income why is my household budget and pin money so small relative to your income?”

“Are you discontent?” he asked.

Mary shook her head decisively. “Of course not. I have no need for more than you give me. In fact, I sometimes have trouble spending all of my pin money, because I forget that I can buy new dresses occasionally. It is only that most people live in a way that shows their wealth plainly and openly. I was wondering why you do not.”

“To be honest, Mary, I don’t know exactly why,” he said, surprising Mary greatly.

She had come to believe that her husband was the fount of all knowledge.

He continued, “I began saving in my younger years simply to ensure that I could provide for any children I had.

I expected to have more than just one son, you see.

“After a while, through discussions with my friends, I learned about various ways of investing, and I found the process intrinsically interesting. I don’t really enjoy society as a whole, so I don’t see a need to spend a great deal of money just so I can entertain others, and I see no need to spend money on clothes, carriages, and expensive horses just to show off.

I suppose there is also the motivation that the more money I save, the more I have available to invest, but when I say it out loud to you it sounds...

wrong, somehow, the idea of gaining wealth simply for the sake of having wealth.

It no longer sounds like the noble and grand thing that it once did. ”

Mr. Allen then did something he had never done before. He reached over to where Mary was sitting and took her hand, pulling it towards himself and by extension pulling her out of her seat and towards him. He then settled her in his lap and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“I guess you have been a good influence on me, Mary. Perhaps it was all just greed for greed’s sake,” he said, and he rested his forehead on her shoulder.

Mary didn’t know what to do or think. Her initial reaction was simply to comfort him, but that didn’t feel quite right.

Before she could respond, he said, “You know, before I married you, I had been on the verge of dropping all my charitable contributions and closing the village school. Not only did you save them by taking over their management, but in discussing them with me, you helped me realize their importance. It wasn’t just important to the recipients of such charity, but it was important to society as a whole.”

Mary couldn’t understand what was happening.

It sounded like her husband was telling her that she had taught him something important, that he was realizing that he had believed or done something that wasn’t the best, but that was impossible.

Mr. Allen was the one who taught her, not the other way around.

Mr. Allen lifted his head from her shoulder and looked her in the face.

“Since you have taught me so much, I will ask you. What do you think should be done with my investments? Should I continue to let them grow, gaining wealth simply for its own sake? Should we live to a higher standard of living, spending it so that it at least serves some function? Perhaps we should increase our charitable

contributions. What do you think?"

"I have no desire whatsoever to spend even more money," said Mary quickly. "Contributing to charity is worthy, but I do believe that can be overdone, making people dependent rather than making their lives better."

She thought about it for several moments. Then she asked, "Who would it affect if we sold off your investments, and who would it affect if we just kept them or if we continued to accumulate more?"

Since they were back on a practical subject, Mary expected her husband to let her go so she could return to her seat, but he continued to hold her waist as he thought about her question.

"Investing money in business ventures, such as warehouses, textile mills, and other such things allows those who have skill but no money to build successful businesses, which in turn provides many people with jobs and income to sustain themselves with.

Withdrawing those investments too suddenly can cause the entire venture to collapse, putting all those people out of a job and ruining their lives as well as the lives of their families.

It is best to sell stock in a business gradually to avoid such sudden changes.

If you do that, it makes little difference.

"As far as liquidating the real estate ventures, while it would take some time to sell everything, it would have very little effect on anyone. As far as I am concerned, one landlord is very much like another.

"The trouble comes when you have to decide what to do with the money once

everything is liquidated. Even the most charitable person cannot use one hundred thousand pounds in the blink of an eye, and the most extravagant socialite in London can't spend that much quickly."

Mary shook her head. "I am not asking you to give everything up," she said. "I am only asking what effect your desire to grow your wealth is having on the world around you. May I see your list of investments again?"

While maintaining one hand on her waist, Mr. Allen reached for the list that was sitting on his desk and handed it to her.

She perused the list, thinking about what effect each of these businesses had on people's lives.

She applied everything she had learned about business and money and came to a conclusion.

"Honestly, Mr. Allen, I can see no harm done here. While your motivations may not have been philanthropic, your investments have provided many, many people with the ability to earn a living. You have not cheated anyone, nor have you oppressed anyone in the process. I can see no reason to change anything, not even your real estate ventures."

"Then, do you wish for a greater household budget? More pin money?" he asked.

Mary almost scoffed. "What would I do with more money? We have everything we need for comfort. More money would only be spent on ostentation, and I do find that sort of thing rather unpleasant."

"Then we are in agreement to keep things as they are?" asked Mr. Allen.



“Yes, we are,” said Mary. She kissed his forehead then gently extricated herself from his hold. It was pleasant to be wanted and to be held close, but sitting on his lap was becoming uncomfortable.

As she went back to her seat, he said, “I am sorry I didn’t discuss all this with you sooner.”

Mary waved away his concern. “Even if you had, I would not have understood it. Now, I do, and I am glad for it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

One week later, Mr. Allen presented Mary with an elegant, comfortable-looking phaeton.

“It is our anniversary today, and I thought you might find this useful in visiting the tenants and neighbors. It is much faster to get ready than the carriage, because you only need one horse to pull it, and you can drive it yourself, though I would prefer if you took a groomsman or footman with you anyway, just in case.”

“Thank you, Mr. Allen,” Mary said as she stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “That was very thoughtful of you.” She hurried forward to look over her new vehicle.

It was beautiful, painted mostly white with gold accents.

The seat was red leather and looked very comfortable.

It was much higher than a normal chaise, and Mary imagined it might be a bit difficult to get in and out of, but the passenger of such a vehicle would have a lovely view, sitting above the dust kicked up by the horse.

Mr. Allen appeared at her side, once again. “Shall we take it for a drive to see how you like it?”

Mary looked up at the sky. It was a cloudy day, though it hadn’t actually rained yet. She could not tell if the clouds would release their water any time soon. “I don’t know,” she said. “It might rain, and though the phaeton is pretty, it doesn’t have a cover.”

“All will be well,” he responded. “We won’t go far, and even if it does rain a bit, it is a warm day so there will be no real harm done. Why don’t you fetch your pelisse and bonnet while I get a horse hitched up to it.”

Mary did as she was told, and by the time she returned, her new phaeton was ready to go. Mr. Allen helped her up into it, and soon they were off.

The ride was as glorious as she had hoped.

They were perched above the dust, and there was a lovely breeze because of their speed, which added excitement to the already pleasant view.

Mr. Allen showed her a little of how to hold the reins and guide the horse, but she was not yet comfortable with it by the time they felt the first drops of rain.

Mr. Allen took the reins back and turned them toward home, letting the horse go as quickly as it wanted. By the time they arrived at the portico in front of Braydon Manor, they were both soaked, but since Mr. Allen was laughing, Mary found she did not mind so much.

The following day, however, changed Mary’s opinion significantly.

Mr. Allen had developed a cold, and Mary was no longer quite so sanguine about them getting wet the day before.

Mr. Allen, however, waved away her concern and went about his business as usual, the only difference being that he carried many more handkerchiefs with him.

Though Mary did not like to see her husband suffer, she assumed it was a simple cold, and he would recover quickly enough.

Instead, she was quite alarmed when Mr. Allen did not come down for breakfast two days later.

His valet arrived halfway through her meal and told her that his master requested her presence in his room.

Even though they had been married for a year, Mary had never been in Mr. Allen's room, so she was a bit nervous as she opened the door. As soon as she saw him, however, all her nerves were replaced by fear and worry.

His cheeks were red with fever, and his breathing had a wheezy, whistling sort of sound.

"Henry!" Mary said, as she rushed to his side. "Henry, you need a doctor."

"Yes, my sweet Mary, I need a doctor," he answered. At least his voice sounded relatively clear. "Go send one of the servants for the physician in Meryton. Then, please return. There are a few things I want to tell you while we wait."

She did as she was told and quickly returned. She then sat on the edge of the bed and held her husband's hand.

"Mary," he said. "There are some things I need to tell you." His voice was relatively strong despite his wheezy breathing, and she began to hope that he was not as sick as she had at first thought.

"First, I need you to know that I changed my will last week, just before our anniversary."

"Why would you need to do that?" Mary asked. "I haven't been able to give you an heir yet, so there was no need for you to make any changes." It was the one area

where Mary felt she had failed to be a good wife, but her husband had never complained about it for even one moment.

“You have given me an heir,” he said, “one that I am enormously proud of and that I feel entirely comfortable leaving all my wealth with. It’s you. You are my heir, Mary.”

“But...” she tried to object.

He silenced her by squeezing her fingers gently.

“You have learned everything I ever hoped to teach my son, whereas my actual son never learned any of it. I could never get him to listen to anything past the age of fifteen. I trust you, Mary. I trust you to take care of all the people who depend on my wealth, and I trust you to live a wise and useful life.”

Mary desperately wanted to stop him from talking about his will. It was beginning to feel as though he was actually dying, and she could not bear the thought of such a horrifying thing in that moment. “Very well, I accept the responsibility,” she said if only to make him drop the subject.

“You have accepted so much responsibility since you married me,” he said, “and you have asked for nothing in return. You deserve the world, but you are so humble and righteous that you don’t even want it. Choosing you as my bride was the best decision I have ever made, Mary. I love you.”

He squeezed her fingers again affectionately, but Mary could barely feel it, so stunned was she. The one thing she had always known about her husband was that he would never love her. He had declared over and over again that he was not an affectionate man.

“You love me?” she asked.

“Yes. I didn’t think it was possible,” he said.

“In all my fifty-eight years, I have never felt like I truly loved a woman. Attraction? Of course. There was even some small amount of friendly love with my first wife. But you. You have taught me how happy a man can be with his wife. You have blessed my life with light and happiness and have taught me how to love. I only wish that I had met you thirty-five years ago.”

“Mr. Allen, I...” Mary tried to say that she loved him, but the words would not come, for they would be a lie. She did love him, but as a guardian, not as a woman loves a man.

“I know,” he said. “You do not need to say it. You do not need to feel it. Simply by teaching me how to love a woman, you have given me the best gift possible.”

“Stop!” Mary cried out. Mr. Allen started and let go of her hand.

She hastily reached out and grabbed it once again.

“I don’t mean to reject you or for you to stop expressing your feelings,” she explained hastily.

“It is only that you are sounding as if you are on your deathbed, and I can’t bear it. I simply can’t bear it.”

“Very well, Mary,” he said as he gently stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. “I will stop for now. Will you please fetch a book and read to me for a bit while we wait for the physician?”

Mr. Allen fought for his life for almost a week, but he eventually succumbed to the pneumonia that plagued his lungs.

For Mary, it was pure torture to see him struggle more and more simply to draw breath.

She spent as much time as she could by his side, but she had to sleep sometimes, so she employed a couple of nurses to assist her in keeping watch over him twenty-four hours a day.

Despite the pain and discomfort he was in, he frequently smiled when she was nearby.

It seemed as though the professions of his feelings for her had released the more tender emotions he had kept locked away.

It was almost as if, even though he was fighting for his life, he was happier than he had ever been before.

When it became clear that there was no way for him to recover, Mary sent expresses to his six close friends informing them that the end was near. She then steeled herself to do something she had promised herself she would never do.

She entered her husband's room and dismissed the nurse who was taking her turn with him. She sat on his bed and held his hand in her lap. When his eyes opened, and she knew she had his full attention, she said, "Henry, I love you, too."

He shook his head with the tiniest movement and the corner of his mouth quirked in the barest hint of a wry smile.

"Of all the times to tell your first lie, someone's deathbed is not the time to do so," he

said, his voice now whisper soft and weak.

“You do not love me, and that is perfectly acceptable. Even without granting me that most precious gift, you have given me far more than I deserve. Hold onto that gift, and someday you will find a man who is not so foolish as I was, who can see the treasure you are clearly. Then, you can give him your heart if you deem him worthy to receive it.”

It took him a long time to get it all out, because he frequently interrupted himself with harsh coughing fits. In the end, however, it was clear. He wanted her to marry again someday, and this time she needed to marry for love.

She couldn't imagine such a thing, couldn't fathom the idea of marrying anyone but Mr. Henry Allen, so she filed the thought away for later contemplation.

Within twelve hours, Henry Allen was gone, and Mary Allen, age seventeen, was a very wealthy widow.



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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

### Four Months Later

Elizabeth heard Mary come into her room just as Elizabeth was adding the last few items to her trunk. Mary asked, “Are you ready?”

Elizabeth looked up and grinned, giddy with the excitement of what was to come. “That was the last thing,” she said. Then she turned to Millie, her new lady’s maid and said, “Will you fetch one of the footmen to tie this up and put it on the coach?”

“Yes, Miss,” Millie said as she curtsied. She then scampered off to find a footman while Elizabeth and Mary headed downstairs to Braydon Hall’s drawing room to finish waiting for the coach to be ready.

Along the way they passed several guest bedrooms which Elizabeth and Mary had spent many delightful hours redecorating.

The oddest thing about the redecoration was that instead of making them grander, Mary chose to make them simpler, though she did not stint on anything that would make them more comfortable.

Those bedrooms were a prime example of one of Mary’s greatest oddities, which Elizabeth had no notion of before coming to live with her.

Mary seldom spent money on herself, and she never spent money on anything that could be called uselessly grand.

In fact, several times in the last few months, Elizabeth had to point out to Mary that

one of her gloves was wearing thin or that she could use a new mobcap.

Each time, Mary waved it away, saying that her maid, Anna, had said the same thing.

Since the problem was always quickly rectified, Elizabeth had to assume that Anna was very good at her job.

On the other hand, any time Elizabeth even hinted that she might like something, Mary acquired it for her almost immediately.

The day after Elizabeth joined Mary's household, Mary had asked her if she liked the piano.

Elizabeth replied that it was a good instrument but that there wasn't much in the way of sheet music in the house.

She had intended to fetch some from Longbourn the next time they visited, but before she could, Mary had ordered an entire box full of various music sheets and books full of songs.

Another time, Elizabeth mentioned in passing that she had always wanted to learn to drive a gig since she was terrible at horse-riding. The very next day, Mary took her out to the coach house and showed her a beautiful white phaeton with a red leather seat.

"It's yours," said Mary shortly.

"You mean, I can use it whenever I want?" asked Elizabeth.

Mary shook her head. "No, I mean that it belongs to you. If you ever leave to live somewhere else, you may take it with you, unless doing so would cause hardship.

I...I don't want it, but I didn't have the heart to sell it. Please take it."

Before Elizabeth could reply, Mary rushed out of the coach house.

It was up to Elizabeth to ask the coachman to teach her how to drive.

Elizabeth later learned that the phaeton had been Mary's last gift from her husband.

Even so, Elizabeth didn't fully understand her sister's antipathy for the vehicle.

Nevertheless, she very much enjoyed learning to drive it.

The light, swift vehicle made it very easy to visit Jane at Longbourn as often as she wished.

The two sisters waited in the drawing room for about ten minutes before a footman came in to announce that the carriage was ready. Elizabeth and Mary headed outside while Millie and Anna followed holding blankets for the journey.

The coach had four horses, and the inside was delightfully warm from the several heated bricks that were on the floor.

Elizabeth knew that Mary wished to get to London with her own horses instead of changing them halfway, but she also wished to get there as quickly as possible, which is why she had splurged on taking four horses instead of just two.

Once all the ladies were settled, the horses set off, and they were on their way.

There was silence for a while. Elizabeth was bursting with excitement, but Mary seemed to be a bit more reserved than usual, so Elizabeth respected her silence. It was often a sign that Mary was remembering the past or mourning her departed husband.

Eventually, Mary came out of her reverie by saying, “Thank you for coming with me, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth looked at her in surprise. “I should be thanking you,” she said.

“Though I have enjoyed visiting Aunt and Uncle Gardiner in Cheapside in the past, I have never dreamed I would be visiting London and staying in a Mayfair mansion. I have been looking forward to this since you first brought up the idea a month ago.”

“To be honest,” said Mary after a pause, “It will be my first time staying in Mayfair as well. Last year, Mr. Allen and I stayed in a less fashionable neighborhood.”

“Were you unable to get a lease on the same house this year?” asked Elizabeth.

“Not exactly,” said Mary. “I just wanted to stay closer to where my friends are staying to make it easier to call on them. Besides, the house on Grosvenor Street, where we will be staying, is closer to the best places to shop.”

“You’ve mentioned your friends quite a bit, but it’s always in a rather general sort of way. Will you tell me more about them?” asked Elizabeth. She was curious how Mary had become such good friends with ladies who were at least three decades her senior.

As they chatted about Mary’s friends and her experiences in London the previous year, Elizabeth began to realize that, though Mary’s friendships had begun simply because the ladies’ husbands were friends with Mary’s husband, they had grown into something quite strong.

Even after Mr. Allen’s death, Mary had maintained a consistent correspondence with all six of the ladies.

Eventually, their conversation waned, and Mary drifted off to sleep. The rocking of the speeding carriage and the warmth of the blankets made Elizabeth a bit sleepy as well, though she was too excited to truly fall asleep.

She gazed out the window and let her mind wander. Mary had changed quite a bit in the last year and a half. Despite the fact that she was still only seventeen, she was a full-grown woman, fully capable of taking on all the challenges that a woman can face.

Elizabeth looked back at Mary. Most of the time, Mary gave the impression that her looks had improved dramatically, but seeing her asleep, Elizabeth could see that she still had the same sallow complexion, the same thin lips, and the same thin frame.

Her apparent improvement had more to do with the confidence she exuded and the way she always seemed so full of life and purpose.

Mary seldom spoke of Mr. Allen, but Elizabeth was sure that her sister's vast improvement was primarily due to him.

Yet, she couldn't fathom what he could have done to inspire such growth in a girl who, only eighteen months ago, had been entirely subservient, insecure, and downright mousy.

If he had inspired such growth and such change, it was only natural that Mary would miss him a great deal.

Elizabeth's gaze shifted back out to the scenery that passed her window. She recalled the series of events that had led to her living with Mary.

Beginning the day after Mr. Allen's funeral, Mama had begun pressuring Mary to come back home to Longbourn, saying it wasn't seemly for Mary to live all alone in

such a big house and that she was far too young for such responsibility.

Though there were many arguments on the subject between Mary and Mama, Elizabeth was privy to only two of them.

Throughout the arguments, Mama became increasingly shrill and demanding, but Mary maintained an air of calm assuredness that told Elizabeth she believed firmly that what she was doing was the best choice and that she would not be swayed.

Mama also would not be swayed, however, and she eventually pulled Papa into the argument.

Elizabeth didn't know the details, but Papa visited Mary to insist that she come home.

However, when he returned from his visit, he declared that Elizabeth was to go live at Braydon Manor with Mary to keep her company.

Elizabeth had no objections to the plan. Though she would miss Jane, the two of them had been apart before when one or the other had gone to stay with Uncle Gardiner in London. At least this time, they would still be in the same neighborhood.

Mary had later confided in Elizabeth that she had wanted Kitty to come stay with her, but Papa had declared that since Kitty was just barely sixteen, she would not make a suitable companion.

When Elizabeth inquired as to why Kitty had been Mary's first choice, she said that Kitty was often overlooked by their parents, much as she had been when living at home.

Elizabeth admitted that such was the case, but she could not see anything she could do about it.

Kitty was, indeed, too young to be away from home for long, and there was no power on earth that could change her parents' behavior.

Elizabeth's thoughts turned to happier subjects, mostly anticipating what fun she and Mary would have while in London. Though Mary was in mourning, they could still go shopping and even visit the theater. Elizabeth knew Mary would also be visiting her friends as well.

Papa had given Elizabeth half her pocket allowance for the year, so she would have plenty of spending money, though she suspected Mary's generosity would outstrip their father's gift.

Though she would not ask for such a thing, Elizabeth suspected Mary would buy her several new dresses and any other little thing Elizabeth admired, much as she had done for the last four months.

After only three hours on the road, they arrived in front of a very grand-looking townhome. They had passed several that were even bigger and grander, but this one was quite impressive enough, and for a moment Elizabeth was intimidated.

Two footmen came out of the front door and assisted Elizabeth and Mary out of the carriage as well as Anna and Millie.

They then proceeded to untie the trunks from the carriage while the ladies proceeded into the house where they were met by another footman who took their outerwear for them.

Anna and Millie took the pelisses, cloaks, bonnets, and muffs and headed upstairs while Elizabeth and Mary proceeded to the parlor where a roaring fire awaited them.

Elizabeth was astounded by such elegance and by the presence of so many servants.

Longbourn only had one footman. The rest of the indoor servants were female. Elizabeth supposed a house as large as this one would need more servants, but it still seemed a bit overwhelming.

The sisters sat and warmed themselves by the fire. Mary asked, “Would you like to see your room? If you’d rather, I can ring for some refreshments, or we could even take a tour of the house. I will need to do the latter soon anyway, for this is my first time here as well.”

“I think I would like to just sit here by the fire for a bit,” said Elizabeth. “It is quite pleasant to be still after such a hasty journey. A cup of tea would be delightful, however.”

Mary made no answer. She simply rang the bell nearby. When a maid appeared, she ordered some tea and biscuits to be served. They sat in silence until the tea was brought.

Once the maid departed, Elizabeth said, “I don’t wish to pry too much, Mary, but I was wondering if perhaps you are spending your inheritance a little too freely.

” When Mary opened her mouth to reply, Elizabeth hastily added, “I know Braydon Hall’s income is twice that of Longbourn, but even so, I wouldn’t think you could easily afford such a large home while staffing it so thoroughly.

I just worry that you might run yourself into debt or some other trouble. ”

Elizabeth expected her sister to be affronted or to vehemently deny any such thing, but Mary just smiled serenely.

“Do not worry, Elizabeth,” she said calmly.



“While I appreciate your concern, you should know that Mr. Allen taught me everything he knew about finances before he left this world. It was because of this that he left everything to me. Otherwise, he would have left his estate to his cousin and only his investments to me.”

“His investments?” asked Elizabeth.

Mary grinned, a rarity for Elizabeth’s most serious sister.

“Yes, his investments.” Mary paused to let the implication sink in.

Apparently, she had more income than anyone knew.

Then she added. “Despite everything I have spent since you came to live with me, rest assured I am in no danger of overspending.”

Given that Elizabeth had helped her sister fully renovate six guest bedrooms, and she had seen how well-kept and well-staffed Braydon Hall had been; given that she had witnessed the extravagant use of four horses where two would have been sufficient and she had had a brief glimpse of the possible number of servants in this house as well, Elizabeth could only imagine that Mr. Allen must have had rather extensive investments.

As Elizabeth was comprehending all the implications, Mary said, “I do not wish it to be generally known that I inherited his investments as well as his estate. I am only telling you this so that you do not worry. I am well aware of what I can afford and what I cannot.”

Elizabeth understood. Mary was telling her that she wished this information to remain between them. Mary continued. “In that vein, if I offer to purchase something for you, you need not demure. Doing so will give me great pleasure and cause me no

hardship.”

This thought brought a smile to Elizabeth’s lips.

“Now that I understand, I assure you I shall do no such thing. You have my permission to buy me as much as you wish,” she said grandly.

After a pause she added with an exaggerated air of indifference, “Or as little as you wish. It makes no difference to me.”

Elizabeth’s small attempt at silliness succeeded in lightening the mood, and they began chatting about what they would like to do while in London.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mary's first few days in London were spent visiting the ladies she had become close to the previous year and catching up on all their news.

In the process, word went around among her acquaintances that she was in town and where she was staying, so it didn't take long for invitations to arrive with her mail.

Out of respect for the fact that she was in mourning, Mary only accepted those invitations that were from people she knew fairly well, and she did not accept any invitations to balls. Even with these restrictions, however, she found that she was engaged a couple times a week.

Additionally, she and Elizabeth made several trips to the theater and to the opera, enough so that most weeks they were home only half the time.

Mary's mornings and afternoons were spent taking care of her business concerns and volunteering with her charities as well as keeping in touch with as many of her friends and acquaintances as possible. She also took Elizabeth shopping as often as possible.

Mary paid for several new dresses for her sister, including one delightful ball gown, even though Mary wasn't even certain there would be an opportunity for her to wear it. Elizabeth insisted that Mary purchase a few new gowns for herself as well.

It did not take long before Mary encountered Mr. Worsley.

A week after she arrived in London, she was attending a dinner at Mrs. Turner's home.

As soon as she walked into the drawing room where the guests were gathering, her eyes found him.

It was impossible not to notice such a handsome man, even among a growing crowd.

He seemed to have felt her gaze landing on him, for within moments, he turned his head to see her. A smile of genuine pleasure grew on his lips and brightened his eyes. Mary felt a thrill shoot down her spine. She thought she smiled in return, but her focus was more on him than on herself.

It took mere seconds for him to excuse himself from the conversation he was engaged in and cross the room to greet her. “Mrs. Allen, it truly is a pleasure to see you again. You are looking remarkably well.”

“As are you, Mr. Worsley,” said Mary. It took her several moments before she realized that she should introduce her sister. “Oh, yes. Mr. Worsley, this is my older sister, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth, this is Mr. Worsley from Eastbourne.”

Mary felt unaccountably nervous introducing Elizabeth to Mr. Worsley.

Usually, once a gentleman had a chance to speak with her, they tended to prefer her company to Mary’s.

While Mary didn’t mind most of the time, she was rather reluctant to give up Mr. Worsley’s company.

He had been so pleasant to talk to last year, and she had quite been looking forward to continuing their conversations.

Mr. Worsley bowed to Elizabeth and said, “It is a pleasure to meet any sister of Mrs. Allen. Have you been in London long?” This last was asked to both of them.

“Only a week,” replied Mary.

“And is this your first time in London?” he asked Elizabeth. “I don’t recall seeing you here last year.”

Elizabeth smiled and said, “In fact, I was in London last year.” After a pause, she added, “Though I was staying with my uncle in another part of the city. This year it is my eldest sister’s turn to stay with him, but Mary was kind enough to bring me with her.

I believe I got the better end of that bargain. ”

Mary expected Mr. Worsley’s attention to stay on Elizabeth, but he turned back to Mary and said, “I am glad you have your sister for company. I was extremely saddened to hear of Mr. Allen’s death, but I admit I was also concerned for you.”

“Thank you for your concern,” Mary answered. “I believe I am rather fortunate to have Elizabeth’s company in particular. Her perpetual cheerfulness makes it rather difficult to feel lonely.”

Mary expected Elizabeth to look either smug or impish at her compliment, but instead she was peering speculatively between Mary and Mr. Worsley. Mary had no notion of what her sister was thinking.

“I believe I should mingle amongst the other guests,” said Elizabeth. “I see a few people I am acquainted with, so they can introduce me further if necessary. You catch up with your friend, Mary.”

Before Mary could respond or protest, Elizabeth drifted away to speak with Mrs. Turner.

Mary turned back to Mr. Worsley to apologize for her sister's desertion, but his attention was entirely on her, not on Elizabeth's retreating figure. "Tell me truly, Mrs. Allen. How have you been?"

Mary did not discuss her true feelings with anyone, not Mr. Allen, not her sisters, not her parents.

Yet, somehow, what came out of her mouth next was the unvarnished truth.

"Some days are more difficult than others," she said.

"Elizabeth's company has prevented me from slipping too far into the doldrums, however. "

"Do you miss him that much?" he asked. There was a tiny note of surprise.

"Yes," said Mary, "and no," she added.

She wanted to leave it at that, but Mr. Worsley gave her such a look of curiosity that she could not help but explain.

"You see, Mr. Allen is the reason I am the woman I am now.

He insisted that I take charge and make decisions, even before our marriage, but when I barged ahead making decisions, invariably I made the wrong ones sometimes.

Even then, he did not berate me or insult me.

He taught me how to correct my mistakes and not make them again.

Even though we were only married for about a year, he changed my life in more ways

than I can count.

“So, yes, I miss him. I miss his support, his knowledge, and his wisdom. But if you are asking whether I miss his company, I think I would say that I have passed through that pain and am on the other side.”

It felt almost sacrilegious to say that she no longer missed Mr. Allen’s company, but somehow, looking into Mr. Worsley’s face, she could not say anything but the truth.

“I don’t know whether to say that I am glad you are beyond the pain of missing his company or to sympathize with you about missing his wisdom,” said Mr. Worsley.

“Both would be accurate. My father is like that for me, teaching me how to manage land and real estate. When I was twenty-one, he gave me control of all his property around Eastbourne with the instructions to make it grow. Like Mr. Allen, my father pushed me to do more than I was comfortable with, but he has always been there to help me learn from my mistakes. I am only grateful that he is still alive.”

Mary appreciated his sympathy and understanding, but she did not wish to continue the topic. She asked, “Will you tell me about Eastbourne? I’ve heard you and others mention it, but I know nothing about it other than it is a growing seaside village.”

“It used to be just a fishing village, but my father began promoting it as a resort many years ago when the idea that sea air is healthful became more popular. It has such smooth beaches that it truly is a wonderful place to enjoy the sea air, and since it is facing the English Channel, it gets fewer severe storms coming in off the ocean.”

“You mentioned that you were trying to build it up,” said Mary. “What have you been doing?”

“Honestly, right now one of my biggest challenges is keeping pace with growing

demand,” Mr. Worsley answered.

“I have been building houses and various types of lodgings, though I have to be careful to not outstrip demand by too much. Additionally, I have been investing in local shops, teahouses, and even a circulating library to ensure that there is enough entertainment beyond simply sea bathing and hunting for seashells and seaweed.”

“It sounds like a wonderful idea to build a circulating library,” said Mary. “I imagine it would be quite delightful to sit in the sun near the ocean and read.”

Mr. Worsley laughed. “I take it that you have never been to the seaside.” When Mary shook her head, he said, “The wind is often quite strong and can whip up out of nowhere. Though it is pleasant enough when one is walking, I would not take a book outside to read unless I knew for certain that it was an unusually calm day.”

“Perhaps I should take a vacation to the seashore, then,” mused Mary.

She had never considered going anywhere but Meryton and London, but now that she no longer had anyone telling her where to go or what to do, there were many options available that she had not considered.

“It sounds as though it would be a unique experience.”

“You would be welcome in Eastbourne at any time,” he said.

They chatted a bit more about the sea and Eastbourne for a few minutes until dinner was announced.

For the first time since returning to London, Mary felt quite content.

Up until then, all her experiences had been overshadowed by her memories of her



husband.

Her friends had been his friends, and her society had been his society.

Somehow, Mr. Worsley didn't fit that pattern, even though she had met him through her husband's connections. Mr. Worsley felt like her friend, wholly and completely, instead of a friend she had simply inherited from her husband.

A couple of months passed easily and quickly for Mary and Elizabeth following the same pattern as the first few weeks.

Elizabeth was exactly as successful as Mary had anticipated.

Though she wasn't the prettiest lady in London, she was far from plain, and her lively wit and cheerful demeanor tended to attract many people.

Elizabeth had developed a couple of favorite young men, but Mary could detect no hint of peculiar regard between them, so she did not concern herself overmuch.

It was well known that Elizabeth had just five thousand pounds by way of a dowry, which was mostly furnished by Mary.

Such an amount would be quite attractive in some circles, but it was not quite enough for the gentlemen Elizabeth had been associating with.

In the second week of March, Mary reached the half-way point of her year of mourning. One morning, Elizabeth asked, "Will you be changing your clothing to reflect your status to half mourning?"

"The idea hadn't even occurred to me," said Mary. "But now that it does, I don't feel it necessary to go out and buy an entirely new wardrobe simply so that I can change

the color I wear.”

Elizabeth seemed disappointed. “I suppose I had hoped that if you were in half-mourning, we could go to a ball once in a while, but I would not wish to impose upon you,” she said.

“You do like dancing,” said Mary contemplatively. “I suppose I could get one or two gray ballgowns, so that we can go to balls without me bringing down the lively atmosphere with my widow’s black, but I refuse to buy an entire wardrobe. Black will do very well for most situations.”

This immediately brought the smile back to Elizabeth’s face. “Thank you, Mary,” she said.

A week later, Mary and Elizabeth attended their first ball in London that year. Mary wore her new gray ballgown, though it was rather simplistic as far as ballgowns went.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mary and Elizabeth walked into the ballroom in Lady Castleton's home in late March. Though the day had been warm for the season, the air outside was cooling off quickly, making the warmth of the ballroom comfortable instead of stifling.

As they often did, Mary and her sister separated once they were completely in the ballroom. Technically, Mary was Elizabeth's chaperone, but she trusted Elizabeth to behave properly, so there was no need to hold her back and keep her chained to Mary's side.

Mary looked around for acquaintances or friends to talk to.

She did not expect to be asked to dance, so she ignored the gentlemen in the room other than to verify if they were Mr. Worsley.

She spotted Mrs. Carlton and was on her way over to speak to her when she was accosted by a gentleman she barely knew by the name of Mr. Stone.

"Mrs. Allen," he said, "It is a delight to see you here this evening. I had not expected to see you at any ball this year."

Mary was confused. She barely knew this man's name and could remember nothing about him. Why on Earth would he be so delighted to see her? "Good evening, Mr. Stone," she said as she gave a little curtsy.

"Since you are here," he said, "I was wondering if I might have the pleasure of your company for a dance this evening."

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. She could not help it, though she berated herself for letting the expression show on her face.

She had met Mr. Stone early in her last season in London, but he had never been one of the men who asked her to dance.

His behavior was out of character, and it confused her.

Fortunately, she did not need to understand his motivations in order to give a quick reply. "I had not intended to dance this evening," she said. "I am only here to give my sister a chance to enjoy a ball while she is in London."

Instead of being irritated at her refusal, Mr. Stone smiled.

"You are an excellent caretaker of your sister. Hopefully, I will be more fortunate at a later time. Until then," he bowed and walked away from her.

She half expected him to head towards Elizabeth, but he did not.

Instead, he moved towards another group of young ladies who were chatting animatedly together.

"I've heard Mr. Stone is rather hard up for money," an easily recognizable voice said from just behind Mary.

The explanation for Mr. Stone's odd behavior made immediate sense, but Mary was more interested in the owner of the voice. She turned, and she could feel her mouth split into a grin. "Mr. Worsley," she said. "I did not know you would be here this evening."

"I did not know, myself, until yesterday," he said, "but a little bird informed me that

you would be here, and I could not pass up the opportunity to see you dance and perhaps to dance with you.”

Mary’s face fell. “I...I just told Mr. Stone that I would not be dancing this evening. It would be quite rude of me to change my mind so suddenly. Even if I were willing to make an exception for you, I would then have to dance with anyone else who asked for the rest of the evening. I am not quite ready to be that sociable.” She waved vaguely at her gray dress that indicated her status as half-mourning.

With concern in his eyes, Mr. Worsley asked, “You must have loved Mr. Allen a great deal to honor his memory so stringently, so much that you would not even dance a few dances after six months.”

Mary did not wish to discuss her feelings about her late husband.

In some ways, she was still confused about it all, and she was not certain she could express herself well on the subject.

Besides, it felt decidedly wrong to discuss her husband with Mr. Worsley in particular, though she did not understand why.

“It is complicated,” she said, hoping he would drop the subject.

“How can it be complicated?” asked Mr. Worsley. “You either loved him or you didn’t. There is no shame if you didn’t, you know. There are many marriages that are quite successful but are not based on love. My parents are one such example.”

“Love is such a difficult word,” said Mary repressively.

He still would not take a hint, however. “It is the most straightforward thing in the world,” he said.

She finally became irritated and lashed out. “Oh? And how many times have you been in love?”

For a moment, Mr. Worsley began ticking off his fingers and murmuring to himself as if he was counting the ladies he had been in love with.

Mary could feel her irritation growing by leaps and bounds, but before it could do more than simply make itself known to her, he stopped.

He looked up from his hands and looked straight into Mary’s eyes.

Mary had learned to avoid Mr. Worsley’s direct gaze, because it tended to make her forget what she was thinking or what she was trying to say.

This time, she failed to avoid it, and she was hit by a feeling far beyond what she had experienced before, as if the world had stopped spinning and then suddenly flipped upside down.

It lasted only for a moment, less than a second, but when the world righted itself, Mary noticed that Mr. Worsley’s expression had changed from that of humor to deadly seriousness with an incredible intensity, and she could feel that his expression was mirrored in her own face.

Though she did not wish to consciously admit it, she knew the look in his eyes, for she had seen a weak facsimile of it in her husband’s eyes, especially in his last few months of life.

“I retract my previous statement,” he said, his usually velvety voice was a little huskier than before. He cleared his voice before continuing. “You were correct. Love is not the simple thing I thought it.”

He made no explanation for his change of opinion.

For a time, the two of them stood side by side, watching as the first dance was forming.

Mary was relieved to be released from his gaze.

The feeling of connection that had so suddenly formed between them was something Mary did not wish to acknowledge and refused to name.

It was far easier to watch the dancers than to confront Mr. Worsley.

When the dance was almost half over, Mary was finally beginning to breathe a bit more easily. Of course, that was when Mr. Worsley turned to her and said, “Perhaps, you could grant me the last dance of the evening. That way, you would not be obliged to dance any additional dances afterward.”

She looked up into his eyes. They were no longer filled with the oppressive intensity that had been there a few minutes ago.

It had been replaced with his friendliness that she had become so accustomed to in the last few months.

She opened her mouth to refuse. She was still in mourning, and her late husband still deserved her respect.

“Very well,” is what unaccountably came out of her mouth.

Mary wanted to knock her head with her own knuckles or perhaps bang her head against the wall. What madness had overtaken her that she no longer even had control over the words that formed on her lips?

Mr. Worsley must have seen the doubt on her face, for he asked, "Are you certain?"

Loyalty to her husband warred with the feeling of connection she felt toward Mr. Worsley: past versus present. Present won, though not without a pang of guilt. "I am certain," she said.

"Thank you for such a precious gift," he said, and he bowed. "I am afraid I must circulate among the other guests now, but I look forward to seeing you again at the end of the night."

Mary bobbed a curtsey in response, but she said nothing as he walked away.

As Gregory Worsley walked away from Mrs. Allen, he wondered if he had made a mistake in asking her to dance.

Though she had said she was certain she wished to dance with him, there was hesitance and conflict clearly written in her expression.

He did not like the thought that something he had done had caused her even a hint of pain.

Yet, at the same time, he longed to dance with her.

He remembered dancing with her last year.

She was far from the most graceful lady, but she was good enough to not be an embarrassment.

However, it was not her grace, or lack thereof, that made him wish to dance with her again.



Rather, it was the thought of having her attention solely on him for half an hour.

It was the idea of being able to touch her hand or perhaps her waist, depending on which dance it was.

Gregory knew he was in love. He had known it for some time, but it was only when she challenged him as to how many times he had experienced it before did he realize how deeply and truly he loved her.

Gregory had fallen in love many times. The first time was when he fell in love with a shop girl at the confectionary.

He was just ten years old, and it was possible he was just in love with the fact that she gave him sugar plums, but he thought about her frequently and even dreamed about her a few times.

The feeling didn't last more than a few months, however, as he discovered activities that he enjoyed more than running to the shops for candy.

His second love was a parlor maid who worked at his father's estate in the country when he was fourteen.

She was beautiful, with porcelain skin and pink cheeks.

Her clear blue eyes were incredibly striking, and she always seemed to be happy.

He often imagined kissing her plump, pink lips, but his father was absolutely adamant that he never touch any of the servants in any way, so he did nothing.

In time the feeling faded as he grew used to her presence.

The pattern continued. Every year or two some young lady would catch his fancy, but the feeling always faded in time. That was the nature of love: obsession followed by indifference. At least, that was what he had assumed until Mary had asked him how many times he had been in love.

In the middle of counting the various ladies who had inspired such passion in him, he glanced up and saw her watching him, a strange expression on her face, and it suddenly hit him.

He loved her, but it was nothing like the love he had experienced before.

This time, instead of beginning as attraction, it had started with respect which grew into friendship as they interacted.

It was only now, as he had a glimpse of her no longer in black, that something in his mind and heart had clicked into place.

He wanted her in his life. It wasn't just passion or obsession, though they were a part of the complex wave of emotion he experienced. It was far deeper than that, though at the same time utterly incomprehensible.

Of course, he didn't understand all the nuance of his feelings in that one intense second. All he really knew was that he suddenly realized he loved her, truly and deeply, and the feeling was stronger and far more complex than he had ever known. He also knew that he could do nothing about it.

Mary was a widow who was still in mourning for her husband, a husband that she had clearly respected a great deal, though whether she had any love for the man was still in question.

She was also a lady of principle. She held herself to the highest standards of behavior,

especially when it came to questions of morality.

It was possible, quite likely in fact, that she would consider entering a courtship during her period of mourning to be a form of unfaithfulness to her husband.

This thought brought him back to wondering if he had pushed her too far in asking her to dance.

She clearly wished to dance with him. He couldn't mistake the look in her eyes in that moment when he had realized how deeply he was in love with her.

She most definitely had powerful feelings for him.

He wondered, however, if he was doing the right thing by taking advantage of her feelings to convince her to do something she might think was wrong.

For most of the evening, he was distracted by his thoughts of Mrs. Allen. Even her name was a distraction, for it was a forceful reminder that she had once belonged to someone else, a man who had warned him away from her almost exactly a year ago.

Eventually, the ball was almost over, and the last dance was beginning.

Gregory led Mrs. Allen out to the floor.

Her hand on his arm felt almost like a burn, though it was the most pleasant burn he could imagine.

It felt right to have her by his side, even though it was only to walk the length of the ballroom so they could take their places in the dance.

Gregory's dance with Mrs. Allen was the sweetest torture.

It felt right to simply look at her. It felt right to be paired with her.

She was perfect. On the other hand, as they conversed about various light topics, it became clear to him that she was struggling to maintain her pleasant countenance.

Something about dancing with him gave her pause and made her uncomfortable.

The dance came to a close, and she managed to smile for him as she said farewell, but he saw how her smile slipped off her face quickly as she turned to find her sister so that they could prepare to depart.

Gregory did not wait for his carriage to be called. Instead, he walked the half mile to his house, thinking furiously the whole way home. By the time he reached his doorstep, he was certain he understood why old Allen had warned him away from Mary last year.

It wasn't because he was a jealous husband as it had at first seemed. Rather, it was because he wanted his young wife to be happy, and somehow old Allen had known that Gregory would disturb Mrs. Allen's peace if he continued his attention to her, just as he was doing now.

Mrs. Allen was no longer a married woman.

Technically, she was free to develop feelings for any man she chose.

However, she was a widow in mourning who still held a great deal of respect for her dead husband.

She would not willingly or freely allow herself to develop such feelings until her mourning period was over.

By paying excessive attention to her, Gregory was placing a strain on her such that she was fighting herself over her affection for him and her respect for her late husband.

Gregory had one thing in common with the late Mr. Allen. He wanted Mary Allen to be happy, which is why he would leave London as soon as he could make arrangements. Mrs. Allen must be allowed to mourn in peace.

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Two days after Lady Castleton's ball, Mary had an unexpected visitor. Mr. Worsley. He stayed for less than five minutes, but he brought the news that he would be returning to Eastbourne earlier than expected.

The news gave Mary a strong pang of disappointment, but at the same time, she was unaccountably relieved. The conflicting emotions were strong enough that tears almost leaked out of her eyes.

As she walked him to the door at the end of his visit, he said, "I hope to see you again in the autumn, but at the very latest I count on seeing you again next winter here, in London." He turned towards her.

He took her hand and kissed it. "I promise you that I very much look forward to that time, whenever or wherever it is, when I can be in your company again."

Mary was too stunned to make a reply before he whisked himself out the door.

Staring after him, long after he was gone, Mary was very conscious of the way his kiss had burned the back of her hand.

She was also conscious of a deep sense of loss, as strong as, though very different from, the loss she had felt at the death of her husband.

The only thing that made her able to breathe and walk back into the parlor was the knowledge that she would see him again and that he looked forward to the meeting.

For several weeks after Mr. Worsley's departure from London, Mary soldiered on, as

she had always done, not sharing her thoughts or feelings with anyone.

Elizabeth remained ignorant, likely attributing any reticence in Mary to either her natural seriousness or to her ongoing mourning period.

A couple of her friends noticed, however.

It was Lady Matlock who first asked about Mary's low spirits in late April. She was visiting Mary one morning, and the two of them were alone, since Elizabeth was out walking.

"Mary," she said, "I am growing quite concerned about you. Every time I see you, you are less animated than before. It can't be because of your mourning, else the trend would be going in the opposite direction. Will you confide in me?"

There was no way in all the world that Mary would tell Lady Matlock that she missed Mr. Worsley.

It felt as though admitting to such a feeling was wrong, a betrayal of her late husband and the vows she had made to him.

As she thought about how to express herself, Lady Matlock said, "Are you missing someone? Someone besides Mr. Allen, I mean."

Mary studied her friend's face to determine if the Lady knew how close she was to the truth, but it was impossible to tell. Lady Matlock was a veteran of London society, and she gave nothing away that she did not wish to.

Unwilling to lie and unable to come up with a deflection, Mary simply nodded her head.

“Is it a gentleman?” Lady Matlock asked.

Suddenly, tears stung Mary’s eyes. She could not fathom why the simple question brought her to tears, but the sorrow of longing for someone who was not there burst from her.

She was crying, though she did not know if she was crying for Mr. Allen or Mr. Worsley.

All she knew was that someone who should be essential to her life was missing.

Lady Matlock suddenly got up and went to sit next to Mary on the sofa.

She wrapped her arms around Mary and Mary laid her forehead on the Lady’s shoulder.

The kindness and comfort loosened something within her, allowing sobs to tear from her throat and wrack her body.

She had not cried so hard since the week after Mr. Allen died.

Lady Matlock let her cry herself out, occasionally rocking her or making soothing noises but not attempting to stem her tears. She gave Mary a handkerchief when she needed it and replaced it when it became soaked.

Eventually, Mary could cry no more. Though she was more aware of her heavy heart than ever before, she could feel that the release of her tears made it feel a bit lighter and easier to bear for now.

When the deluge was over, Lady Matlock said, “Mary, I love you dearly, but you have a bad habit of attempting to bear everything by yourself. I can see it in the



devotion you give to your charity work. You seem to want to take on all the world's ills.

I can see it in your devotion to your sister, Miss Bennet, as you spoil her with far more than you ever purchase for yourself.

You are selfless, and that is often considered an ideal quality in a lady.

“But...in your case, you take it too far. You must share the burden of your trials with others, to lighten the load on your shoulders, so that you may then help lighten the load of others.”

Lady Matlock's words resonated within Mary's soul. They were true, and they were what she needed to hear in that moment.

Knowing that she needed to unburden herself, however, did not automatically give her the ability to do so. She didn't have the understanding of her own heart necessary to put it all into words, and she couldn't shake the feeling of guilt, that her feelings themselves were sinful.

“I miss...” she paused, “Mr. Allen. Yes, I miss him, because he was always so wise and always knew what to do. He had authority and presence, and whatever he thought needed to be done was done in an efficient manner.”

“And?” asked Lady Matlock.

“And, I miss...” again she trailed off. “I miss Mr. Worsley.” The tears that Mary thought were gone threatened to spill again, but this time she held them back.

“I do wonder,” said Lady Matlock, “why you are missing him now. After all, you went many months last year without seeing him, likely without even thinking about

him. What is different now?"

"I don't know," Mary said hesitantly. It sounded like a lie, and she cringed.

"I think you do know," said Lady Matlock. "You just don't want to admit it."

"I love him!" The words burst forth from her soul, and for a brief moment she felt joyful. Then, memories of her husband came crashing back down upon her. "But it is wrong. I shouldn't. I can't," she said.

"Mary, despite the fact that you are in mourning for your husband, the reality of it is that he is dead, gone, passed out of this world. Your marriage vows were only valid until the day he died. Though society's rules tell us that a woman must mourn her husband for a respectable amount of time, it is simply a custom, not a law.

No court, either in heaven or on earth, would condemn you for developing feelings for another man after your husband is gone. "

"Then what should I do?" asked Mary.

"What do you want to do?" asked Lady Matlock.

"I want him to come back to London," she said immediately.

"That is what you want Mr. Worsley to do," said Lady Matlock, "not what you want to do."

What did she want to do? Her mind whirled with possibilities, but there was only one that gave her any peace whatsoever. "I want to finish my mourning period before I think about anything else. Mr. Allen gave me so much that I cannot bear to disrespect his memory."

“Let me ask you this. How well do you think Mr. Worsley knows you?” asked Lady Matlock. It seemed such an odd question for her to ask so suddenly.

“I think he knows me fairly well,” Mary answered. “As well as anyone can when you only meet a few times a week at various social events.”

“Does he know how much you respect Mr. Allen’s memory?” Lady Matlock asked.

“Certainly,” said Mary.

“Then perhaps he is not here so that you can continue your mourning period in peace,” said Lady Matlock.

Such an assumption could only be true under one of two conditions. Either he knew about her own feelings towards himself or he had developed feelings for her. Both possibilities filled her with an anxious mixture of hope and fear.

Hesitantly, Mary said, “Do you, perhaps, think he might return my affection?”

“I do not know,” said Lady Matlock, “and even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.

I suggest you put this all out of your mind as much as you can, under the assumption that Mr. Worsley is giving you the space you need to mourn your husband.

Then, when you have given Mr. Allen the respect you feel he deserves, you can see if you still have feelings for Mr. Worsley and possibly discover if he returns those feelings. ”

Mary thought her advice was sound, but it seemed rather hard, considering she had only just managed to put a name to her feelings for Mr. Worsley.

Before she could respond, however, Lady Matlock said, “I am not suggesting you suppress your emotions, but there is no need to feed them either. If you need to talk about this again or even cry over it, I will be here, at least while you are here in London. I suggest you speak about it to Miss Bennet as well, though, so that you are not left without support when you go back home to Hertfordshire.”

The idea of talking to Elizabeth about something like this felt odd.

Mary considered herself to be something like Elizabeth’s guardian, so she tended to think of her sister as younger than herself.

The reality was, however, that Elizabeth was two years older than Mary.

Perhaps, she could confide in her. But not today. Today, she was emotionally exhausted.

“Thank you, Lady Matlock,” said Mary. “Thank you for helping me understand myself. I think it might have taken me many months to figure this out on my own, if I ever managed to do so at all.”

“You are very welcome, my dear,” said Lady Matlock. “Now that I know what is ailing you, I am wondering if you are still planning to go back home at the end of this month. You had mentioned you might extend your stay, but I have yet to hear anything definitive.”

“Elizabeth and I have decided to stay until the end of May. She is enjoying her time here too much for me to wish to cut it short when it isn’t necessary. When the weather warms up a bit more, and London’s smells become stronger, I suspect she will be all too happy to depart for the country.”

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The two friends chatted for a bit longer, discussing various plans and events that they would be attending together. Just before she left, Lady Matlock left Mary with some shocking news.

“I feel that it is in your best interest that you know something about Mr. Worsley,” she said.

“He has a title, though he insists that none of his friends in London use it, because it is merely a courtesy title. His full name is Gregory Worsley, Earl of Pendleton. When his father passes away, he will become the sixth Marquess of Glyndebourne. I didn’t tell you earlier, because I honestly thought you would discover it for yourself, but if you are still ignorant of the fact even now, it would be a disservice to allow you to continue in such ignorance.”

The shock stupefied Mary, and she did not fully recover the use of her faculties until well after Lady Matlock had departed the house.

Mary’s mood improved marginally after her conversation with Lady Matlock.

Though she was tempted many times, she never was able to discuss her feelings with Elizabeth.

There just didn’t seem to be a good opportunity, and since there was no urgency to the issue, it did not feel necessary to bring it up.

Whenever Mary felt herself feeling loss, she spent some time pondering, attempting to discern whether she was missing Mr. Allen, Mr. Worsley, or something else

entirely. By doing so, she was able to gain a great deal of insight.

She realized that what she missed most about Mr. Allen wasn't his company, his presence, but it was the feeling of security he gave her.

When she was married to him, she knew that no matter what happened he would always take care of any problem that arose.

She had gradually come to know that he would do whatever was in his power to make her happy.

This was far more than she had ever received from anyone. Her parents, with their profligate and negligent ways had never inspired such confidence, nor had they ever given her happiness any sort of priority. She had always been the least of the sisters, the last to be considered.

Was it any wonder that Mary had developed such a strong attachment to her husband and that she had suffered so greatly upon his demise?

She was now required to see to her own happiness, her own security.

Even there, however, Mr. Allen's influence was felt.

He was the one who had given her the knowledge she had lacked and the opportunity to grow.

Because of Mr. Allen, Mary was a confident, wealthy woman, and she was fairly secure in the knowledge that she would remain so.

What she was not so certain of was whether she had the ability to ensure her own happiness.

She would, however, do what Mr. Allen had always encouraged her to do.

If she did not know how to do something, she would attempt it anyway.

Even if she failed, she would learn and try again.

During this time, Mary also came to accept that she had never loved Mr. Allen, at least not in any sort of romantic sense.

She had loved him like a father, like a friend, but there had never been any attraction between them.

It took a great deal of time and thinking to overcome the guilt she felt at this realization.

Eventually, she realized that she had done everything that was within her control to be the best wife she could be.

She had given him everything she had to give.

What mattered most was that she had made him happy, and of that she was certain.

As Mary's understanding of her own feelings toward her late husband increased, so too did her understanding of her feelings toward Mr. Worsley.

Where she had felt no attraction for Mr. Allen, she knew that the opposite was true with Mr. Worsley.

She had been attracted to him from the moment she laid eyes on him, before they had ever even spoken.

This attraction had only increased as she got to know him better.

He was an interesting conversationalist, intelligent and concise.

Talking to him always expanded her understanding of the world around her, and he seemed to have as much pleasure in her company as she did in his.

She often felt that even if they talked together every day, they would never run out of things to say to each other.

Mary wondered what would have happened had he stayed in London longer last year, before Mr. Allen's death.

As she thought about how her feelings for him had grown this year, she shuddered to think how much Mr. Worsley would have eventually disturbed her peace had he stuck around.

She would have been forced to take drastic measures to avoid him in order to remain emotionally faithful to her own husband, and the process would have been enormously painful.

Now, however, Mary learned to be at peace with her feelings.

Lady Matlock had been correct that she was no longer bound by her marriage vows.

Maintaining her period of mourning was a show of respect for Mr. Allen, but her feelings were free to be what they wished to be.

She had no husband to maintain faithfulness to.

There were still two things that marred Mary's newfound peace.



The first was the fact that she missed Mr. Worsley a great deal.

Though he had promised they would meet again and that he very much looked forward to it, she still doubted.

What if he found another lady he liked better?

What if he was simply too busy in Eastbourne to travel?

Occasionally, a small voice whispered in her mind, what if he died before she could see him again?

The second thing that disturbed her peace was when she contemplated the last thing Lady Matlock had told her, that Mr. Worsley was the heir to the title of Marquess.

In the deepest, most secret regions of her heart, Mary hoped that one day she and Mr. Worsley would marry, but given his title and status that seemed unlikely, not to mention intimidating.

This was one area where she could not find peace on her own.

Ultimately, it depended on whether Mr. Worsley wanted to marry her, and that was not something she could determine at this point in time.

She tried to put her faith in Mr. Worsley, that he would return to her as he had promised, and when that failed, she put her faith in God. In doing so, she found her greatest peace. Humans are frail, fallible creatures, but all things were possible with God.

By the time Mary and Elizabeth left London at the end of May, Mary was more at peace with herself than she could ever remember being.

She understood her own emotions, and she had a strong grasp of her place in the world.

With all of that being the case, she was quite looking forward to going home to Braydon Hall.

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Despite the many hours she spent on her charity work, both indoors and out, and despite the enormous amount of time she spent keeping her financial records accurate and her household running smoothly, she had spare energy for taking a walk almost every day.

Elizabeth commented several times that Mary was looking better than ever and that she was glad and grateful to see Mary so happy.

Elizabeth, too, seemed happy, though she was less energetic than she had been in London.

Elizabeth frequently took the little white phaeton out, and Mary grew accustomed to seeing it.

Though she still harbored some resentment toward the vehicle for being the means that led to her husband's demise, she was no longer at the point where she could barely stand to look at it.

She was, however, grateful that it belonged to Elizabeth.

Mary didn't think she could ever bring herself to use it, much less take care of it the way Elizabeth did.

Several times that summer, Mary invited Jane to come stay with her.

Twice, she was successful in convincing Mrs. Bennet to part with her favorite daughter for a week each time.

The addition of Jane to their dinner conversation was astonishing.

Mary had always assumed that Jane was a quiet sort of lady, but she found that when the more voluble members of their family were not present, Jane was almost as talkative as Elizabeth, though not as witty.

Those two weeks when Jane visited were rather eye-opening for Mary, for she came to the conclusion that Jane was the wisest of her sisters. She resolved to seek her out should she ever need advice.

There was also one memorable week when Kitty was allowed to stay with Mary.

Once again, Mary's eyes were opened to new information about one of her sisters.

When not in the presence of Lydia's high spirits, Kitty was relatively calm.

Though she was a bit too prone to complaining, she was seldom in oppressively high spirits.

She was cheerful, certainly, just not overly so.

Mary hoped that someday she would be allowed to have Kitty stay with her permanently. She was certain that they could be a good influence on each other. Mary could help Kitty be more grateful and less prone to whining, and Kitty could help Mary be more cheerful.

September arrived, and the weather began to cool a bit. On September fourth, Mary visited Mr. Allen's grave. If he was still alive, it would have been their second anniversary.

She stood, looking at the elaborate headstone that marked where her late husband lay.

She remembered his final week, the happiness he had shown in her company.

She remembered his confession of his love for her, and she remembered his refusal of her confession of love for him.

She remembered his admonishment to seek a man who could see her value, a man she could give her heart to.

“Mr. Allen...Henry,” she said out loud, “I wanted to tell you that you are still missed. Your friends in London miss you still, and I miss you as well. In the year that I knew you, you changed my life so dramatically. You made me a better woman, a better person, and I will never lose my gratitude for you. This last year, ever since you left me, has been challenging. I have had to learn to navigate society and life without your strong commanding presence to lean on. Fortunately, I had your friends’ wives, who are now my friends, to lean on instead, at least until I learned to stand on my own.

“I hope my management of your land and your investments has pleased you. You said you were leaving everything to me, because you believed I would not waste it, that I would be a good steward of all that you had worked so hard for. I think I have done well in that regard. Other than your London real estate, your investments have netted an average profit of seven percent. The real estate earned less than it could have, because I used your largest home for myself this past season.”

It felt odd to be talking about money at a grave, but in life, the topic had been the one Mr. Allen had been most interested in. Mary sat on the ground with her back to the headstone and simply communed with nature, trying to feel Mr. Allen’s presence so she could know if he was happy with her.

As she sat, a feeling of warmth and peace settled over her.

It was enough that she was finally able to say out loud what she had been thinking for months.

“One of the last things you told me was that I should find a man I could give my heart to,” she said.

“I think I have found him. In fact, he is someone you knew. Mr. Worsley. I don’t know for certain what will happen, but if he fulfills his promise to seek me out, I will almost certainly give him my heart. I hope you approve.”

Mary fell silent again, seeking to know if Mr. Allen was genuinely accepting of her willingness to move on and fall in love with another man.

Her mind flew over all her interactions with him.

He had never been particularly possessive.

He had never shown even an inkling of irritation when some gentleman or other gently flirted with her.

Again, she replayed her last few interactions with him in her mind.

It became clear to Mary that Mr. Allen loved her, but it was not a selfish love. He truly wanted her to be happy. He wanted her to have the joy he had found, that of knowing what it was to love another.

Mary smiled. She patted the ground she sat on, where Mr. Allen’s mortal remains lay buried six feet beneath her.

“Thank you Mr. Allen, for everything. You will always remain in my mind as one of the best men. I have spent the last year of my life showing the world my respect for

you. It was nearly as long as my marriage to you was, but it was worth it. Now, however, I believe it is nearly time to move on with my life.”

Mary felt a surge of happiness wash over her, and she knew Henry Allen approved of her resolution to move on.

She stood and brushed away the dirt that had stained the gray dress she wore.

It didn't matter, for she would not need it again any time soon.

She whispered one final, “Thank you.” Then she turned and walked back to the house.

Nine days later, Mary Allen put away all her black and gray dresses in boxes and had them stored in the attic.

A few days after the end of Mary's mourning period, Mama and all of Mary's sisters came to visit at Braydon Hall.

Almost as soon as they were all seated, Mama said, “Mary, have you heard the news? There are to be two newcomers to the neighborhood. One of them will surely be a wealthy young man, for I have heard from the butcher's wife, who heard from the housekeeper at Netherfield.

The young man came down from London in a chaise and four, very elegant I'm sure, just a week ago to look at the place.

Yesterday, the housekeeper received orders for the house to be opened and prepared for its new resident. ”

“And who is the other resident?” Mary asked.

“No one knows for certain. One of the larger houses in Meryton proper has been rented for the next three months, though the transaction was made through an intermediary. I would assume it was someone suitable, since it is a large house, larger than my sister’s at least. Let us all hope it is someone who can add to our society and not just some tradesman looking for new connections. ”

“Does anyone know when they will arrive?” asked Elizabeth.

“The new owner of Netherfield will be taking possession by Michaelmas. No one knows when the mystery guest in Meryton will arrive, not even the housekeeper that has been engaged for the place. She was just given orders a couple of days ago to have it ready as soon as possible.”

“I hope it’s a gentleman,” said Kitty. “Gentlemen around here are so scarce that it makes dancing quite difficult. At the last assembly, I had to dance with Lydia and Maria Lucas for two of the dances.”

“I hope one of them falls in love with me,” said Lydia. “What a good joke it would be if I could marry before Jane did.”

Mary looked at her oldest sister whose placid expression had dimmed slightly at Lydia’s remark.

At age twenty-two, Jane had been out for six years.

Despite her clearly being the most beautiful, kindest young lady in the neighborhood, she had still not found someone who could love her enough to marry her without any significant dowry.

The feeling of disappointment, of failure, must weigh heavily on her shoulders at times, especially with the amount of pressure Mama put upon all her daughters to



marry well.

It didn't make sense to Mary. When she had inherited all her husband's wealth, the safety of their family was assured.

She would never let any of her sisters or her mother go homeless or even be uncomfortable for as long as she lived.

Even after her death, she would ensure they were provided for, since she had already made a will, leaving a significant fortune to each of them.

Since this was so, why was Mama still so obsessed with marrying her daughters off?

The new resident of Netherfield arrived on September 27, and he was almost immediately visited by all the principal gentlemen of the neighborhood to welcome him.

Mary, not being one of those gentlemen, did not.

She assumed she would simply have to wait until they were in company together.

In the end, it mattered little to her other than that the subject provided much speculative conversation for herself and Elizabeth.

On the last day of the month, a visitor arrived at Braydon Hall. Shortly after the sound of the front bell, Mrs. Hampton showed the guest into Mary's study, where she was working on her ledgers and writing a letter of business.

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Surprised that Mrs. Hampton would show them here rather than have them wait in the parlor, she looked up just as her housekeeper said, “Mr. Worsley to see you on urgent business, Ma’am.”

Standing before her, just inside the door, was the man who had turned her life upside down, the man Mary hoped most earnestly to someday marry.

She stood, and said, “Mr. Worsley, it is both a pleasure and a surprise to see you.” Though she had intended to maintain decorum, she could feel a grin growing on her face, one so wide her cheeks already ached.

A matching smile grew on his lips. His dark, entrancing eyes sparkled with pleasure. “I promised I would see you again,” he said.

The two of them stared at each other for many long moments.

Mary had no concept of how long it was, because time had no meaning.

Eventually, it was Mr. Worsley who broke the silence.

As he took a step towards her, he said, “I was hoping to take you for a drive, if you were willing. I brought my curricule with me.”

Before answering, Mary instinctively looked out the window to make certain it did not look like rain. When a short glance reminded her that it was a sunny day, she said, “That sounds delightful. If you will give me a few minutes to fetch my pelisse and bonnet, we can be on our way.”

A few minutes later, Mr. Worsley helped Mary into his curricule by the simple expedient of grasping her waist and lifting her into it. It was a heady feeling to be lifted by such strong, dependable hands, and the feeling of his hands on her waist burned delightfully.

As they set off, Mr. Worsley said, "You will have to direct me where to go. I am unfamiliar with the area, since I only arrived late last night."

As Mary pointed him toward her favorite lane that wound among the various farm plots of her tenants, she said, "You must be the new tenant of the house in Meryton. The whole neighborhood has been speculating as to who you were."

He laughed. "I suppose that is the nature of small towns like this where very few people come simply to visit." After a brief silence, Mr. Worsley said, "May I call you Mary?"

Mary's heart swooped with joy. "Yes, you may," she answered.

He glanced at her, and their eyes met. There was such warmth and affection in his gaze that it caused Mary to catch her breath.

He said, "I must admit, it is an unexpected pleasure to find you so happy. Not that you were unhappy before, but you tend to be rather serious. Today, I find you full of smiles. It makes for quiet a lovely sight."

Breathing in courage, Mary said, "I am only smiling so brightly, because I am happy to see you. I have missed you a great deal."

Mr. Worsley's smile dimmed. "I am sorry I had to be away for so long," he said.

"I think I know why you did," replied Mary, "and even if my assumption is incorrect,

it was likely for the best.”

He gave her a quizzical look. “It is rather surprising to hear you say that,” he said. “It makes me rather curious what you think my reason was.”

Mary felt a blush stain her cheeks. “It would be incredibly presumptuous of me to tell you.”

“Very well,” he replied. “Then I shall tell you my reasoning, and you can tell me if you were correct. How does that sound?”

Mary simply agreed, “Very well.”

“At the ball where we danced in March, I realized that I love you,” said Mr. Worsley.

“The realization didn’t come as much of a surprise.

I have felt a growing affection for you since the earliest days of our acquaintance.

What did come as a rather strong shock, however, was the realization of how strong my feelings were, how deep they ran, and how complex the emotion was.

“I also realized something else that night. I knew you were drawn to me, though I cannot say with certainty how strong your feelings were. What I did know, however, was that my attempts to draw you closer to me resulted in hurting you, likely due to your status of being in mourning. I knew if I stayed in your company that I would eventually push you away, hurting both of us a great deal in the process. The only solution was to leave your side and let you finish mourning Mr. Allen in peace.”

Throughout his explanation, Mr. Worsley had continued driving down the quiet, secluded lane they were on. At this point, however, he pulled the reins, stopping the

horse. He then turned to Mary. “You should know that my feelings have not waned in the interim. I love you, Mary.”

Mary looked up into the handsome, striking face of the man she loved more than any other, the man who could both unsettle her and calm her, the man who cared so much for her happiness that he had left her alone for six months. “I love you, too, Mr. Worsley,” she said.

At her words, a light lit in his deep, brown eyes.

She knew what such a light meant. It had been something she had seen many times in Mr. Allen’s eyes, but this time it was far more compelling than she had ever experienced, and she suspected there was a matching light in her own eyes.

“Gregory,” he said. “My name is Gregory.”

“Gregory,” she said immediately.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” he said. It sounded demanding, but he gave her a moment to refuse if she was so inclined.

She was not inclined to refuse, however.

He lifted one hand to her cheek with his fingers curling around the side of her head.

He then pulled her closer as he bent down to touch his lips to hers.

Mary’s whole body awoke in a way she had not felt in over a year. Without thought, her arms wrapped around him and pulled him even closer. Their kiss, which had begun gently, quickly grew fevered, and Mary forgot that she was sitting in a curricule surrounded by the farmlands of her own estate.

It was Mr. Worsley who came to his senses first. He pulled away and said, “I should probably not do that again for a while.” Mary was disappointed, but the very small part of her mind which was still thinking rationally agreed with him.

Given her strong response to him, she realized that their passion could very easily burn out of control, leading them to behave in very inappropriate ways.

“I think you forgot to take into account the fact that I was married for a year and have since been without any of those pleasures associated with the married state,” Mary said.

Mr. Worsley barked a laugh. “I did, indeed, forget to take that into account.” He turned back to the reins, picked them up, and started the horse moving again.

They rode in silence for a time. Mary was grateful for it as it allowed her to calm her racing heartbeat.

After a time, though, Mary realized there was something in their conversation that had been left unsaid.

It was a topic that was not usually broached by females, but Mary had learned to speak her mind, to recognize what she wanted, and to seek out how to achieve it.

“It feels as though there is still something left unsaid,” said Mary.

“Oh? And what is that?” Gregory asked, though the corner of his mouth quirked as though he knew what she was referring to, but he wanted to see if she would say it.

Mary did not back down from the challenge. “You have not mentioned marriage. Is that not the next step when two independent adults realize they are hopelessly in love with each other?”

He looked at her. The light was back in his eyes, and Mary had to force herself to lean away from him to prevent herself from distracting him from his driving with another kiss. Instead of being offended at her reaction, he merely grinned. “Are you hopelessly in love, Mary?”

“Perhaps not,” she said, turning back to face the front. She could see out of the corner of her eye that his flirtatious look lost its heat at her response. She did not wish to hurt him, however, so she quickly continued, “I think I would prefer to call it hopefully in love.”

Gregory laughed heartily. “As am I,” he said. “I believe that describes it perfectly. As to your question about marriage, I fully intend to ask you, but not before I have courted you so well that you are fully aware of the treasure you are to me.”

“That may have been your plan upon coming to this neighborhood,” said Mary, “but given our response to a simple kiss, do you still think it wise to continue to delay?”

“Ever the practical lady,” he said. “Are you concerned about me leading you into temptation?”

“I am practical,” Mary answered. “Practical enough to know that the most surefire way to avoid falling to temptation is to avoid placing yourself in its way as often as possible.”

Gregory glanced back at her once again. The expression in his eyes was much softer now, though still clearly filled with affection for her.

“You know, that is one of the things I love most about you, your thoughtful approach to morality. You don’t just spout lines that you’ve heard.

You live it to the best of your ability, thoughtfully and sensibly. ”

It was the greatest compliment Mary had ever received, and she knew he meant it. He was complimenting that part of her personality that was most core to who she was, and it felt wonderful to know that he saw her so clearly.

He looked back towards the front and said, “Perhaps you are correct. Perhaps I shouldn’t delay it any longer than necessary. I did so hope to sweep you off your feet with a romantic and dramatic proposal, though.”

“I do not need romance and drama to know that you love me,” said Mary.

“Love is shown by the little things that a person does each day for the one person that matters the most to them. It is also shown by the big things that can be life changing. You showed me the latter when you chose to allow me time to grieve. The former is something that takes a lifetime.”

“How do you know so much about love?” Gregory asked.

“You are asking if I loved Mr. Allen,” she said.

“You have a right to know, I suppose. I did not love him, at least not in a romantic sense, but I did love him almost as a father.

Perhaps mentor is a better word. He taught me everything, far more than my parents taught me in sixteen years.

He gave me everything I wanted: opportunities to serve others, the confidence to become a more socially acceptable woman, and a great deal of knowledge about the world around me.

He even gave me both responsibility and independence by leaving his entire fortune to me, which he had no obligation to do.



“What knowledge I have of love, how it is expressed and how it grows, is because he loved me. I watched as he gradually fell in love with me over the course of a year, though I did not know what I was seeing at the time. It is only in thinking back over my life with him during my time of mourning that I was able to see the symptoms and their progression.”

Silence flowed between them when Mary finished her explanation. She could tell that Gregory was thinking a great deal about what she had said.

When he finally spoke, his words quite shocked Mary. “He did love you,” he said, “very much, but I don’t think it was a possessive sort of love like what one finds in most romance novels. He knew you very well, and he genuinely wanted to make you happy.”

It was odd to hear the same conclusion she had come to come out of Gregory’s mouth. She hadn’t even been aware that the two of them had ever spoken together about her. She decided not to question how he had come to this conclusion, so she simply said, “Yes, he did.”

“Are you certain you do not wish for romance and drama?” Gregory asked.

“I am quite certain,” she replied adamantly. “In fact, the more dramatic someone’s protestations are, the less I tend to believe them.”

Once again, Gregory halted the progress of the curricule. Then he turned towards her. “Mary Allen, will you please join your life with mine so that together we can be far happier, far better, than either of us could be alone? Will you marry me?”

His question was so sincere, so completely in tune with what she wanted and hoped for. She could not help but throw her arms around his neck and hug him tightly. “Yes, Gregory. Yes, I will marry you,” she said into his neck.

He held her close in return. “I promise, Mary...I promise I will do all in my power to make you a very happy lady.” He then leaned back just enough so that he could see her face.

“However, you must resign yourself to being courted and spoiled rotten between now and the day we marry. Even beyond that point if you will let me.”

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Gregory proceeded to set the curricule in motion once again.

Mary was content to remain in silence, simply feeling her betrothed's presence beside her.

It was hard to believe that she was once again engaged to be married.

Yet, at the same time, it was the most natural thing in the world. She belonged next to Gregory Worsley.

As soon as that thought passed through her mind, she remembered that Gregory Worsley had another name. He was also Earl of Pendleton, heir to the Marquess of Glyndebourne.

"Gregory," she said hesitatingly, "Is there something else you need to tell me? Perhaps something I might need to know as your future wife."

His expression became a bit sheepish. "I am afraid the conversation got away from me," he said.

"I was simply so happy to have you in my arms at last. You are right. There is something important I need to tell you. It may even change your mind about marrying me, though you seem to already know about it." He glanced at her questioningly.

"What I know or do not know is of no matter," said Mary sternly. "We both know that I should hear it from your own lips."

Gregory sighed. "I am the oldest son of the Marquess of Glyndebourne. My courtesy title is Earl of Pendleton," he said. "Though I am the owner of most of the land around Eastbourne, my family's land, the land attached to the title of Marquess, is in West Sussex."

"Thank you for telling me," said Mary.

"You do not seem surprised," he said. "I suppose you must have heard it in London. It isn't exactly a secret, but neither my father nor I spend much time in London, so we aren't as well-known as some others.

I have gone by Worsley my whole life. Though most of the ladies of London know who I am, simply going by Mister instead of Earl tends to make people treat me differently than they would if I insisted on using my title. "

A few moments of silence passed. "Do you still wish to marry me?" Gregory asked hesitatingly. "I know you have no desire for or pretension to a title. Social power means little to you."

"I did hear of your title in London," said Mary.

"Lady Matlock informed me of it. I have had five months to get used to the idea, so of course I do not wish to change my mind. I only wonder that you would want someone like me as your wife. I am hardly elegant, not particularly sociable, and not even particularly pretty. Not exactly what one imagines as a countess or marchioness."

Again, Gregory stopped the curricule and faced her.

"You may not fit society's image of a noble Lady," he said, and Mary felt a pang, but he continued quickly.

“I do not see that as a bad thing, however.

I have always wanted a wife who would help me take care of the people in my domain, not someone who would simply laud their own superiority.

“Eastbourne, in particular, is quite difficult to manage, because the tenants change from year to year and even season to season. I will need your help, your pragmatic approach to charity, even your knowledge of business. You are perfectly suited to be my wife in personality and manner. As far as looks go, I have always loved to look at you. Your brown eyes, usually so calm and thoughtful, are a delight to behold when you are learning something new or discussing a topic of particular interest.”

He placed a hand on her cheek, and for a moment Mary thought he would kiss her again. Instead, he said, “I hardly need to remind you how attractive I find you.” His voice was deeper, and his eyes held the fire of passion that they had held after their kiss.

Mary surprised herself by saying, “Remind me anyway.”

Immediately, his lips were on hers. It took mere moments for him to deepen his kiss, and Mary was once again lost in the feeling of him. There was no doubt in her mind that Gregory desired her very much.

When he pulled away, he said nothing. He merely turned back to the reins and set the curricule in motion.

Once Mary could tell that their breathing was back to normal, Gregory said, “I think we may need a chaperone from now on. It is not usually considered necessary for a widow, but...” He trailed off, and Mary knew what he couldn’t bring himself to say.

“I agree,” she said.

“Is there any way I could convince you to just elope with me? It wouldn’t take long to get a license, you know.”

“It sounds so easy and wonderful and romantic,” said Mary, “but we would regret it in time. If we are to truly become one, if you truly wish me to be a partner instead of a possession, we need to take the time to arrange our financial and legal affairs. We need to involve our families. Additionally, I need time to make arrangements for the care of my tenants here.” She gestured around her at the fields they passed.

Gregory scowled petulantly, and Mary couldn’t blame him. She felt the same way, but she knew she was right. “You are right,” he said. “I don’t like it, but you are right.”

“I don’t like it either,” said Mary quietly. She wanted to feel his kiss again, wanted to be married to him immediately. Instead, she scooted as far away from him as she could on the little bench seat of the curricule.

He chuckled at her, knowing that she was doing what was necessary for both of them.

It didn’t take much longer for them to come back to Braydon Hall. Mary led him inside, so she could share her news with Elizabeth.

The following week was full of visits with family and friends, introducing Gregory as Mary’s betrothed.

It was a time that was both delightful and stressful.

There were moments of wonder as Mary and Gregory discussed their future together.

There were moments of intense embarrassment, such as when Mrs. Bennet crowed loudly at having a future marquess in the family.

They settled on a wedding date of December first, which was the first Sunday of that month.

There was much to be done in the interim.

Though Mary didn't need to buy a great deal of wedding clothes, since she was a widow, she did need some.

Some of her evening gowns were not quite suitable for the wife of an earl.

Fortunately, Mary did not need to make a special trip to London for her new clothes. Much of what she needed could be purchased in Meryton, and for the rest, she sent a letter to her Aunt Gardiner asking her to acquire what was needed.

On October tenth, Mary left her home to visit Eastbourne for a week.

She was fortunate enough to have obtained permission for Kitty to join her on her excursion.

The journey would take one and a half days each way, with a week-long stay in between so that Mary could tour her future home and make any changes she desired.

She also planned to get to know the village better.

Gregory joined her on the trip, though he took a separate carriage to avoid even the appearance of scandal. Elizabeth, however, decided to spend that time at Longbourn, since she did not wish to miss the assembly, nor did she wish to live alone at Braydon Hall.

Elizabeth settled back in at Longbourn easily enough. It was genuinely good to be with Jane again, although Lydia was a bit more demanding of attention than usual,

since Kitty was not there to giggle with.

On the day of the assembly, Elizabeth, Jane, and Lydia dressed in their finest gowns and helped each other style their hair in the finest styles. Elizabeth wore pearl hairpins in her hair and a pearl necklace Mary had bought for her in London.

The ladies of the house left in very good time and were among the first to arrive at the assembly rooms in Meryton.

It was one of the few times Mama could be counted on not to dither, because she loved to arrive early so she could see who arrived and when, so she could discuss it all with her friends at a later time.

Everyone noticed when Mr. Bingley arrived. Elizabeth had not met him, but her good friend, Charlotte Lucas, told her about him. “The blonde one in the front of the group is Mr. Bingley,” she said.

“Do you know who the others are?” asked Elizabeth. Other than Mr. Bingley, there was a young lady, a lady in her late twenties, and a man whose red face hinted that he had already had some wine even before arriving at the assembly.

Additionally, there was a tall, very handsome man standing at the back of the group, though his stern face indicated that he was not particularly pleased with his surroundings. Elizabeth felt she had seen him a couple of times in London, but she could not remember who he was.

“I do not know for certain,” answered Charlotte. “I suspect the young lady is his sister. He did mention he had a younger sister. The others, I couldn’t say.”

They did not have long to wait. The group was greeted by Charlotte’s father, Sir William Lucas, who often acted as the master of ceremonies at these kinds of public



events. Once he had greeted them, he offered to introduce them to some of the families.

The tall, handsome one immediately declined to be introduced, and he peeled away from the group to go stand by the wall.

The rest were immediately led over to Charlotte and Elizabeth.

Mr. Bingley requested a dance from Charlotte, since he was already familiar with her father.

Elizabeth discovered that both the ladies were sisters to Mr. Bingley, though the older lady was married to the red-faced gentleman, Mr. Hurst.

Before Mr. Bingley moved on to his next set of introductions, he did indicate that his friend's name was Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth immediately remembered where she had seen him. He was nephew to Mary's good friend, Lady Matlock. She had only seen him twice, and both those times were in the Lady's home. Apparently, he didn't particularly like circulating among society.

She briefly wondered if Mr. Darcy would remember who she was, but she immediately discarded the idea.

She barely recalled him, and there was no way someone who avoided people as much as he did would remember someone as ordinary as she was.

Elizabeth decided to ignore the man and focus on her own enjoyment instead.

Fitzwilliam Darcy was annoyed. He was happy to accompany his friend, Bingley,

into the country, but he had not counted on the fact that his friend was a sociable creature.

This facet of Bingley's personality meant that there was bound to be much more to this trip than simply hunting, fishing, and riding.

Take this assembly, for instance; Darcy would never have attended an assembly like this on his own, not even in his home county. Now, because of Bingley, he was here amongst strangers whose condition in life was so different than what he was used to. It was decidedly uncomfortable.

As a way of showing respect for his host, he did dance with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, but then he retired to the edge of the room, simply attempting to bear up under the weight of the noise and the chaos.

Bingley thrived in this kind of environment, but Darcy tended to wither. Well-organized balls were tolerable, though not particularly pleasant. This, however, was a seething chaotic mess of unfamiliar faces, unpleasant odors, and appalling noise.

At one point, Bingley was so overcome with the joy of the evening, he left his dance partner for a few moments, simply to cajole Darcy into joining the dance.

Of course, Darcy refused, but Bingley would not let it go, eventually going so far as to threaten to introduce him to the lady sitting down behind him.

After a very brief glance, Darcy declared her not handsome enough to attract his attention. He may have said something else, but it was not important. What was important was that Bingley then went back to his partner just as the line of the dance was beginning to move again.

Oddly, after Darcy had dismissed the young lady from his mind, his eyes kept being

drawn to her. He supposed he was looking more closely at her to determine if his initial judgment had been correct. He also felt that there was something vaguely familiar about her.

So, he watched her as she danced several dances.

He could not place why she seemed familiar, but he did come to the conclusion that his initial assessment was not entirely accurate.

When her face was at rest, there was nothing notable about it, but when she spoke, when she smiled, and especially when she laughed, there was a light of intelligence and life that lit within her, changing her face from something ordinary to something quite out of the ordinary.

Darcy did not ask her to dance. He would never stoop so low as to deliberately court the attention of a simple country miss. He did, however, very much look forward to the next time they might meet in company, so that he could once again enjoy the sight of such remarkable expressions.

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Mary's trip to Eastbourne was delightful.

To get there, they traveled through the weald, which was a delightfully hilly area.

Though it was difficult for the horses to manage, it certainly made for a picturesque and interesting landscape.

Once there, Mary and Kitty settled in at the inn in Eastbourne.

Gregory had wanted to secure a house for them, but Mary said it would be silly to do so for such a short stay.

The following day, they visited Gregory's home, and Mary found it utterly charming. She had feared that it would be a little too grand for her, since her fiancé was nobility, but it turned out to be not much bigger than Braydon Hall and decorated in a similar style.

She gave orders to have a few of the rooms refurbished and replaced most of the curtains in the house, which were showing signs of being a bit moth-eaten.

It was very different from when she had been hesitant to make even the slightest change at Braydon Hall before her first marriage.

This time, she knew how much things would cost, how much money she had to work with, and she had enough experience to know how important some updates were and how unimportant others were.

The rest of the week was spent enjoying all Eastbourne had to offer.

There was a little boardwalk that trailed along the shore, making it easy to enjoy the sea air and the view without the hassle of getting sand everywhere.

There were quite a few little shops, some of which were perfectly normal and some of which sold little knickknacks related to the sea, often decorated in seashells.

Mary was glad to have Kitty with her for the trip. Kitty was eager to see every new thing, and her exuberance helped Mary to see the village with more open eyes.

The day before she was to return to Hertfordshire, Gregory took Mary on a very memorable walk along the shore. It was a gloriously warm day for the season. The sun was shining, and the wind coming off of the sea wasn't particularly strong.

The two of them chatted about many things, sharing various experiences both past and present. Towards the end of their walk, Gregory surprised Mary by saying, "I am afraid I have some rather disappointing news."

Mary looked at his expression in an attempt to gauge just how disappointing his news would be.

Based on what she saw, she braced herself for something very bad, indeed.

"I will not be able to accompany you back to Hertfordshire as I had planned. A couple of disputes have arisen in the last day that require my direct attention. The issues are complex and could take weeks to untangle."

Mary felt her heart break just a little at the thought of being separated from Gregory. Ever since that memorable drive, when their hearts had been laid bare to each other, when they had begun to plan their future together, she had seen him for multiple

hours every day.

If he could not return with her, she was not certain she wished to go. “Perhaps, I should stay as well, then,” she said. “It has been a delightful week, and I would not mind extending my stay.”

Gregory gently pressed the hand that was resting in the crook of his elbow. “You know that will not work, Mary,” he said. “You have arrangements to make at Braydon Hall as well as shopping that needs to be done that cannot be done here.”

As he spoke, Mary felt tears spring to her eyes. Gregory stopped walking and turned her so they faced each other. “I will miss you, too, Mary,” he said as he wiped away one of the tears that trickled down her cheek.

Despite being out in the open where everyone could see, Mary desperately put her arms around Gregory and buried her head in his chest, letting her tears fall and allowing a few sobs to escape.

She felt his arms go around her in return, one of them around her shoulders and the other cradling her head. She smelled his scent as it surrounded her. She was home and safe in his arms, and she did not wish to leave the comfort of being there...but she knew she must.

Gathering in courage and strength, she pulled away from her fiancé, her beloved, and she looked up in his face. Concern and love were etched into his features, and she knew that this man returned her love in full force, that he would miss her as much as she would miss him.

Gregory brushed his thumb across her cheek in the gentlest of caresses. “You are always so strong, Mary, that I sometimes forget how very deep your feelings run. I can only say that I am the most blessed man in the kingdom to have won the love of

such an amazing woman.”

He bent down and kissed her cheek. Then, he placed her hand back on his arm, and they continued their walk.

“I shall join you in Hertfordshire as soon as possible,” he said. “Mid- November at the latest, though I am hoping it will be sooner. At least we were able to get the marriage contract settled before coming here, so that is one less thing that remains to be taken care of.”

Mary merely nodded, her heart too full to be able to comprehend more mundane matters in that moment.

The next day, Mary and Kitty boarded her carriage to return to Hertfordshire.

When Mary returned to Braydon Manor, most of the news of the neighborhood concerned their new neighbor and his guests. Apparently Mr. Bingley had invited not only his sisters and brother-in-law, but Mr. Darcy as well.

Mary knew who Mr. Darcy was, of course. During her two seasons in London, she had come across him at least a dozen times, though they had only conversed briefly a few times.

What she was hearing about him, however, did not match what she knew of him from Mary’s good friend, Lady Matlock, who often bragged about how good a man her nephew had grown to be.

Nor did it match her own observations. He had never been particularly lively, but he seemed friendly enough with those he was familiar with.

According to Elizabeth and several other people, Mr. Darcy was the proudest man

alive, unwilling to even look at anyone in the neighborhood, much less talk to them.

Mrs. Bennet had even gone on at length about how the man had sat near Mrs. Long for an entire half hour without even murmuring a greeting.

Unable to reconcile the two very different accounts she had heard of the man, she resolved to observe him the next time they were in company together.

It didn't take long for such an opportunity to arise. Only a few days after Mary's return from Eastbourne, Sir William Lucas held an evening party at his home. It was not exactly a dinner party, more of a soiree with refreshments laid out and guests expected to entertain themselves by mingling.

The event gave Mary the opportunity to meet Mr. Bingley and his family.

She found the young gentleman to be exactly what everyone claimed: cheerful, friendly, and easily pleased.

He had nothing but good things to say about his new home and neighborhood, though his attention was clearly more on Jane than anyone or anything else.

Miss Bingley was a bit harder to make out.

She clearly felt herself to be above such chaotic, poorly dressed company, but she was friendly enough toward Mary and even toward Jane.

Mary suspected that the young lady was quite accomplished at presenting two different faces to the world depending on who she was interacting with.

Mary watched Mr. Darcy for well over half the evening, and the exercise yielded some interesting conclusions.



He was exhibiting all the symptoms of pride that everyone had accused him of.

For example, he only spoke to those of his party for the most part, though when someone was brave enough to greet him, he responded with civility.

Additionally, however, Mary could detect a bit of discomfort guiding his actions.

She supposed it was to be expected. He was out of his natural habitat, and it made sense that he would be uncomfortable in such a situation.

Mary was familiar enough with the elegant and highly ordered lifestyles of the very wealthy, and when she looked at her neighbors with that perspective in mind, she could see that there was quite a difference between them and those with whom Mr. Darcy associated.

The final thing she noticed almost made her laugh out loud.

The entire neighborhood, and especially Elizabeth, was convinced that the man found Mary's sister to be intolerable.

In fact, the opposite was true. Mary noticed at least three separate instances of the man deliberately standing near Elizabeth simply so he could listen to her conversation with others.

When he was not listening to her, his eyes were occasionally drawn to her in a way that was likely involuntary.

Mr. Darcy was attracted to Elizabeth.

Mary had been around enough gentlemen, especially entitled spoiled gentlemen like Mr. Darcy, to know that attraction did not always lead to love, and love did not

always lead to marriage, so she did not automatically assume that the young man was seriously inclined towards Elizabeth despite his obvious admiration.

Mary also wasn't entirely certain, even if Mr. Darcy made his attraction known to Elizabeth, that she would respond positively. Certainly, Mr. Darcy was handsome, and certainly he was wealthy, but Elizabeth had her own brand of pride, which had been wounded by Mr. Darcy's insult.

Mary surmised that what was actually preventing Mr. Darcy from seeking the company of the woman he clearly admired was his own pride.

He likely thought Elizabeth poor, at least in terms of dowry, for Mary had never made it known in Hertfordshire that she planned to contribute to her sisters' dowries.

If he had heard anything at all of the Bennets, he was likely aware of their poor connections, namely Mrs. Bennet's sister who was the wife of a country solicitor and her brother who was a tradesman in London.

This, too, would be a massive deterrent to a man such as Mr. Darcy.

The problem was that his actions were based on incomplete information.

Though it was unknown, Elizabeth did have a reasonable dowry, entirely appropriate to her station in life.

Additionally, though she had some poorer connections, she also had some very high connections, namely Mary, whose financial worth and friendships were far above anyone in the neighborhood, and Mary's fiancé, the future Marquess of Glyndebourne.

Mary decided that her best course of action would be to clear up Mr. Darcy's

misunderstandings so that he could then proceed in whatever way he chose. There was no guarantee that he would seek out Elizabeth's company, but at least he would no longer belabor under misapprehensions.

Once she had made this decision, she made her way toward the man. As she came into his line of sight, she could see that he was surprised to see her. Since she was short, she often passed unnoticed in a crowd, so he must not have been aware of her presence.

"Mr. Darcy," said Mary, "I am surprised to see you in a place like this."

Mr. Darcy gave a slight bow. "I am surprised to be in a place like this," he said, "but my friend invited me to his new home here, and I could not refuse. The society here, however, leaves something to be desired. Do you not agree?"

"Oh?" asked Mary. "Are my friends and family not good enough for the great Darcy of Pemberley?"

"Your friends...and family?" he asked. "My apologies, Mrs. Allen. I was not aware you were originally from this area."

Mary laughed. "I am originally from this area, yes, but I also still live here. My estate is merely two miles north of here, and the home of my childhood is one mile south. I would be most grateful if you would treat my friends with respect. By the way, how is your aunt doing?"

Mary knew that the reminder that she was friends with his aunt would reinforce her message to stop being so pompous. Lady Matlock had no patience for that sort of thing.

He spluttered, but he managed to answer, "She is quite well. At least she was when

last I heard from her. I imagine you have received a letter more recently than I have.”

“I suppose I have,” replied Mary. She allowed the silence to grow between them.

Then she said, “Have you heard the news that I am now engaged to Lord Pendleton? We sent the announcement to the London papers a couple of weeks ago.” It felt odd to call Gregory by his official title, but she wished to impress on the arrogant man in front of her the height of Elizabeth’s connections.

He looked at her, wide-eyed. “No, I had not heard that. The last time I saw you, you were still in mourning.” He scanned her clothing and added, “Though I can see that is no longer the case. I suppose I should do better at keeping up with the news.”

“It makes little difference to me,” said Mary. “I was just making conversation.”

After another period of silence, she said, “By the way, the young lady you cannot keep your eyes off of, the one you insulted at the assembly a week ago, is my older sister. She currently has no dowry to speak of, at least nothing official other than a promised inheritance from our mother, but I had planned to make significant contributions to my sisters’ fortunes.

Although, if I do not like their chosen husband, they will get nothing. ”

Mary looked Mr. Darcy straight in the eye to see if he got her message. “I understand you, Mrs. Allen, loud and clear. I apologize for my atrocious behavior.”

“It should not matter how wealthy someone is or how well-connected they are for you to treat them in a civil manner, Mr. Darcy. Besides, I do not need your apology, since I am not the one you offended,” she said.

“I hope you enjoy your evening.” Then Mary drifted away to speak to other guests.

As she moved away, she smiled to herself.

It was a social maneuver she would not have believed herself capable of a year ago, yet she was certain she had carried across her message clearly.

She watched him for a few minutes after she left his side to see if he would finally talk to Elizabeth, but he made no move to do so. With an inward sigh, Mary washed her hands of the matter. In the end, it was not her business, so she stopped paying him any attention.

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Darcy had been shocked to see Mrs. Allen in Sir William's drawing room. The young widow was not particularly notable herself, but she was connected, through friendship and through her deceased husband, to some of the most powerful and wealthy socialites in London.

To have someone who was essentially of similar social standing to himself, and soon to be superior rank, correct him of all his misconceptions and poor behavior was humbling, indeed.

It took him some time, but he came to realize that she was in the right to correct him as she had.

His behavior toward the neighborhood in general and toward Miss Elizabeth Bennet in particular had been reprehensible.

It was also rather eye-opening to find that Miss Elizabeth could be considered quite a suitable match.

He had been increasingly attracted to her since the assembly, but he had attempted to ignore the feeling so as to not allow it to grow.

Admiration and attraction were one thing, but he could not allow the enticing young lady to ensnare his heart, because he had thought that a match between them was impossible.

Now, he found out that she was not nearly so unsuitable as he thought. She still had some rather low connections, but that was made up for by the fact that she was soon

to become sister to the future Marquess of Glyndebourne.

After mulling all this over, Darcy decided he should apologize to Miss Elizabeth for his patently untrue insult. With that in mind, he made his way to her side. She was speaking with Colonel Forster, the colonel of a regiment of militia who were stationed in Meryton for the winter.

“I have been thinking it might be suitable to throw a ball using the assembly rooms in Meryton,” the Colonel was saying. “I thought it might help in establishing the good will of the neighborhood towards my officers. Do you think such a thing would be well received?”

“I should think there could be nothing better,” replied Miss Elizabeth.

“There is nothing quite so useful in establishing friendships as a ball. Those who are watching the dance have plenty of opportunity to mingle while those who are dancing have the opportunity to deepen existing friendships in much the same way as a tête à tête. It is the perfect combination of both impersonal and interpersonal.”

“That is certainly one way of looking at it,” replied the colonel, “but I would assume a simple soiree, like this evening’s gathering, might be just as effective.”

“My personal preferences must make themselves known,” said Miss Elizabeth. “I cannot condone the existence of a soiree when a ball must be given up in its place. One is hardly interchangeable for the other, after all. A soiree has no music and no dancing, and that deficiency must speak for itself.”

Darcy was surprised when, at the end of her little speech, Miss Elizabeth turned to him and said, “What is your opinion on the subject, Mr. Darcy? We all know you abhor a ball, but it is unclear whether you like a soiree any better.”

Colonel Forster glanced at him oddly at this accusation. Of course, he had not been in the area during the assembly a few weeks ago, so his confusion was understandable. “They each have their advantages and disadvantages. I am afraid I cannot state a firm preference one way or the other,” he said.

“A diplomatic, yet useless, reply,” cried Miss Elizabeth. “While it is patently true, it neither improves the conversation nor helps us settle the debate.”

At this point Colonel Forster excused himself from the conversation, and Mr. Darcy was left with Miss Elizabeth.

“If I may change the subject, Miss Elizabeth,” said Darcy, “I would like to tender my most sincere apologies for my insult to you at the assembly a few weeks ago. I was not aware that you had heard my comment until recently.”

She tilted her head in an entirely charming manner. “Are you apologizing for me overhearing the comment or for you uttering it in the first place?” she asked.

“I am apologizing for saying such a patently false statement,” said Mr. Darcy.

“And which statement, out of the several you uttered, was false?” she asked. “That I was sitting down instead of dancing? That I was somehow deserving of being slighted by the other men in the room? Or perhaps it was that I was tolerable to look at?”

Darcy felt his ears go red. Hearing her sling his insulting speech back in his face in such a manner was entirely demeaning, but a part of him felt he deserved such treatment, because it was no different to how he had treated her.

Another part of him, however, was angry.



He was here attempting to apologize to this young woman, and she was not taking what he was offering. It was ridiculous.

The angry light in her eyes halted his own growing anger, however. It gave her an expression of arresting beauty he had never seen anywhere else. “You are far more than merely tolerable,” he said. “In fact, at this moment you are the most beautiful woman I have ever met.”

The words had slipped out on their own, almost without his permission. Yet, they were true, and he could not regret them.

Instead of soothing her, however, his statement seemed to make her anger grow.

“You are making fun of me, Mr. Darcy, and that is far more cruel than your impersonal slight at the assembly,” she said quietly but with a fierce undercurrent of anger and pain.

“I beg you to leave me in peace before we both regret this conversation.”

Before he could respond to her nonsensical statement, Miss Elizabeth turned on her heels and stalked away from him. He could only stare after her, wondering what had just happened.

Ten days passed, during which Darcy could not manage to utter more than a few words to the lovely Miss Elizabeth, despite being in company with her three times.

Every time he saw her, he attempted to strike up a conversation, but she would never respond with anything other than, “If you would excuse me.” Then she walked away.

If she would not hear him, if she would not engage with him in conversation, he could not apologize. If he could not apologize, he could never truly get to know her.

It was his frustration and disappointment at this that helped him realize how very much he liked Miss Elizabeth.

There had been plenty of ladies that Darcy had been content to admire, but very few that he actually wished to know more of.

Miss Elizabeth was now one of that select group, but the desire to know her did not automatically make it possible.

He could never understand why his sincere admiration had made her withdraw from him even more, and without knowing that, there was no hope whatsoever of mending the breach.

Her behavior, as unpleasant as it was, in no way diminished his admiration, however.

The more he watched her, the more he listened to her, the more he heard about her, the greater his admiration grew.

Since Darcy was unable to repair the damage he had done to Miss Elizabeth, he instead set about repairing his relationship with her neighbors, who were now temporarily his neighbors.

He talked with them more often and did his best to appear more cheerful so as not to push people away.

He didn't know how successful he was. Getting to know strangers had never been a particular strength of his, but he nevertheless made the attempt.

About a week into November, an unexpected guest was shown into the library at Netherfield. "Mr. Worsley is here to see you, Mr. Darcy," said Bingley's butler, as he moved aside to reveal Lord Pendleton.

Darcy stood up to greet the young man. “Pendleton,” he said, “I am surprised to see you. I had heard you were stuck in Eastbourne dealing with a property dispute.”

“You may call me Worsley,” he said as they both sat down in the comfortable chairs by the fire.

“I was stuck there, to my great disappointment. I managed to get the issue resolved enough so that they could carry on without me a couple of days ago. I arrived back in Meryton yesterday, for I could not bear to be apart from my Mary any longer.”

Darcy shook his head and said without thinking, “That is a match I would never have guessed at in a million years. Mrs. Allen doesn’t seem like the kind of woman who would attract a man like yourself.”

“A man like myself?” asked Worsley. “And what kind of man would that be?”

Darcy could not mistake the warning tone in the other man’s voice. He practically dared Darcy to insult Mrs. Allen simply so he could have the pleasure of ripping Darcy to shreds. “I must have been mistaken,” said Darcy diplomatically.

“Indeed,” said Worsley, relaxing a bit. “Mrs. Allen is perfect for me, knowledgeable, teachable, and wise with her resources.

She manages her money, her time, and her attention with consummate ease, and everyone whose lives she touches are better for it.

Let me tell you something my father once told me.

‘Marry a wise woman,’ he said. ‘A wise woman will help you, but a foolish woman, especially one who does not love you, will be nothing more than a millstone around your neck, hindering your every effort.’”

“My father said something similar,” said Darcy. “I only wish the sentiment were more widely shared among our peers. If it were, parents might make more of an effort to teach their daughters more than just how to host parties and look beautiful.”

“Just so,” said Worsley. After a pause, he said, “I hear tell you have gotten yourself into a bit of a romantic tangle.” This was said with a bit of a twinkle in the younger man’s eyes.

“I am not certain I would call it that,” said Darcy. “I assume you are speaking of the way I insulted the best lady in the neighborhood before even being introduced to her.”

“Indeed, I am, though I might argue with your assertion that Miss Elizabeth is the best lady in these parts. I did hear you made it even worse when you attempted to apologize,” said Worsley.

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Darcy shook his head. “That is the part I don’t understand. I admit I said some things I shouldn’t have said, and I admit that I wasn’t as friendly as I should have been, but I cannot understand why complimenting Miss Elizabeth would make her so angry with me.”

Worsley just looked at Darcy for a few moments. Then he said, “Mary told me everything, you know. I can answer your question, but I wonder what you will do with that information should I choose to help you. I do not wish for my future sister to be hurt any more than she already has been.”

“I am uncertain what you are asking of me,” said Darcy. “Are you demanding to know my intentions towards Miss Elizabeth?”

Worsley shrugged. “In a way, I suppose.”

“I admire her a great deal,” said Darcy.

“I feel drawn to her as I have felt toward no other woman. I cannot say I will be promising marriage, but I would at least like the chance to be near her, to talk with her. I have no intention of hurting her, but as I have clearly proved, I am perfectly capable of doing so without intention.”

Worsley sighed. “I suppose your answer is as good as any,” he said.

“Personal relationships are so complicated that I have always found the question of ‘What are your intentions?’ to be completely pointless. Very few men deliberately set out to hurt a lady, though I suppose there are plenty of men whose purpose is merely

to have fun. I assume you are not the kind of man to deliberately engage a lady's affections unless you were at least a little serious about her. ”

“I am fairly serious about her,” said Darcy. “I believe that, given the chance, I could be very much in love with her. To be frank, the idea scares me a bit, but her wealth and connections are a reasonable match to my own, so I see no reason to resist.”

“Her connections?” asked Worsley. “Are you referring to me?”

“Yes,” said Darcy without demurring. “Her other relations are so low, that without you as her future brother-in-law, I would have to consider her to be unsuitable.”

“Ah,” said Worsley. “I believe I see now why my future sister is so completely opposed to you.”

“And will you be sharing your great wisdom?” asked Darcy.

Worsley laughed briefly, but he became serious quickly.

“By denigrating most of her relations, you are showing that you have no respect for anyone she loves. Her low relations, which you only see as names and titles, are everything to her. If you cannot respect that part of her, you will never respect her, and the one thing Elizabeth will never tolerate from a husband, or even a friend, is lack of respect.”

Such a viewpoint had never occurred to Darcy, though it should have.

By looking down on her connections, by being cold to her neighbors, he was indirectly looking down on and being cold toward her.

If he ever wanted to gain her attention, he would have to adjust how he thought about

and responded to people.

“Why didn’t you have this problem?” Darcy asked Worsley. “With Mrs. Allen, I mean. You are of even higher status than I am.”

“Mary is very different from her sisters,” said Worsley.

“She is not as romantic nor as emotional as they are, at least not overtly. Additionally, she married Mr. Allen when she was just sixteen and was subsequently introduced to, and accepted by, a much higher society than that of her sisters. This is why I was introduced to her in the first place. As for myself, I care very little for who her relations are, though I would do anything in my power to make her happy, including freely associating with anyone she deems worth associating with.”

“I believe the salient fact is the last one,” said Darcy. “The question then is, do I respect Miss Elizabeth’s judgment enough to be associated with those who she respects? Do I like her enough to be willing to do whatever it takes to make her happy?”

“Those sound like good questions,” said Worsley. “Do you have answers?”

“Not at the moment,” replied Darcy. “I will have to think on it.”

Silence pervaded the room while Darcy pondered. “You never did explain why my attempted apology simply angered her further,” he said, eventually.

Worsley chuckled. “She didn’t believe you.

Elizabeth has it so firmly fixed in her mind that her older sister, Jane, is the pretty one that your exaggerated compliment felt false to her.

She thought you were making fun of her appearance, teasing her for being so arrogant as to take offence when you called her merely tolerable.

In short, because your compliment was so far above what she could believe it ended up cutting her to the quick. ”

“But I was entirely sincere,” said Darcy. “In that moment, with the fire of anger in her eyes, she was the most beautiful sight I have ever seen.”

Worsley held up his hands defensively. “I believe you, Darcy. I feel the same way at times when watching Mary’s changing expression as she ponders a new topic.”

Silence fell again. Then, Darcy said, “Suppose I decide that I do like Miss Elizabeth to such a degree that I would be willing to adjust my entire outlook on life. How do I apologize to her when she won’t even speak to me?”

Worsley raised his eyebrows. “If you are asking that question, I imagine you are more serious than you previously indicated.”

Darcy shrugged one shoulder. “Perhaps,” he said. “I have drawn no firm conclusion yet.”

Worsley nodded. “I am no expert on apologies, especially not to ladies. I am too young for that. The only thing that comes to mind is that if she will not hear you out, perhaps you could write a letter. If you did, I would ensure she gets it in a discreet way. I cannot promise whether she will read it, however.”

Darcy nodded in return. “I believe I will take you up on that offer, but I should take another day or two to be certain of my course. Thank you, Worsley, you have been of enormous help.”



“Not at all,” said Worsley. “I am merely looking after the happiness of my future sister, and by extension, my future wife.”

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Elizabeth had accepted that Mr. Darcy was cold and haughty, but she had never imagined he could be deliberately cruel...until the party at Lucas Lodge.

Under the guise of pretending to apologize, he had delivered the most hurtful thing anyone had ever said to her.

It wasn't what he said. On the surface, it sounded like a compliment.

No, it was the way he said it. With coldness in his eyes and an expressionless face, he gave her a patently false compliment, exaggerated to the point where it could in no way be mistaken for truth.

By doing so, he had merely emphasized how very unpleasant she was to look at.

She couldn't fathom why he did it or what he gained by such behavior. Maybe he was the kind of twisted soul who enjoyed inflicting pain. Elizabeth did not know, but she did know one thing. She would not allow herself to be subjected to any additional pain from that source.

Any time he attempted to approach her since, she had merely excused herself from the conversation.

She wished she could simply turn her back on him, cut him from her life and her list of acquaintances, but he was too far above her in society for such an action to be wise.

So, she contented herself with avoiding him while staying just barely within the

bounds of acceptable behavior.

She looked forward to the day he left the neighborhood and went back to wherever he came from.

Two weeks after that horrid night at Lucas Lodge, Mary's fiancé, Mr. Worsley, handed a letter to Elizabeth. When she asked who it was from, he would not say, only indicating that she should read it.

Elizabeth opened the letter and almost immediately realized it was from Mr. Darcy.

Her immediate instinct was to drop it like a hot poker, but she managed to contain that impulse.

She did, however, look at Mr. Worsley questioningly.

"Why are you delivering a letter from Mr. Darcy to me?" she asked.

"He can have nothing to say that I would wish to know. Besides, I do not understand why you are the messenger here."

"I am the messenger, because he is a friend of mine," said Mr. Worsley.

"An awkward, somewhat proud friend, but a friend nonetheless. I honestly think you should read the letter, as he has put a great deal of thought into it, nearly two days' worth.

However, I would not blame you either should you choose to throw it in the fire. I understand how much he has hurt you."

Mr. Worsley's face was genuinely concerned for her, and Elizabeth was, once again,

very pleased for her sister. She had found a very good man to marry. She looked over at Mary, who was sitting next to Mr. Worsley on the sofa. They were holding hands.

“Elizabeth, it would be good for you if you could find a way to forgive Mr. Darcy,” said Mary.

“Longstanding anger only festers in the soul, hurting you a great deal in the long run. Perhaps, Mr. Darcy’s letter will contain an explanation of his actions that will make it possible for you to let go of your anger. ”

Elizabeth was not nearly as religious as her younger sister, but she felt the truth of her statement. She did not want to be angry anymore, but given her own pain, she couldn’t find a way to not be angry.

She stared down at the offensive letter in her hand and debated with herself for some time. Taking a breath of courage, she opened it up and read it.

November 7, 1811

Dear Miss Elizabeth Bennet,

I take up my pen to attempt to tell you what I failed to convey in person.

I wish to tender my most abject apologies for many things.

The list of my sins, I have learned, is far longer than I knew when I originally attempted to apologize to you at Lucas Lodge, but at the very least, I want you to know that I am aware of my faults and errors and am most diligently attempting to correct my behavior.

The first of my errors was that I insulted you within your hearing, though not directly

to your face, at the assembly in October.

I will say that there is no excuse for such behavior, though I will also add that it is not particularly common behavior for me, so there will certainly be no repeat of such a reprehensible performance.

When I attempted to tender my apologies before, you asked me to be more specific, so I will.

First, I will say that it was the height of stupidity to excuse my actions based upon the fact that you were not currently dancing.

By that standard of behavior, only a few ladies would ever dance, and most men would simply be the followers of a few gentlemen who chose the fairest ladies.

Second, I will say that you are far from merely tolerable in looks.

I am certain you are aware of this, yourself, simply from looking in the mirror, but I will add to that knowledge and declare that, truly, you are one of the handsomest women of my acquaintance.

I do not lie or even exaggerate with this statement.

It is truly how I perceive you. When you are animated, which is almost any time you are talking, there is a light in your eyes that makes you remarkably beautiful.

I simply did not see it when I glanced at you at the assembly, though I did notice it later when I spied you on the dance floor.

I will only add that I am truly sorry to have done anything that has caused you pain, and that includes both the insult at the assembly and my botched apology at Lucas

Lodge.

I also would like to apologize for my haughty demeanor that I carried with me when I first came to this neighborhood.

I carried myself apart from everyone, thinking myself above my company.

I have since learned to appreciate many good qualities possessed by your neighbors, family, and friends and have re-learned something I knew well in childhood: the worth of a man is not measured by his wealth or status but by his actions.

I freely admit I was wrong to mistreat everyone so, and I apologize.

I have done my best to improve my behavior on this front.

I would very much like it if you and I could start over, since my admiration for you leads me to wish to know you better.

If you do not completely reject me, I propose to call on you tomorrow afternoon, in hopes that we may go riding together.

If you decide, however, that you would rather not have anything to do with me, you may send word through a servant or merely deny me access to your home tomorrow.

If you do so, I promise I will not bother you further.

I sincerely hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me, and I look forward to the possibility of seeing you tomorrow.

With affection and hope,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Elizabeth did not know what to make of such a letter. Every sentence, every word, ran counter to what she thought she knew of Mr. Darcy. Suspecting that Mr. Worsley knew at least some of what was in the letter, she asked him, "What does this mean?"

"I do not know exactly what is contained there, but I suspect it is mostly an apology," said Mr. Worsley. "Usually, an apology indicates that a person has recognized they have done something wrong, and they are attempting to either become better or make up for their error."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes in exasperation. "I know what an apology is," she said. "I mean that he seems to be a far different man in this letter than he did in person. Which is the real Mr. Darcy? Are his apologies sincere? What does he mean by it?"

"Miss Elizabeth," said Mr. Worsley, "it is entirely possible that both are the real Mr. Darcy. Do we not all make mistakes and behave in ways we later regret? As for whether his apologies are sincere, of that I can assure you with confidence."

"Yes," said Mary. "Have you not seen for yourself that he has been more sociable among our neighbors ever since the party at Lucas Lodge?"

Elizabeth did not wish to admit it, but she had noticed no such thing. She had been entirely focused on ignoring the man completely. Now that she was thinking about it, however, she realized that there had been a decrease in the number of people complaining about him.

"Then, what does he mean by it?" Elizabeth asked again.

"Are you referring to the letter as a whole or to his apologies?" asked Mr. Worsley.

“Well, I suppose his apologies are self-explanatory, but I do not understand why he would care enough to go to the effort of writing a letter. I certainly do not know why he would ask me to go riding with him tomorrow,” she said.

“He asked you to go riding?” asked Mary.

“Yes, he did,” said Elizabeth, “though he added that if I refused, he would leave me alone entirely so as not to bother me further.”

“And will you accept?” asked Mary.

“I don’t know,” exasperation making her raise her voice. “I still cannot tell what his motivations for such an invitation might be, and both of you seem to be avoiding the question.”

“His motivation is likely that he simply desires your company,” said Mr. Worsley in a placating tone. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“Yes, it is,” said Elizabeth. “He has never wanted my company before.”

Mary lifted one eyebrow at Elizabeth causing her to rephrase her sentence. “By that, I mean that he has never sought my company before.”

Mary looked at her disbelievingly again, and Elizabeth tried to remember her interactions with Mr. Darcy objectively.

She hung her head and said, “I suppose he did try to engage me in conversation a few times, but I declined. But that just raises the question as to why Mr. Darcy would deliberately seek out the company of a lady who patently and obviously does not like him.”



Mr. Worsley answered her question. "I cannot speak for Darcy on this point, but as a man of privilege I can say that I quickly get tired of ladies who pander to my every whim and every opinion." He looked at Mary affectionately and said, "It is entirely refreshing to speak to a lady who is capable of disagreeing with me on occasion."

"But we do not disagree only on occasion," said Elizabeth. "We disagree constantly. In fact, we have never agreed on anything."

"You do not know that, Elizabeth," said Mary. "You have not spoken to him for more than five minutes total. How can you possibly know if you will always disagree?"

Slowly, with each bit of explanation from Mary and Mr. Worsley, Elizabeth's wall of anger toward Mr. Darcy was crumbling.

She didn't like the feeling, but it seemed morally wrong to cling to her anger in the face of an honest apology and reasonable explanations.

With this last statement from Mary, the last of the wall tumbled.

Elizabeth sighed. "Very well," she said, "I will accept his apologies, but I cannot go riding with him tomorrow. I do not ride at all."

"Perhaps you could take the phaeton, instead," said Mary. "You do so enjoy driving it, after all."

"That sounds acceptable," said Elizabeth.

"Just make certain to take the stablemaster with you as chaperone," said Mary.

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The following day found Elizabeth full of nerves.

Mr. Darcy was essentially a stranger, but she would be spending an entire hour in his company as they drove through Mary's estate.

Even if there hadn't been an emotionally fraught history between them, she would have been nervous, but their shared painful past made everything so much worse.

At two in the afternoon, Mr. Darcy arrived at Braydon Hall asking for Elizabeth. He was shown into the drawing room where she waited, and he was clearly ill at ease. He did not know whether she would accept his invitation, since she had sent no reply to his letter.

Elizabeth immediately felt bad for the man, so she said, "There is no need to be quite so nervous, Mr. Darcy. I have not rejected your invitation. I have, however, made an alteration. I do not ride, you see, so I cannot go riding with you. However, I do have a sweet little phaeton that we can use to go driving instead. Will that do?"

Mr. Darcy's nervous face relaxed a bit. "That sounds delightful."

"It will take a couple of minutes for the phaeton to be ready," said Elizabeth. "Won't you sit down?"

Once he was seated, he said, "This is a pleasant home. Your sister has been rather fortunate."

Elizabeth did not know how to respond to that.

Her feelings about Mary's first marriage were mixed.

On the one hand, she thought it was entirely unreasonable for Papa to allow Mary to marry someone so much older than herself.

On the other hand, Mary had actually seemed happy in her marriage, and she had grown into a wonderful, independent lady who Elizabeth looked up to.

"I think, on the whole, I would agree with you," she said.

"Mr. Allen was a very good husband to Mary." Not wishing to continue the subject, she said, "By the way, how is your aunt? The last time I saw Lady Matlock was in April. I am sure Mary has heard from her, but she does not read me all her letters."

Darcy's face relaxed into a small smile, and Elizabeth found the expression made him quite handsome.

"Mrs. Allen asked me the same question two weeks ago, though she used it to remind me that Lady Matlock would be quite displeased by my behavior. As far as I know, she is doing well. She is currently at Matlock, though she will be returning to London after Christmas."

They chatted for a bit about London and a few mutual acquaintances until a footman came in to announce that Elizabeth's phaeton was ready.

They walked outside, and Elizabeth could see that the stablemaster was already mounted on a horse which was standing behind the phaeton, ready to chaperone them on their drive.

The footman produced the steps which she always used to climb into her vehicle.

Once she was seated, Mr. Darcy climbed up on the other side.

Without a word, Elizabeth lifted the reins and they were off.

There was silence between them, and Elizabeth began to wonder if she was going to be required to begin the conversation again.

“I wonder, Mr. Darcy,” she said, “why you were so insistent on this outing, yet you are not saying anything. Did you have something particular in mind when you requested it?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mr. Darcy turn to her, though she kept her gaze forward, focusing on guiding the horse.

“I cannot say that I had any particular subject in mind,” he answered, “but I did have a very important purpose to my request.”

“Oh? And what is that?” she asked.

“All I wanted was to be near you and hear you speak,” he said.

The simplicity of the statement combined with the earnestness in his voice to create one of the most compelling declarations Elizabeth had ever heard. She had heard attraction and love described in many ways, but none were so compact yet so all-encompassing as this one.

Against her will, she looked at the man in the carriage beside her.

His expression was still blank, much like it had been when he had offered his offensive compliment at Lucas Lodge, but there was something in his eyes that belied his expression, a gentle heat.

It reminded her of banked coals which provide some warmth but mostly gave the promise of a good blaze once they have been stirred up.

She did not know what to make of this man, so she resorted to flippancy.

“As loquacious as I can be, Mr. Darcy, even I cannot speak into a void for long,” she said. “If you wish for me to speak, you must do so as well.”

“Is there anything in particular you would like to talk of?” he asked.

“Tell me about Pemberley,” Elizabeth said. “I have heard snippets of how beautiful and grand it is, but I know nothing specific. Who better to get information from than the master himself?”

“That is a very broad subject,” he said. “Are you asking about the size or elegance of the house? Perhaps you want to know more about the landscape or the gardens. I could also go on at length about the tenants and servants.”

“Tell me what you love about it rather than what you think I want to hear,” said Elizabeth. “I think nothing could give me a more accurate picture than that.”

And he did.

He told her about one of his tenants who knew more about his wheat and his turnips than he did about his own children. Fortunately, the man was married to a very good woman who was excellent at taking care of the details in the man’s life as well as his children.

He told her about the time when the sheep from the home farm had all managed to get into the ornamental gardens on one side of the house. They had been nibbling on the hedges and flowers for a full day before they were found, and it took a year for all

the damage to grow back completely.

He told her how one of his maids had managed to attract the eye of a very prosperous farmer. Both her parents and his objected to the match, but they married anyway and have been happy for ten years or more.

Elizabeth learned more about Mr. Darcy in the next hour than she ever imagined possible.

It was clear, from his choice of what to discuss, that he was not particularly enamored with his wealth or status.

What mattered most to him, what made him happy, was his home, his family, and the people who lived on his land, whether they were servants, farmers, clergymen, or shop owners.

If Elizabeth had not been so blinded by his poor behavior, if she had not been so resistant to giving up her anger, she could have known this man weeks ago.

It was not all her fault. After all, Mr. Darcy had been hiding his true self behind a wall of dignity and pride, but it was Elizabeth who had refused to see when he dismantled that wall.

When they arrived back at the house, Elizabeth allowed Mr. Darcy to help her out of the phaeton. The footman still placed the stairs next to it, but Mr. Darcy offered a firm hand to help her steady herself as she descended.

His hand was warm, and his strength was clear based on how steady he was when she leaned into his hold for balance.

Elizabeth could see that the stable boy was bringing Mr. Darcy's horse around in

preparation for the gentleman's departure. Intending to say farewell, she looked up into Mr. Darcy's face and found something that took her breath away.

His expression had relaxed into a gentle smile, and the banked coals in his eyes were much warmer now. Elizabeth felt herself grow warm from such a heated gaze. It made her want to be closer to him, much like one moves closer to a fire to better feel its heat, but such a thing was impossible.

Mr. Darcy took her hand and bowed over it. For a moment, Elizabeth hoped he would kiss it, but he did not. He said, "I am most grateful for your time today, Miss Elizabeth. It was a delightful drive. May I call on you again in a day or two?"

"It was, indeed, a delightful drive, Mr. Darcy," she said. "I would be very happy to see you again whenever you choose to call."

"Thank you," he said in such a low voice that it was just above a whisper.

He then climbed on his horse and rode away.

Elizabeth surprised herself by watching as he left rather than immediately going inside. He had a good seat on his horse, and his firmly upright posture hinted at the fact that he was likely far stronger than he looked.

She marveled to herself how much her opinion of Mr. Darcy had changed in just one day, just one hour.

She shook herself out of her reverie by reminding herself that if her opinion had changed so much in a short time, it could always change more in the future.

It took time to get to know a person, but she fervently hoped Mr. Darcy would give her that time, for she truly wished to know him better.

When he was out of sight, only then did she turn and ascend the steps to the front door.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

Mary was pleased to see the smile that graced Elizabeth's face when she returned from her drive with Mr. Darcy. Apparently, her sister had finally forgiven him, and she was much happier for having done so.

Mary suspected that it would be very easy for Elizabeth to fall in love with him, though it would depend strongly on how adamant and consistent Mr. Darcy was in his courtship. That was something Mary could not predict, but she looked forward to seeing how it all played out.

Mary couldn't devote too much time to her sister's romance, however, for she had much to do and much to prepare for her own wedding.

Since Mr. Worsley was once again in Meryton, he took up at least a couple of hours of her time every day.

Not that she ever regretted the time spent.

In fact, she wished she could give him more of her time, but that would have to wait until after the wedding.

The time she spent with her betrothed was sometimes taken up with matters of business and money, but there was plenty of time to just chat. Despite their resolve to keep themselves chaperoned, there were plenty of stolen kisses and caresses as well.

One morning, a week after Mr. Worsley had returned to Meryton, he and Mary were sitting in the parlor while Elizabeth was out for a drive with Mr. Darcy. Mary had asked a maid to stay in the room with them, but she was not within easy hearing

range.

“I was thinking about what we will do with Braydon Hall after we get married,” he said.

“I thought we were planning to manage it from a distance, possibly lease out the house itself to keep it from falling into disrepair,” said Mary. “You said it would make a fine inheritance for a second son.”

“I did say that,” he said, “and I believe it, but as I’ve been thinking about it, I thought that might be unfair to you.

You have taken care of this home and these people for over two years, and I believe you should have the sole right to decide what happens here and who it goes to when you and I are gone. ”

“Why are we discussing this now?” asked Mary.

“It is already written in the marriage contract, which has already been filed with the courts, that Braydon Hall will go to our second son, just as your property in Eastbourne will go to our eldest until it is time for him to inherit your family’s title.

My investments will be used to furnish dowries for any daughters.

If we make changes now, we will have to completely rewrite the contract and re-file it. ”

“I just don’t think we explored our options thoroughly enough,” he said.

“For example, you could sell it and use the proceeds and your investments to more equitably provide for our children. After all, it is entirely possible we could have five

boys, just as your parents had five girls. We just don't know what will happen. ”

“It is also possible that we will not have any children at all,” said Mary quietly, voicing her own fears for the first time. “I was married to Mr. Allen for over a year, and I never fell pregnant.”

Saying her fear out loud seemed to give it power, and Mary felt tears spring to her eyes.

Mr. Allen had told her not to worry that she hadn't produced an heir, since she would be his heir, but Gregory's situation was entirely different.

No one but the son of his lawful wife could inherit his title, and if she did not produce that son, she had no idea what would happen to Glyndebourne.

Gregory gathered her into his arms to comfort her, despite the presence of the maid.

“Mary,” he said, “I will not trifle with your intelligence by saying that it does not matter whether you produce children or not. It does matter, and we both know it. However, none of us can predict what life will bring, nor can we tell why you didn't have children with Mr. Allen.

There are many ladies who go a few years before falling pregnant, and there are others who become so right away.

“What we can do is promise each other that we will support each other no matter what happens. Together, with God, we can always find a way forward. That is what marriage is always about.”

Being in Gregory's arms was quickly becoming Mary's favorite place to be. With his strength surrounding her and his scent filling her lungs, she felt truly at home, safe, at

peace.

He was correct. They could not predict the future. Thinking that gave Mary an idea.

She pulled herself out of his arms and said, “Since we cannot know what will happen, what if we left Braydon Hall unassigned in the marriage contract. Then we can decide together what should be done once we have more information about what needs to be done, once we know how many children we have and what their needs will be.”

“You are brilliant,” Gregory said. “It sounds like a perfect plan. I’m surprised I didn’t think of it myself.” He grinned to show he was teasing. “I assume that means you do not wish to sell Braydon Hall.”

“No,” she said. “I would be happy to lease out the house, but I would like to retain control of the estate. I will have to travel here occasionally to check on things, but I don’t need this entire house just to visit for a few weeks a year.

I can stay with my parents or just rent a house in Meryton like you are doing now. ”

“We,” he said. “Not just you, but we both will need to visit Braydon Hall occasionally. I do not like the idea of being separated from you even for just a couple of weeks. Where you go, I will go. I hope the reverse also holds true.”

“Of course,” said Mary. “I will always be happy to travel with you wherever you need to go. Though I hope we are not a particularly flighty couple. I do like to have roots and a steady home.”

“As do I,” said Gregory. His voice had deepened in that way he had when he was feeling particularly amorous. “It is one of hundreds of reasons why we make such an excellent couple.”

Mary squeezed his hand, but the presence of the maid made her uncomfortable expressing her feelings in any more personal way.

“I love you, Gregory,” she whispered.

“I love you, Mary,” he said softly, and he kissed her cheek.

A few more weeks passed by in a whirlwind of activity.

Elizabeth received a visit from Mr. Darcy almost daily, and it became quite clear to Mary that Elizabeth’s heart belonged to Mr. Darcy should he choose to claim it.

In fact, Mary was beginning to worry that, if he decided against marrying Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy could hurt her very badly.

Mr. Bingley had clearly taken note of Mr. Darcy’s more purposeful courtship, and he began visiting Jane at Longbourn to specifically call on her.

He took her for walks and rides when he could, but Mrs. Bennet did not give Jane quite as much freedom as Mary gave to Elizabeth.

Nevertheless, Mr. Bingley’s attentions were obvious enough that the entire neighborhood expected him to propose very soon.

Mr. Bingley, with encouragement from Mrs. Bennet and Lydia, had decided to throw a ball toward the end of November as a way of thanking his neighbors for welcoming him so readily.

The week before the ball, there was little conversation about anything else, except between Mary and Gregory.

Neither of them cared very much about it one way or the other.

They were much more focused on their wedding, which was to be held a week later.

Mary was looking forward to being able to dance with Gregory, but it was not something she was overly excited about.

After all, they would have a lifetime together beginning just a week after the ball.

What Mary was interested in was Elizabeth's excitement as she added a new ribbon to her dress and purchased fresh flowers for her hair.

Elizabeth had never looked forward to a ball so much in her life, and the reason for it was simple. She was head over ears in love with Mr. Darcy.

The truth was startling and shocking to admit, especially after such a rocky start, but it was nonetheless true.

After only a few times in his sole company, Elizabeth realized that his natural seriousness made him a relaxing presence.

She didn't have to be perfectly witty Elizabeth, though he enjoyed her jokes.

She could be herself, silent if she wished to be or talkative if she had something to say.

His steadiness of character quickly became apparent, and Elizabeth found herself growing in her trust in his judgment.

She didn't always believe everything he said implicitly, but the few times she had asked what he thought on a particular topic, his insight had given her a perspective

she would not have thought of on her own, showing her that he thought deeply on many subjects.

Her admiration of his intelligence, steadiness, and handsome features were all part of what she loved about him, but Elizabeth had to admit that the fact that he so clearly adored her added weight to her feelings.

He would often drop compliments into their conversation as if they were facts, giving her no choice but to believe he meant them.

He also deliberately took every possible opportunity to hold her hand.

Occasionally, Elizabeth had caught the gentleman simply looking at her with the slightest of smiles on his face, his mind clearly contemplating something pleasant about her.

With all this, it would be miraculous if Elizabeth didn't love him.

Two days before the ball, Mr. Darcy braved the rainy weather just to sit and talk with her for a half hour in Mary's front parlor.

While he was there, he asked Elizabeth for both the first dance and the supper dance at the Netherfield ball.

Of course, she readily agreed, but she was beginning to hope that he would soon ask a much more important question.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

The day of the ball dawned without a cloud in the sky, which was a true relief after four straight days of rain. Elizabeth took great care that evening to make herself look as pretty as she knew how. She also noticed that Mary had taken pains to look her best as well.

As the two sisters entered the ballroom at Netherfield, Elizabeth immediately looked around for Mr. Darcy, but she did not see him.

Instead, Mr. Worsley approached them. He had clearly been watching for Mary, and Elizabeth was not surprised when the two of them headed off to the side to talk together.

Elizabeth mingled amongst the growing crowd. She found her good friend, Charlotte Lucas, and chatted with her for a bit. Still, Mr. Darcy did not show his face. Elizabeth was beginning to worry that he would miss their dance.

Just as the beginning of the music signaled the guests to assemble for the first set of the evening, Mr. Darcy finally arrived by her side.

“I apologize for the delay,” he said. “I found I was quite a bit more nervous than usual, which had the effect of causing delay in my preparations.”

Elizabeth could well imagine that if she were as nervous as he seemed, she might have trouble getting herself ready for the evening, so that was understandable. What was incomprehensible was why he would be so nervous in the first place.

“You were nervous, Mr. Darcy?” she asked.



“Yes,” he said. “I wanted to make a good impression on you, so I kept changing my mind as to what to wear. In the end I only succeeded in making myself late, which is far worse than getting the color of my waistcoat wrong.”

Elizabeth laughed lightly. “No need to worry. Your waistcoat is perfectly lovely, and you are not late. At least, you are not late as long as we join the dancers now.”

In answer, Mr. Darcy held out his arm to lead her to their place in the dance.

The conversation flowed easily and smoothly throughout their dance, much like all the other conversations they had in the last two weeks. This time, there was a charged undercurrent to their interaction, similar to the feeling one gets when a strong thunderstorm is approaching.

When they grasped each other’s hands as part of the dance, their touch always lingered a beat or two beyond what was expected. Their gazes lingered on each other’s faces. Their feet felt as though they were unwilling to separate them even when the moves of the dance called for it.

Elizabeth struggled against a strong urge to simply leap into his arms and kiss him. There was an expression on Mr. Darcy’s face and a heat in his eyes that suggested to Elizabeth that he might be struggling against the very same temptation.

As they danced, the rest of the world faded away. Elizabeth only had attention for the man in front of her, and she cared not who was next to her or what they were talking about with their dance partner.

Given how strong their attraction to each other was, Elizabeth expected Mr. Darcy to linger by her side even after their dance was over. He did not. He bowed over her hand and thanked her for the dance, but then he departed from her side and disappeared among the guests.

Suddenly, the room felt much colder, though she knew that, in fact, it was quite warm. With Mr. Darcy's departure, Elizabeth's mind was inundated with doubt as to when, or if, he would ever propose.

She was not alone with her thoughts for long. A local gentleman approached to request her next dance, and she accepted, grateful for the distraction from her own sentimental thoughts.

The first half of the evening passed by in a swirl of dancing and chatting with friends. Elizabeth danced every dance, and she was never alone for more than half a minute. All around her, the people she had known all her life were having a truly joyful evening.

The supper dance finally arrived, and with it so did Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth had been aware of his presence throughout the evening.

Her eye had often been drawn to his figure against her will.

He, however, seemed to avoid meeting her gaze, almost as if he was distancing himself from her.

Given his behavior, she half expected him to conveniently "forget" his request for her supper dance.

He did not forget. When it was time to line up for it, he was standing in front of her, once again giving her his undivided attention.

Instead of offering his arm to lead her to the dance floor, he said, "I have something important to discuss with you. I wonder if, instead of our dance, you would accompany me into the hall."

Anxiety shot through her at this request. She hoped. She feared. She wondered if this would be the moment he proposed. At the same time, she had always been told to never leave the ballroom with a gentleman.

Elizabeth knew she could not really deny Mr. Darcy anything. Even if it was imprudent or incautious, she agreed to go with him.

The two of them exited the ballroom by the main doors.

They found themselves in the grand foyer of the house where a few people were scattered to temporarily escape the heat of the ballroom.

Mr. Darcy led Elizabeth further down the hallway where it would be much harder for them to be seen or overheard. Then he turned to face her.

“Elizabeth, I must tell you that I have grown quite attached to you in the weeks since I met you. Your light and laughter brighten my heart, and your beauty is unmatched which brings me further joy every time I see you. Additionally, the way you demand respect and won’t accept anything less only improves my opinion of you.

“You have reminded me of standards of behavior that were taught to me as a child, but which arrogance had pushed aside in recent years.

You have brought me low, and in doing so have made me a far better man, and because of you I am determined to continue to strive to be the kind of man my parents wanted me to be and the kind of man you deserve.

“You must know that I love you, Elizabeth. Will you marry me?”

As Mr. Darcy gave her this speech, which he had clearly prepared and memorized, Elizabeth watched his face and eyes.

He was full of nervousness, clearly uncertain what her answer would be.

Yet, despite his uncertainty, he had gathered his courage to ask anyway.

Despite the fact that he had memorized his speech, he clearly meant every word.

“Mr. Darcy,” she said. “It has been some time since I have forgiven you. I believe that one of the biggest reasons your insults hurt me as much as they did was because I have been attracted to you from the beginning. Once the air was cleared between us, it did not take long for that attraction to deepen. I love you, Mr. Darcy. My heart is yours. Yes, I will marry you.”

Relief and joy suffused his face in equal measure, but Elizabeth did not see them for long.

His mouth crashed into hers for her first kiss, and it was like nothing Elizabeth had ever imagined.

At first, all she could sense was his need for her, but his kiss quickly gentled into something more caressing, more tender and caring.

It lasted far longer than either of them had planned, and they only parted when a stern, male voice said, “Elizabeth.”

Disentangling herself from Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth turned to see her father, his face stern. It was very unlike the relaxed humor that was usually found there.

Elizabeth opened her mouth to explain, but Mr. Darcy forestalled her. “Mr. Bennet, I would like to ask your permission to marry Elizabeth.”

“Because you have compromised her?” asked Papa.

“Quite the opposite,” said Mr. Darcy. “I kissed her only after she agreed to marry me.”

Papa’s firm gaze moved from Mr. Darcy to Elizabeth. “Is this true?” he asked her.

“Yes it is,” she said.

Papa sighed deeply. “I was hoping that you would be coming home after Mary’s wedding to relieve the inevitable silliness that will swamp the house once Jane is married, but if you are to be married as well, I shall have to find another way to stem the tide.

” He looked genuinely sad when he said, “You have my permission, of course. I cannot deny something that clearly makes my Lizzy so happy.”

Elizabeth barely heard her father give his permission. Her mind was stuck on something else he said. “Jane is getting married?” she asked.

Papa nodded. “Bingley asked me less than an hour ago. He at least had the foresight to ask me for some time alone with her.” He eyed Mr. Darcy with disfavor.

Mr. Darcy, however, ignored the implied criticism. “Would it be possible to announce the engagement at supper?”

Papa waved the request away as if it was of little consequence. “Of course, of course. I will be announcing Jane’s engagement as well.”

By the time the three of them returned to the ballroom, the supper dance was half over. Instead of joining them, Mr. Darcy asked Elizabeth for her last set which she gladly gave him. They spent the remaining time before supper talking about the past, the present, and the future.

After the announcement of their engagement was made at supper, along with that of Jane and Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy did not have a moment alone due to the plethora of congratulations that came their way, not to mention the many queries they received as to how their romance had progressed.

The final dance of the evening was a delightful reprieve for them both. Once again, they could each give their partner their undivided attention. Once again, they could feel the delightful tension between them they had felt during the first dance, that tried to pull them together.

As Elizabeth and Mary departed from the ball, Mr. Darcy gently kissed Elizabeth's hand and promised to call on her as soon as possible.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

The day of Mary's second wedding dawned bright and clear but cold. She could feel how very cold her room was before even getting out of bed, so she stayed snuggled under her blankets for much longer than usual, waiting for the recently lit fire to warm the room.

As she lay there, her mind pondered her confused and mixed feelings.

There was no doubt in her mind that she loved Gregory very much, that he loved her, and they made a good match.

Each of them had unique knowledge, strengths, and weaknesses which seemed to complement the other's.

In the last two months, they had both learned to lean on each other, and in doing so they had become much stronger together.

There was also no doubt that Mr. Allen approved of Mary's choice as he looked down on her from heaven. He had told her with his own mouth to marry again after he was gone. He had told her to seek out a man she could love and who she deemed worthy. Gregory was clearly such a man.

Yet, even with such assurances, Mary felt odd.

Memories of her first wedding intruded in her musings.

She remembered her insecurity and the unstable feeling of not knowing what the future held for her.

She remembered making her vows to her husband before God, fully intending to do everything in her power to uphold them.

She also remembered that she had failed to fulfill the vow she had made to love Mr. Allen.

This wedding day was so very different, yet in many ways it was the same.

The vows would be the same, and her intention to fulfill them would be the same.

This time, however, she was much more certain.

She knew she would be able to honor all her vows.

She knew with confidence that came from experience that she would make a good wife.

She was even fairly certain that, should God bless them with children, she would be a good mother.

The guilt Mary felt over failing her first husband would likely never fade.

He had married her specifically to produce an heir, and she had failed, just like she had failed to love him the way he deserved.

The dismay that surfaced whenever she contemplated her failure made itself quite apparent for a few brief minutes.

It was finally broken up when Mary remembered Gregory's assurance that whatever life threw at them, they would handle it together.



This was so different from the way Mr. Allen treated her.

He had always been the one with power, the one to make the decisions, and the one who dealt with problems. For sixteen-year-old Mary, barely out of the schoolroom, he had been good for her.

For eighteen-year-old Mary, the woman who had managed all her property on her own for over a year, such control would likely have chafed.

Gregory did not even attempt such a thing.

Every aspect of their future lives had been discussed together.

When they disagreed, they discussed the situation until they could come to some sort of agreement.

Fortunately, since they shared the same set of guiding principles and priorities none of the disagreements had been of particular importance.

Mr. Allen had been a good husband, Mary thought to herself, but Gregory would be a great husband and a very good man.

With happiness glowing in her heart at the thought of her future with the man she truly adored, Mary finally climbed out of bed.

A couple of hours later, Mary was standing in her best dress looking at Gregory and vowing to love, honor, and obey him as long as they both lived. When he repeated his vows to her, a thrill went through her.

Once their vows were made and the vicar had pronounced them husband and wife, Mary felt complete in a way she had never felt before. With Gregory beside her and

God supporting her, there was no righteous deed that was impossible.

The wedding breakfast was held at Braydon Hall, and all of Mary's family and friends were there. Gregory's parents had been unable to travel so far, but she would have plenty of time for them at a later date.

Mary was careful to speak to each guest, accepting congratulations and making her farewells to each of them. She would not be returning to Hertfordshire until next summer at the earliest.

When the breakfast was approaching its end, Mary gave orders for the leftovers to be delivered to those who were in need of food among her tenants. Gregory called for the carriage, with Mary's trunks loaded onto the back, to be brought around.

Amid many calls of congratulations, the two of them climbed into the carriage and were off.

They would be spending a week in London at Gregory's home, though they would be leaving the knocker down while they were there so that they were not disturbed.

Then they would make their way to Eastbourne to settle into their new lives together.

They had discussed a longer wedding journey, but neither of them was particularly fond of travel or excessive amounts of leisure.

Once they were on their way, Mary turned to her new husband. She was unexpectedly shy and did not know what to say or do. Certainly, she knew what it was that married people did. She also knew what she wanted to do, but not all of her desires were possible in a moving carriage.

As Gregory returned her gaze, he too was silent. Then he suddenly chuckled. "We are

quite a pair, are we not? We've been fighting so hard against temptation for two months that now that everything is perfectly legal and moral, neither of us knows what to do."

"It isn't that I don't know what to do," said Mary. "It is more that I do not wish to get carried away in a moving carriage."

Gregory's eyes heated, but Mary had little time to contemplate them. Within moments, his mouth was on hers in a searing kiss, which she returned with fervor.

There is no telling how long it lasted. In some ways, time had very little meaning for them. When they did part, however, Mary said, "Thank you, Gregory. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for waiting for me. Thank you for everything."

Gregory traced a finger across her cheek and said, "You were worth waiting for. The few months I spent waiting for you are far outweighed by the many years we will have together in the future. Together, always."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:28 am*

The day after the Netherfield ball, Elizabeth moved back home to Longbourn to prepare for her own wedding. She also wished to spend as much time with her father as possible to soften the blow of him losing two more daughters to marriage.

Jane and Elizabeth shared a wedding date on December twenty-eighth. Then, each of them went their separate ways. Jane and Mr. Bingley spent a month in Brighton, and Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy spent a month touring the lakes.

After their wedding journey, the Bingleys stayed in London for several months, giving Jane an opportunity to meet all of Mr. Bingley's friends.

When they returned to Netherfield, they both quickly realized that living so close to Mrs. Bennet was simply asking for her to interfere in their lives on an almost daily basis.

Even Mr. Bingley's congeniality and Jane's gentle kindness couldn't tolerate such a situation for long.

The following fall, they moved back to London.

From there, they spent some time looking for land in the country so Mr. Bingley could finally fulfill his father's wish, to elevate their family to the status of landed gentry.

They were fortunate enough to find an estate only thirty miles from Pemberley, making it possible for Jane and Elizabeth to resume the closeness they had always shared as sisters.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy also went to London that winter, but only for a couple of months. They then returned to Pemberley, since spring was the best time to get to know that great estate.

It took some time for Elizabeth to become familiar with all of her new responsibilities.

She had been raised as the daughter of a gentleman, so she knew most of them, but being married to a man of Mr. Darcy's status and wealth required much more work than she had anticipated.

Elizabeth was not afraid of work, however, and it was something to fill her days.

Both Jane and Elizabeth were blessed with several children each, and the two sets of cousins grew up knowing each other well. The journey between the two estates was easily accomplished in half a day, so there were frequent and extensive visits between them.

A few months after the three weddings, Lydia shocked every person within five miles of Meryton by running off with one of the officers of the militia, a man by the name of Mr. Wickham.

The young man had joined the militia shortly before the Netherfield ball, but he had not garnered much attention from Jane, Elizabeth, or Mary, since they each were focused on the gentlemen who were courting them.

The rest of the neighborhood, however, was quickly enamored of the young man's cheerful nature and pleasing good looks. He easily fit in with the other officers and gained a reputation as a good friend to them all. He also gained the attention of every single lady in the neighborhood.

Lydia, the youngest Bennet, felt herself to be the luckiest girl in the world when Mr.

Wickham's affections were turned toward her in the spring of 1812.

It did not take him long to convince the young lady that she was violently in love with the man, nor did it take much to convince her to elope with him, since she thought that to be the most romantic thing in the world.

Mr. Wickham had no trouble convincing the youngest Bennet sister to relinquish her virtue, but it quickly came to light that he had no intention of marrying her unless Mr. Darcy, Mr. Binley, and Lord Pendleton agreed to furnish her with a decent dowry.

Mr. Bingley purchased a commission for him in the army, and Gregory and Mr. Darcy each furnished five thousand pounds, though the money would be settled on Mrs. Wickham, and it could only be collected by her.

Lydia cared little for how it all came about. She was simply overjoyed to finally be married and to such a handsome and charming young man.

Once the glow of romance wore off, however, Lydia found that she had married a scoundrel. She was forced to learn how to manage their money, and she frequently hid a portion of it so he would not gamble away the money they needed for food, coal, or servants.

Kitty fared much better than her younger sister.

With Lydia gone, she was the recipient of much more attention from their mother, and since she was the only daughter left at home, she was also treated with more respect from her father.

Her petulance and vanity smoothed out, and she became a fairly well-behaved young lady.

In the winter of 1813, Mary was finally able to convince Mr. Bennet to let Kitty come

stay with her when she and Mr. Worsley went to London. The two sisters had a gloriously fun time shopping for an entirely new wardrobe for Kitty and visiting every place of interest in the city.

Mary's triumph and joy in Kitty's company did not last long, however.

Within two months of Kitty's arrival in London, she had caught the attention of a friend of Mr. Bingley's, a young landlord who owned quite a bit of property in London which he rented out.

His name was Mr. Branton. After a mere month of courtship, the young man proposed, and two months later, the last of the Bennet sisters was married.

It took three years before Mary and Gregory had any children, but they were both delighted when their son was finally born. Having an heir put them somewhat at ease, though they both earnestly wished for more children.

Their additional desires, however, were not to be granted. After ten more years with no additional children, it became obvious to the couple that they would simply have to be content with their one son.

In due time, Gregory eventually became Marquess Glyndebourne. When he did, their son took over managing the property in Eastbourne. By that time, the little coastal town had grown three-fold and had become a bustling holiday destination for a wide variety of people.

Frustrated at not having any daughters to leave her own wealth to, Mary made a new will.

When she died, Braydon Hall was to be sold, and the proceeds were to be combined with her investments and then divided equally among her seven nieces.

Since she lived a long and happy life, she eventually extended it to include her great-nieces and a few nephews and great-nephews as well.

By the time this unhappy event came about, her wealth had grown to such an amount that, even when divided among so many, it still furnished a fortune of more than twenty thousand pounds to each of them.

Mary and Gregory left behind them a legacy of kindness and wise charity.

The successful management of Eastbourne provided many people opportunity for employment and a good life.

Mary was always aware of anyone in her little town who struggled to make ends meet or who went through a rough patch in life.

She didn't always solve everything by simply giving them food or money.

Instead, she looked for more permanent solutions, such as setting them up in a business or trade or simply finding them some kind of basic employment.

She established a free school in the little town that was available to all children and even some adults, so anyone who was willing to put in the work could learn to read, write, and do basic math.

She was so beloved among the students that, against her protestations, the school came to be known as Lady Mary's School.

Those who knew Lord and Lady Pendleton only in London would hardly recognize them at home in Eastbourne. Neither of them cared a great deal for the fanciest dress, and they seldom relied on their dignity as peers to accomplish anything.

It took years for Mary to finally understand why Mr. Allen had been so happy, so



peaceful, in his final days, but she eventually realized what he had been trying to convey.

He had been a selfish being all his life, mainly concerned with his own success and happiness.

When he finally learned to love and care for someone else's happiness, it had filled him with purpose and pleasure that was like nothing he had ever known.

Mary's life was so full of the joy of loving others that it barely registered in her mind that there could be any other state of existence.

As she experienced life, however, and met all kinds of people, she realized the great gift she had been given.

Not only was she blessed with a husband she could love and respect, but he loved and respected her in turn.

Additionally, she was surrounded by those who needed her love in one way or another, and she had the means to help them live happier more fulfilling lives.

Mary and Gregory lived long and happy lives together, always leaning on each other in difficult times. Though Mary was the soul of propriety at most times, the entire town of Eastbourne knew that she often let her standards of behavior slip when she was in the presence of her beloved husband.

For decades, the town's favorite type of gossip was telling each other the various places where Lord and Lady Pendleton had been caught kissing in public.

The End