



THE QUEEN OF ROSINGS PARK
BOOK 3



A LESS
AGREEABLE
MAN

MARIA GRACE



A Less
Agreeable
Man

Out takes



Maria Grace



White Soup Press

Published by: White Soup Press

A Less Agreeable Man—Out takes

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Dedication

For my readers who have encouraged me so much!



Introduction

If a book is well written, I always find it too short
— *Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility*



It is a sad fact of author life that we must ‘kill our darlings.’ That is we must edit our words and cut our scenes that we otherwise are very fond of to serve the greater purpose of our story.

But in this wonderful internet age, these scenes can live on in blogs, websites and through special offerings like this one.

Since so many of you have expressed a desire to keep these deleted scenes with the full text of *A Less Agreeable Man* I thought I’d collect them here and offer them free to my newsletter subscribers.

In these scenes you’ll find a number of substantial changes from the original draft and scenes cut for a variety of reasons. While I hate to cut material, I am

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convinced the final product was made better for the edits.

These cut scenes were proof read, but did not go through the final edits, so its possible there may be a few typose here. Nonetheless, I hope you enjoy the cut tidbits.

Many Blessings!

Maria Grace

Discarded Prologue Chapter 1

Late in the morning, well past the time Mary preferred to trade her old linen morning dress for a proper day dress—drab and plain, suitable for her station—she clutched Charlotte’s upper arm as they painstakingly trekked down the parsonage stairs.

Mary’s elbow dragged along the faded, hard-to-describe wallpaper—really just what color was that? A murky red-yellow-brown sort of affair with an odd arrangement of stripes that simply looked muddy and dirty—just above the too-low railing, while her opposite shoulder pressed hard against Charlotte’s. A vague sour milk scent hung in the air—the young maid had let the cream pitcher tumble off a tray and seep into the stair carpet two days ago. Charlotte wrinkled her nose and muttered under her breath—a hint that Mary should follow up with the housekeeper

to remedy the situation. They replayed this exercise several times a day, now that Charlotte's belly had grown so big she could not see her feet.

Mr. Collins insisted that the staircase was neither too shallow nor too deep, exactly proper for a parsonage of this size.

But he was wrong.

The stairs were cheaply made, irregular in their height and depth, entirely unsuitable for anyone, servant or master. And they groaned, each stair in a slightly different voice with every step taken. Though it had been more or less amusing in the first month of Mary's stay with the Collinses, Charlotte's increase had made a death trap. One Mr. Collins seemed entirely unable—or unwilling—to recognize.

"Just three more. Hold the rail and my arm, and we shall be down in a moment." Mary turned sideways and gathered her skirts out of the way to allow Charlotte a bit more room to maneuver.

"I hate to be such a bother." Charlotte panted heavily.

"You are no bother. It is these stairs that are a bother."

Charlotte wheezed and pressed a hand to her chest. "Pray do not say that in Mr. Collins' hearing."

"Forgive me, but I do not see why that should unsettle him so. It is not as though I am criticizing them to Lady Catherine, or that she would even be able to respond to such comments if I did. Please, hold the railing. You cannot afford a fall."

"I know it seems a bit untoward, but he is still very protective of her, perhaps even more so now in her current state." Charlotte used that tone she always used when she was trying to defend Collins' behavior.

How tiresome it had become.

They reached the ground floor and the ribbon-back wooden arm chair with badly embroidered, faded cushions kept at the base of the stairs. Its sole purpose was to catch Charlotte, enabling her to catch her breath.

Catching her breath was taking longer and longer now. Something was ... odd with this pregnancy. Not wrong per se, but odd. It was normal for a woman to grow heavy and awkward and tire easily. But, usually it took longer to get to this stage. Charlotte seemed to be progressing very quickly.

She needed to see a midwife soon, and somehow Mary had to convince her if it.

Charlotte pushed to her feet and waddled the few yards to the morning room, Mary in her wake. Mr. Collins deemed the morning room also perfectly adequate for his station in life. Assuming of course his station included drafty windows and a fire that smoked; then, he was perfectly right.

The small room barely contained the well-used round breakfast table surrounded by six wooden dining chairs. Two of the chairs were mismatched to the rest—something Mr. Collins was quick to ignore. Large windows faced west, catching none of the morning light and warmth, very inconvenient for sewing or anything else that wanted good light. The smoky fire left the blue pale paper hangings and the curtains sooty and grey. No doubt the maid tried to keep it clean, but it was well past the time it should have all been redone.

That would likely never happen. According to Mr. Michaels, Rosings steward, the estate did not have the funds to manage many necessary repairs, much less

unnecessary ones.

The newspaper was gone from the table. Mr. Collins must have already come and gone.

That was not a bad thing.

Charlotte pulled out a chair.

“Would you not be more comfortable using this one? The arms make it much easier for you to rise.” Mary pulled out one of the mismatched chairs and beckoned Charlotte toward it.

“You are right. It is just hard for me to accustom myself to this helplessness.” Charlotte lowered herself into the seat, more of a controlled fall than actually sitting.

“Shall I get the footstool?”

“I would like to say no, but my ankles are so swollen today...”

Mary pulled the plain little wooden stool out from its unobtrusive spot under the table and positioned it under Charlotte’s feet.

“I hate asking so much of you.” Charlotte covered her eyes with her hand adding just enough dramatic flourish to emphasize her suffering.

“Is that not why I am here? I seem to recall that is what we told Mama and Papa—that I would stay to help you during your confinement.” Mary forced another smile, at least the third for the morning.

Charlotte uncovered one eye. “I recall another conversation. Mr. Michaels did not wish you to leave Kent for Derbyshire. He desired to keep you close—”

“And away from Papa.” Mary swallowed hard and retreated toward the window. Reminders of her family and the notion that Charlotte was doing her a favor by allowing her to stay were certainly not what she needed right now. Especially when the latter was

true—to a degree.

Mary pulled the dingy, sheer curtain aside. She really needed to speak to the maid—lazy thing left streaks the last time she washed it. No doubt Charlotte noticed it too, but lacked the energy to pursue it with her staff.

“Do you miss them? You mother and your sisters?”

Mary leaned her head against the dusty white window frame. “Sometimes. But it was not as if I was of any great use to any of them. I am happy to be where I know that I am helpful.” But they did not need to talk about that.

“I truly am glad you are here. I do not know how I would manage without you.”

“Speaking of help...”

Charlotte clutched her face in her hands. “Pray, Mary, do not go on about a midwife. Not again, I am too weary.”

Mary turned and half sat on the window sill. “You have gone far too long without making arrangements with a midwife.”

“What are you worried about?” She stroked her belly, wincing. The baby was probably kicking hard.

“I have watched my mother through a number of her confinements. I have seen how it is supposed to progress.”

“And this is not proper?”

“Not so much that, as very fast. You are already as large as Mama when she delivered, and I know it is not the proper time for it.” Mary held her breath. This was not the first time she had broached the subject, and the previous times had not gone well.

Charlotte stared at her belly and nodded. “I am

not surprised you noticed. It seems to be a trait amongst your family. You are all so observant. But you are right. I have been suspecting ... suspecting ...”

“What? What have you not told me?” Mary clenched one hand in a fist behind her back.

“I did not wish to sound ... I do not know ... silly perhaps. But here, give me your hands.” Charlotte waved Mary and took her hands, placing them on either side of her belly. “Now just wait a moment, be still.”

Mary held her breath and waited. Underneath each hand, a hard kick landed. “My gracious, the baby is quite strong. Oh!” Another flutter of movement under her hands.

“I ... I think there is more than one. Feel here.” Charlotte moved Mary’s hands. “See here, there are two bulges. I think there are two babies.”

Mary pulled a chair close and fell into it. “Twins?” A cold chill ran down her spine.

“I am so afraid.” Charlotte pressed her fist to her mouth. “What am I to do?”

“There is little that can be done. We will pray most heartily for you to be safely delivered. Until then, you must see a midwife. If there is anything that can be done to increase the chances of a safe delivery, then we must begin immediately.”

“You know how I feel about midwives.”

“You have told me how you feel about the incompetent woman who attended your mother. I understand your fears. I have never told you about the medical atrocities we have been exposed to, and I will not. Trust me though, it is enough to put me off all doctors, surgeons and apothecaries. Still though,

just as you cannot judge all of the Bennet girls by knowing Lydia, you cannot dismiss all midwives because some are awful. I know there are excellent ones—”

“How do you know?” Charlotte blotted her eyes with her sleeve.

“I know because I talk to people, or rather, people talk to me. I do not know why, perhaps it is because I am quiet and they believe I am listening, but people tell me all manner of things that I am not necessarily interested in hearing. I have heard a number of local ladies lauding a Mrs. Mariah Grant. They have said she has made a world of difference in their lying in.”

“I have heard nothing of the sort.” Charlotte ducked her head and turned aside.

“Trust me please. Allow me to invite some of the ladies whom she has attended to call. You might speak to them directly and hear what they have to say. It seems as though ladies like nothing more than to share the stories of their births with others. If there was something wrong, I assure you they will not hold back. You know that they will tell you the truth of the matter.”

Charlotte chuckled. “My mother was certainly apt to share her tales. I was not supposed to have heard them, of course. They are not fit for a maiden’s ears. But she and her friends did get so loud in the parlor. Especially after a liberal dose of French cream in their tea.”

Afternoon brandy increased women’s chatter in Mama’s parlor as well.

“No doubt. My mother was similarly liberal in voicing her experiences. So then, you will allow me to do this for you?”

Charlotte peeked over her shoulder. "Yes, I suppose we must."

"I will do everything in my power to assist you, you know that." Mary tucked a stray curl under the edge of Charlotte's mobcap.

Charlotte grasped her hand. "You are indeed a good friend, if a very stubborn one. I am thankful that you are here."

The housekeeper entered, a short, thick woman of plain features and little personality, bearing a silver tea tray. "The post just come, madam. Letters, for Miss Bennet."

Mary took the letters. "One from Lizzy. Oh, and this is from Lydia, see the decoration she puts around the direction? Her letters have become so pretty these days, I think they need framing rather than reading."

"Would it be too forward to ask you to read from them to me? I would so dearly like to know how they are going. It is still so hard to believe they are both in Derbyshire and that Lizzy has married Lady Catherine's nephew."

"Lizzy's first, then?" Mary broke the seal on the letter and scanned it for personal bits. Lizzy was usually very good about marking anything that should not be read aloud. Sometimes nearly all her letter was underlined. No doubt she understood Charlotte would be curious.

Charlotte leaned back in the chair and sipped her tea, one hand over her belly.

"Lizzy writes that Lydia is married now. Married!" Mary stared at the words gaping.

"Do not keep me in suspense, tell me more!"

"She is Mrs. Amberson, now. The couple will take residence in Derby soon. It seems Miss Darcy is quite

taken with him as a piano teacher and will be studying under him once they are established.”

“I imagine that is a very good thing for Miss Darcy. She was such a shy girl when she visited here last. It is good to hear she is leaving her melancholy behind.”

“You do not have to be so politic with me, Charlotte. I know full well what you are thinking. We are all glad to hear that Miss Darcy has recovered from Mr. Wickham’s interference.”

“That both Miss Darcy and Lydia have.”

“Indeed. Who would have imagined? Oh gracious, this is interesting. Lizzy says that Mr. Darcy and their new friend Sir Anthony have decided to be Mr. Amberson’s patrons. They will sponsor a series of concerts at the assembly rooms in Derby to help make him known there.”

Charlotte pushed her elbows into the chair’s arm and sat a little straighter. “Gracious! That is a strong statement for Mr. Darcy to make. I am impressed. Mr. Amberson must be quite astonishing to gain his approbation in so public a fashion.”

“I am all agog.” This was all too much to take in. Lydia married to such a man? With the Darcys’ approval? How could it be?

“What does Lydia say?”

Mary opened the letter and gasped. “You must see this.”

She handed Charlotte a drawing of Lizzy, Darcy and looking on whilst Mr. Amberson.

“If her drawing is to be believed, it seems the Darcys are very fond of their new brother.”

“I would be far more suspect of the sentiments she expresses in her drawing if Lizzy’s letter did not

mirror the same sentiments.” Mary unfolded Lydia’s letter and scanned it. Unfortunately it included no helpful underline to guide her reading.

That would probably be too much change to expect from Lydia.

“Well that is interesting. Lydia says—well, that bit is rather confusing. I do not quite understand how it came about, but Mr. Amberson taught at Lydia’s school, but was required to leave. He then walked to Pemberley and insisted on an audience with Mr. Darcy. Apparently he would not leave the doorstep until granted admission.”

Charlotte snickered. “I can only imagine that scene.”

“Indeed. As Lizzy has told me, the butler there is rather imposing, as Long Tom was. To stand up to him must have taken a great deal of fortitude.” Mary chewed her knuckle, reading ahead as fast as she could.

“Or a man deeply in love.”

“Apparently. It seems he convinced both Darcy and Lizzy of his suitability as a husband and his desire to make Lydia his wife. They not only agreed but—oh my gracious! Mr. Darcy walked Lydia down the aisle at her wedding, and Lizzy held the wedding breakfast at the house they kept in Summerseat!”

“I would never have believed it from any lips but yours.”

“I am hardly sure I believe it! I am anxious to meet this reformed sister of mine. She cannot be the same girl who left Kent in the company of Mr. Wickham.”

This should be happy news, Lydia coming to good after all, under the influence of Mr. Darcy. It should give her hope and comfort, even joy that Lydia was

greatly loved.

But it did not seem fair. Three sisters, all with men deeply in love with them.

“No doubt. But sometimes, people do change. Certainly Lady Catherine has since Miss de Bourgh’s death.”

Mary set the letters aside and sipped her tea. It had steeped too long—a bit bitter. Fitting somehow. “I wish as pleasant a change had come over Lady Catherine. She seems to grow worse with each passing week.”

“The housekeeper at Rosings told me that the gardeners found her wandering the kitchen garden, muttering about finding herbs for Anne’s tea last week. None dared tell her of Anne’s death, so they just allowed her to roam and pull up plants as she would. The garden was a mess when she left.”

“That could be very problematic. The budget is already so tight, without the garden, they may struggle over the winter.”

“I think the gardeners were able to replant much of what was pulled and started some new seeds in hope there would be sufficient time for them to grow.”

Mary rubbed her knuckles across her chin. “That will not stop her from doing it again. I think I shall speak to Colonel Fitzwilliam and suggest that a fresh fence and gate be put around the garden. To keep the sheep out, of course. We might prepare a small section specifically for Lady Catherine, though, where any damage would be inconsequential to the estate.”

“You always have such creative ways to manage her when everyone else becomes so impatient.”

It was not so very different from managing Mama.

If anything, not living in the same house with Lady Catherine made it far easier to tolerate her spells and her whimsies.

The housekeeper returned with her silver salver. "Another letter come for you, Miss Bennet. Seems the delivery got mixed up with that for the manor."

The handwriting was Michaels'. Her hands trembled.

"I can see by the look on your face who that letter is from. Go upstairs and enjoy it in a bit of privacy. I promise, I will not move from this spot without your assistance." She chuckled. "I am not sure if I can get up on my own as it is. Do not argue. It does me good to see you with a bit of enjoyment for yourself. I shall enjoy my tea and toast."

Mary clutched the letter to her breast and hurried up the stairs.

His letters had been so regular since he left for London, two each week on Wednesday and Saturday, bright points in her week to anticipate and cherish. But recently a full week had passed since his last missive. Little spots of worry had begun to form in her mind, whispering the most awful, outlandish, troublesome things.

It was true, very true: Mr. Michaels was no Mr. Darcy, with his forceful and passionate nature. Nor did it seem he was the Mr. Amberson Lizzy wrote of, with a flair for quiet drama and determination. No, men like that belonged with women like her sisters. Beautiful, vivacious, intense.

Michaels was a quiet, steady man, protective and predictable. His temper was even, not bent toward passions, good or bad. One knew exactly what to expect from him. His life was well-ordered and precise.

Though Lydia and Kitty deemed him very dull, he suited Mary well. She had been called dull sufficient times to be quite comfortable with the description. When Kitty accused Mr. Michaels of being as tiresome as Mary, it seemed quite prophetic. The very next day he paid them a call and stayed a full half hour in Mary's company.

Nothing about him or his letters were romantic. It might have been nice once in a while. Very nice. But all the conduct books advised: steadiness, by its nature, would outlive romance. It was the wisest choice.

She tiptoed into her room, as though any noise might bring unwanted demands to draw her away from her letter. The room was small, tucked awkwardly under a gable which rendered it full of odd angles and hard-to-use spaces, filled with mismatched and badly mended furniture. Nothing was attractive: the dressing table was scratched and bore an ink stain on top; the bedside table listed to the left on one short leg; the bed was short and wide, nearly square so she had to sleep nearly diagonally upon it; the draperies around it bore moth holes and fraying seams; and the dresser drawers stuck so forcefully she had to call the maid for help to open them.

Charlotte wanted her to take the other guest room. But Collins deemed it the most modest room in the house, thus the room most fitting one whose family was not in Lady Catherine's good graces. Whilst a bid demeaning and uncomfortable it was neither musty smelling nor positioned over the kitchen where it would have always smelt like food and it did have one distinct advantage: it placed her as far away as possible from Mr. Collins' snoring.

She settled into the cushionless wooden chair that

just fit in the nook surrounding the single square window, and opened his letter.

Dear Mary,

I must apologize for the last two letters I should have written. No doubt you noticed their absence. I fear you may be worried. Indeed I began them, but so many unexpected matters arose that they were never completed. I decided to begin afresh rather than try to make sense out of what I wrote earlier.

My business here has been more complex than I anticipated. I fear the state of Rosings Park is far more difficult than any of us truly imagined. I will be bringing Colonel Fitzwilliam far more bad news than any heir deserves.

My first letter to you was interrupted by a score of tradesmen at my door, demanding payment for their wares. Payment which is not in Rosings' coffers at present. I found sufficient funds to distribute just enough to keep them at bay for another quarter. They are demanding debtor's prison for someone. It was not a pretty sight.

The second letter suffered disruption when I had to a call from several physicians who claimed they had consulted with Lady Catherine concerning Miss de Bourgh's condition, but never received an appropriate honorarium for their efforts. You will hardly be surprised to learn that they lost their veneer of gentlemanly behavior when I demanded some proof of their claims.

I managed to sort them out, but I fear my creativity and my patience are being stretched far beyond what I am equipped to manage. Retrenching is going to be essential to weather this current storm.

I hope Colonel Fitzwilliam will be of a mind to take the necessary actions. As a single man who has not been recently accustomed to living in a grand estate, he might be made to see the necessity of it. I hope so.

Maybe he would take leave of Rosings altogether, lease the house out, and allow Mary and Michaels to live out their lives without the kind of constant interference that Lady Catherine offered. That was too much good fortune to hope for.

As I pick up my pen to write to you a third time, I am certain I shall not be thwarted as I have the best possible news. I have lingered a few days extra in London in the hopes of receiving the post that has just come.

A letter from your father arrived today. He has finally signed the settlement and all is in preparation for our marriage. The papers are finished, and he cannot change his mind now. So you know, the settlement is somewhat less than what I hoped for but exactly as you expected. Your father has agreed to pay your dowry in full, but nothing further than that.

I am of course disappointed as I had hoped to set aside a jointure that you would be able to live on. That is not possible for now. But I have plan on how your dowry might be invested so that by the time you should need a jointure, there will be sufficient there that you will be able to have some independence.

Mary pressed the letter to her chest, hot trails trickling down her face. He might not have the drama or passion of Darcy or Amberson, but he was indeed the best of men.

The sentiment did ring of a plot in a gothic novel to be sure, but it was entirely reflective of the kind of steady, protective temperament that she most treasured in him. Just a week or so, and he would be back.

Then the rest of her life might finally begin.

Discarded Prologue Chapter 2

Several days later, Mary helped Charlotte to the parlor. The windows faced the back of the house and only had good light in the morning. That had probably helped keep the blue-green paper hangings from fading. The second best furniture in the parsonage graced the room and a not-too-faded floral carpet covered squeaky floorboards. A settee faced a matching sofa near the fireplace, the burgundy upholstery and scratched exposed wooden arms on both. A simple dark stained wood curve finished the back of both pieces, with lighter patches worn away where shoulders had rubbed against them. Several tan leather bergère arm chairs faced the fireplace adjacent to the settee and sofa, gracing the room with the homey scent of old leather. Dark oak bookcases with precious few books and a wood and glass curio cabinet housings trinkets Charlotte had brought with her

when she married lined the wall opposite the window. No less than four small square tables, finished with scratched cream colored paint dotted the room, useful for cards, writing or refreshments. A very serviceable, if not very elegant parlor.

Mary instructed the housekeeper to refreshments. Mrs. Barrows and Mrs. Newton, and Mrs. Shaw would be here soon.

Or rather now.

Mary greeted them at the door herself. Yes, Mr. Collins had asked her to stop doing that, it was unseemly and suggested they could not afford a proper housekeeper. But, he was always fussing at her for one thing or another. There was little point in trying to please him now. As soon as she got one thing right, he found two other points to critique.

His temper had grown restive since Lady Catherine's invalidity. He did not seem to know how to cope with Colonel Fitzwilliam who did not appreciate Mr. Collins's fawning and had no patience for Collins' opinions.

What Colonel Fitzwilliam seemed to want was sound advice and even well-reasoned argument. Neither of which Mr. Collins was well-equipped to deliver, but Michaels was. And that only served to irritate Collins more.

Mary led the matrons through the dark hallway to the parlor where Charlotte waited, comfortably settled on the sofa with her feet up. The housekeeper followed in with glass pitcher of lemonade and a white, flowered earthenware tray of sandwiches and biscuits which she placed on one of the cream tables and disappeared, though something about her expression suggested she would be listening at the door.

“How lovely to see you, Mrs. Collins.” Mrs. Barrows, a tall, impossibly thin woman curtsied. She had a reputation for eating as heartily as her husband, but one would never know by looking at her.

“Thank you so much for your invitation.” Mrs. Newton sat beside Mrs. Barrows on the faded settee across from Charlotte.

The two ladies were nearly inseparable. Some mistook them for sisters, which was odd as they looked nothing alike. Mrs. Newton was round and ruddy, with cheery cheeks and twinkling eyes.

“And good day to you, Miss Bennet.” Mrs. Shaw perched properly on the chair nearest Charlotte. Her glasses balanced precariously on the end of her sharp nose, leaving all who encountered her with the sense of being looked down upon. It was unfortunate as she was a gentle, kind soul who never cared to judge others, but one had to take the time to talk with her to find that out.

Charlotte tried to pour lemonade for her guests, but had to turn the chore over to Mary as she found herself unable to lean over her belly enough to reach the pitcher.

“Thank you for joining us this afternoon.” Charlotte resettled herself on the sofa, wincing and breathing hard.

“Indeed, we are grateful.” Mary handed Mrs. Shaw a glass. “I shall go straight to my purpose though, lest we chatter about and never address the crux of the matter.”

Charlotte’s eyes bulged a bit. She never had been comfortable with any measure of directness, and Mary could be little else.

“Mrs. Collins is clearly in need of a midwife. I

could think of none better in Hunsford to make recommendations than you.”

Between the three women, they boasted thirteen living children and none had suffered serious complications.

Mrs. Newton and Mrs. Barrows tittered over their lemonade. Their cheeks tinged pink, but it was a false modesty at best, such topics were not difficult for them to bear. Mary had overheard them discussing far more colorful details of their births than who was their midwife. Knowing that Mary had overheard those conversations would probably give them genuine distress, though.

“If I may be so bold,” Mrs. Shaw set her glass delicately on the table. “I would strongly recommend Mrs. Mariah Grant. She has attended me the last four times. Such a difference from the woman who attended my first. I would never ask for anyone else.”

“I agree, most assuredly I do.” Mrs. Barrows pressed her hand to her chest. She had a penchant for the dramatic, rather like Charlotte. “She was brilliant when my little Jonathan was born. I do not know what I would have done without her.”

“And you know, very few of her ladies come down with childbed fever, far fewer than Mrs. Kerring you know. I think that says so much for her.” Mrs. Newton glanced at Mrs. Barrows and nodded.

“I had it once, and there is definitely reason for dread.” Mrs. Shaw wrung her hands, the corners of her mouth drawn up in tight lines. “It was with my first lying in, before we came to Kent. I cannot say what it is that Mrs. Grant does differently, but she has a way about her.”

“Yes she does, and a way of setting a woman at

ease that many do not have.” Mrs. Newton served herself a sandwich from the platter, then placed two on a small plate that she handed to Mrs. Barrow

Mrs. Barrows took the pate with one hand and waved a pointing finger of the other. “And she is always quick to attend. She does not dilly dally like some I have heard of. No, she makes her way directly and insists on staying through the first several days and beyond, just to insure nothing takes her by surprise. With my youngest, she came the day before he was born, saying she just had a feeling it was time, and sure enough, twelve hours later, she was right.” She proved her point by taking a large bite of the sandwich.

“And she is calm as a summer’s morning. Never seen a woman so steady in a crisis, even when something goes wrong, she goes about her business. Never flustered or unsettled.” Mrs. Newton dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief.

Poor woman had lost her last child shortly after its birth.

“That is very good to hear.” Charlotte chewed her knuckle. “I think I should like to contact her.”

“You have had no contact with a midwife yet? Mrs. Collins, forgive me for being so forward, but that is not wise. You must send for her immediately. You cannot risk your health like that.” Mrs. Newton sat up very straight and took on a motherly look, her voice rising to shrill notes.

Charlotte blushed and looked aside. “Thank you for your concern. I shall attend to it immediately.”

“You know you may rely on us as well. Anything that you need, we shall be here.” Mrs. Barrows glanced at her friends who all nodded. “You must tell

us what you have done to prepare for your lying in.”

Mary edged back as they conferred. They were nothing if not knowledgeable and efficient. In a quarter of an hour, they had arranged to visit again to prepare the nursery and Charlotte’s lying-in room. In the meantime, they took it upon themselves to sew the remaining items the baby would need.

“Oh Miss Bennet,” Mrs. Shaw leaned close as the rest continued their conversation. “I have some news that you should find most pleasing.”

“I am intrigued, madam, would you do me the kindness of sharing it with me?” Oh, how she hated being teased into asking for more information. Lydia and Kitty played that game with her often, usually to remind her that she had been left out of whatever had been interesting. But, truly, it was not fair to assume that of Mrs. Shaw just because she shared an annoying habit with the youngest Bennet sisters.

“I saw a particular horse on the way here this morning. One very familiar to me and I would expect very familiar to you.” Mrs. Shaw’s brows rose. “The one with the odd patch on its side. One belonging to Mr. Michaels.”

Mary’s face grew hot and cold at the same time. Was that even possible? She was at the parlor window before she ever realized she had stood.

How foolish! What chance that he should appear in the distance now, at the very moment she went in search for him?

“It is delightful to see such devotion, Miss Bennet.” Mrs. Shaw chuckled.

She did not like to be laughed at, even if it were good natured.

“Yes indeed, pray, have you any plans for your

wedding?” Mrs. Barrows turned over her shoulder to gaze at her.

Mary’s face flushed as she made her way back to her seat. She glanced at Charlotte, but rescue was unlikely. How was Charlotte to know how much Mary disliked being asked such personal questions in a group that cared little for her other than as fodder for their gossip.

“When will the banns be read?” Mrs. Newton asked from behind her glass, but the hungry look in her eyes belied her innocent expression.

“Starting the Sunday after he returns.” Apparently it was possible to speak while clenching ones teeth and smiling at the same time.

“I am surprised you did not have them read before he left. It did leave us all wondering that perhaps he might—” Mrs. Newton’s eyes narrowed just a bit.

Charlotte dropped her spoon on her saucer. Everyone jumped.

“Forgive my clumsiness. The baby is so active! Oh, that reminds me. I knew there was something I had intended to ask you. The last time we dined with you, Mr. Collins so enjoyed the crust on your eel pie. I must learn how you prepare it.”

Mrs. Newton turned to Charlotte with a broad smile. “I am so glad to hear you liked it. The receipt, you see, came from my mother. But it was Mr. Newton’s mother who taught me how to instruct the cook properly in the making of it. There is a little trick to it...”

How dear of Charlotte—best not waste this way of escape. Mary curtsied, though no one noticed, and slipped from the parlor, the voices followed her into the dimly lit hall, even after the door closed behind

her.

Charlotte would do well on her own now. With any luck, she had heard enough that she would need no further pushing to call upon Mrs. Grant. That was a very good thing. No stranger to lyings-in herself, Mary had no expertise to offer, though it would be like Charlotte to call upon her for help anyway.

She paused at the horrid narrow stairway. If she went upstairs, Charlotte would find her as soon as the matrons left. That would not do. A good long walk was the only way she could be certain of sufficient respite to regain her composure. She scurried to the plain oak door and let herself out.

A little used footpath that led to the Rosings' woods beckoned her across the rutted, uneven lane. Tall hardwoods lined the path, their branches arching out and tangling with one another to form a canopy that kept out the sunlight. Some found it a little ominous—even called it haunted at times—but that only ensured she would have the privacy she craved.

Honeysuckle vines twined around some of the trees, winding itself into the canopy and filling the air with its sweet perfume. Too bad there were no flowers in reach for her to taste their nectar. Each flower had only a drop, but it was delightful.

Once she lost sight of the house, she slowed, kicking piles of dry leaves and dirt away from the center of the path.

Why must people be so difficult?

Why did everyone around so quickly assume she knew what she was doing and expect that she would do it? It was a very bothersome thing.

Why was it so easy for the matrons to believe that Mr. Michaels would abandon her if he left Kent for

any time at all? Their engagement had been announced for some time. Why did reading the banns make it any more or less real?

No doubt they did not think her sufficient enticement to keep his attention once he was exposed to the wider society of London. Surely there, prettier, richer girls would vie for his attention, and she would necessarily be the loser.

Why was it the woman always suffered more being jilted than the man? He might walk away with little damage, but her reputation would bear the stain forever.

It was a very unpleasant thing to know that people thought one likely to be jilted.

She picked up a fallen branch, narrow and whippy and snapped it through the air.

Michaels was not that kind of man, though. None knew how hard he worked whilst in London. He was not there attending balls and parties, rather spending late nights slogging through the disaster of Rosings' records and negotiating with irate merchants and a few peers from whom Lady Catherine had borrowed money. Had he been looking for another, he would have had no time to find her.

Mary snapped the branch in half over her knee.

Michaels had chosen her from among all her sisters, that was the thing she had to focus on. He could have courted any of them. Not that Lydia would have paid him any mind or that Lady Catherine would have permitted Jane a suitor she did not select. Still, Michaels selected her, purposefully, intentionally because it was her disposition that suited him.

It was silly to give in to her foolish insecurities and fears. But when Papa continually reminded her that

she was far less attractive and witty and warm and generally appealing than her sisters, it was a very natural thing to do.

A man broke through the trees a hundred yards ahead of her. A dusty deep grey great coat with only a single cape at the shoulders shrouded his form and his tall black boots were spattered with dried mud, almost as though he had just dismounted his horse. He strode toward her with long purposeful steps that crunched through the gravel path and a very familiar gait that favored his left leg just a bit.

Could that be? No, it was so very unlikely. Still her heart ran faster, as her feet longed to do.

Young ladies did not run. It was shameful and reflected a lack of proper self-control.

The man, though, seemed to have no such compunctions. He sprinted, leaping over a small fallen tree, coat flying behind him. "Mary!"

There were times when running was entirely right and appropriate and necessary. She pelted toward him.

They met in a sunbeam that had fought its way through the canopy just to mark their greeting. He caught her in his long wiry arms and pressed her to his chest, her head finally coming to rest in the hollow of his shoulder. He was exactly the right height.

Smells of horse and the road dirt mingled on his coat, but did not mask the scent that was uniquely him. She peered into his face. It was dusty, too, with little sweat trails through the dust along the chiseled planes of his cheeks. The lines beside his warm brown eyes revealed a weariness to which he would probably not confess. He never liked to admit he was

tired.

“I had no idea you would come out to meet me. Who told you?” He pressed his cheek to the top of her head. His whiskers rasped along her hair, pulling strands from its tidy knot.

How hard had he ridden that he had not taken time to shave? He was always scrupulous about his appearance. It was the mark of a professional, he said.

“I truly had no idea you were here. It was simply the hand of Providence that brought me here right now.” And a few nosey matrons, but he did not need to hear about them.

“I cannot imagine better fortune! Postponing a call on Colonel Fitzwilliam will be a pleasure.”

“You have not yet been to the manor?” He always visited there first when he returned from traveling.

“The news I have matters little if it waits an hour or even a day to be delivered.” He stepped back, looking up into the trees.

She bit her lip and held her breath. “Was your trip to London unsuccessful?”

“Not unsuccessful, but far more complicated than I anticipated.” He removed his hat and brushed sweaty brown hair back from his forehead. “I believe I have finally untangled the records at last, but there is still so very much to be done.”

“You look so weary.”

“I am a bit discouraged. Mr. Darcy has touted my abilities to Colonel Fitzwilliam and created very high expectations.”

“Mr. Darcy does not praise easily. He would not have said such things if he did not believe you up to his claims.”

“I am concerned I will not be able to meet those standards. I am certain the colonel expects the debts to be paid off quickly, with little privation on his part. The expenses of the manor are extreme, and I have a sense the colonel would prefer to maintain a lavish lifestyle. It is hard to see how, under those circumstances, the estate might be unencumbered in even ten years. I cannot imagine he will be amenable to plans of economy.” He rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger.

“We will find a way, somehow.” She rubbed her hands together. It was a bad habit whilst she was thinking, but only Mama seemed to mind it. “I know Lady Catherine is difficult, but perhaps I can assist in persuading her, and thus him, of what must be done. With a bit of patience and persistence, it might not be as difficult as you expect.”

He embraced her again and kissed the top of her head. “I cannot tell you how glad I am to be home and privy to your good sense and encouragement. Now you must tell me all about you. Your letters are always so pleasant and cheerful, but I know things could hardly have been so easy for you.”

He offered her his arm and she slipped her hand in the crook of his elbow. How strong and steady he was. They ambled down the footpath toward the manor.

A gentle breeze wafted honeysuckle perfume over them, kissing their cheeks with a touch of warmth.

“Things have been as they usually have been. Mr. Collins is as he always is.” No, that was a lie. But there was little Michaels could do to curb his temper, so best say nothing.

“Obsequious, pompous, overbearing and long

winded?”

Mary tittered and turned her face aside. “Those are your words, not mine.”

“Indeed you are far too kind to say such things. But when you describe the care to which he sees you follow every one of Lady Catherine’s instructions, it is not difficult to discern your true sentiments.”

“If you think those are my sentiments, then I have spoken too harshly, and I must moderate my words more carefully.” She swallowed hard. If he could see through her so easily, then Collins was not far behind. And that would be a serious problem.

“There is no sin in finding him annoying, my dear.”

Perhaps it was true. But that was how one got hurt.

“Mrs. Collins is faring well as she increases.”

Michaels shook his head, the corners of his lips turning up. “It is difficult to imagine a household of little Collinses running about. Perhaps it is a good thing he is the kind of man who will have little to do with his children.”

“It is not the nature of most men to be nurturing to the fragile and weak. Do not be so critical of him.”

He stopped, turned and grasped her shoulders, slow controlled movements that did not trigger her reflex to flinch away. “I know you are grateful for them providing you a place to stay so that you did not need to return to your father’s house whilst I have been away. But pray do not let your gratitude cloud the ridiculousness of the man.”

“It is not a bad thing to see the positive.”

“It can be, if it blinds you to other truths.”

They had had this conversation before. He still did

not understand. Sometimes, seeing the little good there was in a situation was the only way to survive when nothing around one made sense.

His edges of his eyes creased as his brow furrowed. Upon some things, they would never agree. "So then, tell me of Lady Catherine."

"I wish there were more good to tell. She no longer comes to call. There are some days she is driven past in the phaeton. Mrs. Jenkinson believes that the fresh air is good for her spirits. She waves as they pass, but they no longer stop. It vexes Mr. Collins when that happens. He broods for hours, still wondering what he has done to offend his patroness."

"You of course have explained—"

"That it is best that she does not stop to call. Yes, on numerous occasions. But the information does not suit him."

"It sounds as though he has a temper?" He offered his arm and they continued their stroll.

"Does not every man?" She looked aside.

"Mary! You well know that is not what I was asking."

"His temper is nothing to my father's. Mr. Collins might rail about and grow loud and cross, but nothing more. It is nothing I am unable to bear."

After living with Father so many years, there was a great deal she could bear. Far more than Michaels needed to understand.

"I am glad that you shall not have to stay there very much longer."

"Mrs. Jenkinson says that Lady Catherine has some good days in which she is quite aware of what is going on around her and demonstrates good understanding. She will direct menus and even engage in

conversation with Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

“You mean try to tell him what to do?”

Mary shrugged. That was not the sort of thing with which Mr. Collins would appreciate her agreeing. “The darker days are growing more common though, and very unpredictable. Those days she is angry, and I fear uncontrollable. I saw bruises along Mrs. Jenkinson’s face last week. She claimed that she was distracted and ran into the door frame. I am not inclined to believe that, though. I have heard the word ‘Bedlam’ mentioned more than once in reference to her. I am disinclined to agree to something so drastic.”

“But would it not be for the best?”

“For her or for Colonel Fitzwilliam? Does it not seem cruel to you to have her taken from all she knows and holds dear—the only things which calm her—to a strange place with strange people and ways. Would that surely not make things worse than better? I admit I am just a simple girl, but the reasoning seems quite sound to me.” She gritted her teeth.

“Your reasoning always is. But if she is indeed a danger to others, and possibly to herself, then we must have some way to manage her.” Did he realize how conciliatory he sounded?

“I plan to call upon Mrs. Jenkinson and the housekeeper tomorrow. With their help, I hope to be able to offer some useful ideas soon.”

“Shall I convey that to Colonel Fitzwilliam when I meet with him? I think he will appreciate the assistance with his aunt.”

“If you wish. Just pray, let not Mr. Collins be informed. He is entirely uncomfortable with me meddling in the affairs of my betters. The notion that

Lady Catherine must be managed agitates him greatly. Whilst I can bear it, Charlotte cannot. I fear her condition is fragile. She should not be taxed.”

He stopped and pressed her hands to his chest, a little bemusement playing around his lips. “How do you always seem to know what everyone around you needs? I may be steward of the land here, but my dear, I am quite certain you are steward to all the people.”

“Do you disapprove?” She bit her lower lip.

“I approve very much.” He leaned down and kissed her, gentle, chaste, controlled. His lips, were dry and warm, a little rough from traveling.

Her heart fluttered, just a little, controlled as much as he. Someday, she could give it free reign to soar, but not today.

Soon, very soon though, they would be wed. Perhaps then.



Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, formerly of His Majesty’s army, navigated the treacherously steep servants’ stairway that smelt of old stone and damp. Half the steps were too narrow to accommodate his foot, and they creaked with each step he took, threatening to reveal him to the enemy. Stray beams of sunlight peeked through odd openings in the walls. Dust motes skittered on the light. Cobwebs dangled from the walls, reaching for him and clinging to his dark wool coat as he passed.

Did the servants not clean these passages? Probably not—who would have noticed or cared until now?

The mysterious dark passage had been fun to explore as a child. How often he and Darcy had startled

servants as they scurried on their errands, thinking themselves sequestered from the family? Their startled looks had been mightily entertaining, then.

Now, they were irritating.

Irritating and embarrassing.

The master of a house should not be hiding like a rat in the walls, avoiding a cat—or in his case, a mad dowager. Yet, that was exactly what he was doing.

He had faced cannon fire and sabers, taken a musket ball to the shoulder and another to the thigh, stood against Napoleon and lived to tell of it. Never once had he hidden or run. But Aunt Catherine—she had him scurrying into dark corners like despicable vermin.

Had she been with Napoleon, he would have won.

Which was why they had run out of port last month. Now the stores of brandy were growing low as well. If things did not change soon, he would have to turn to whisky. There was still plenty of that in the cellars.

He shouldered open the door to his office, but it resisted. He dug in his feet and shoved again. There, just enough to slip through.

He stumbled and tripped, catching himself on the hall chair stacked with ledgers he had left just in front of it yesterday. Too damn drunk to remember to leave his own escape route clear.

Bloody hell, how had it come to this? He scrubbed his face with his hands. Drink had always been a pleasure, never a necessity. When had that changed?

Yes, the unexpected inheritance was astonishing, and he was grateful. Finally he was a proper gentleman in the eyes of society with an estate and connections that would make him welcome in nearly

any society.

But it was also ruining him.

He wound his way past the chair, across the books, around small round oak table whose purpose he could not remember. Turning sideways, he edged between his desk and a large, leather wingback pulled in close from his last meeting with Michaels.

At last! He fell into the generous, faded armchair behind his desk. It groaned beneath him, reminding him that the state of the estate mirrored the state of his office. Bright sunlight streaming through two tall windows adjacent to his desk revealed every book and paper out of place, every piece of furniture than had been uprooted as he searched for pieces of paper he had mislaid. He scrubbed his face with his palms.

Darcy was right, He knew nothing about managing an estate, much less one in the condition of Rosings.

Thank God for Michaels.

While the steward left him feeling like a fresh-licked incompetent often enough, he had the good manners—and good sense—never to point out Fitzwilliam's shortcomings. There was a great deal to be said for a bit of discretion.

The new butler—blast it all, what was his name? He was of average height, average looks, average everything. There was not a single distinguishing thing about him, right down to the average color of his suit. How dare he be so unexceptional. Dash it all, he would be Tom from here on out—Small Tom, though, as he bore little resemblance to Long Tom whom he replaced—entered and waited until Fitzwilliam cast an irritated nod his direction. “Sir, Mr. Michaels has arrived from London, are you at home to him?”

“Am I at home? What does it look like? I am drowning in a sea of documents and in need of a man who can swim. Damn it yes! I am at home.”

Small Tom bowed a very average bow and shuffled off.

A moment later, Michaels strode in, a portfolio under one arm, road dust on his coat and an oddly content, maybe even a little smug, expression on his face.

Fitzwilliam brushed cobwebs from his shoulders. “So you have wasted no time in coming to me. Have not even changed your clothes. I knew there was a reason I liked you, Michaels.”

“I am glad to have pleased you, sir.” Michaels navigated around the piles of books and other gathered debris on the floor and sat on the leather wingback near the desk—the only other seat in the room not covered in detritus.

“What news have you for me? It had best not be all bad, or I shall surely run mad with my aunt. Wait, wait, shall I retrieve the brandy before or after you open that portfolio of disaster you keep always by your side.” He laughed, mostly to control his nerves. It sounded hollow even in his own ears.

Michaels opened his portfolio and rifled through papers within. “The news is mixed, sir, but I would suggest that the brandy be delayed in any case. These are matters best approached with a clear head.”

“You mean a clear headache.” Fitzwilliam dodged around Michaels and retrieved the brandy decanter from its cabinet between the windows. He really needed to clear a more direct path. The slight burn of glistening dark elixir trickling down his throat was just what he needed.

He turned and came eye to eye with Michaels' stern gaze. Michaels approached and reached for the decanter. Fitzwilliam clutched it harder.

"Sir, pray do not make this more difficult than necessary."

They locked eyes, but Michaels stood his ground, firm as the last general he had served under.

Damn him.

Fitzwilliam released the crystal into Michaels' steady hand. He stalked back to his desk, kicking over a stack of books as he went, and fell into his chair. "So then if you are going to deny me liquid comfort, give me good news to comfort me."

Michaels returned the decanter to the cabinet and sat down. He pulled paper and folios from his bag. Dear God, how much could such a small bag hold?

"To sum it up, I have negotiated with all the know creditors. Needless to say they are unhappy, but they understand they will more likely to be paid back if no one ends up in debtor's prison."

Aunt Catherine would probably prefer Bedlam to debtor's prison in any case.

"To that end, I have drafted a plan of economies. An extensive plan." He tapped a folio and laid it on the desk. "I suggest we review that when you are fresh, perhaps in the morning. The plan is comprehensive and will require a vast array of changes to all aspects of life at Rosings."

Fitzwilliam muttered under his breath. While change was not anathema to him, the same could not be said of Aunt Catherine.

"Though it may be—challenging—for some time, I am confident that the plan will allow the debts to be repaid in the foreseeable future."

“Foreseeable? Just how long is a ‘foreseeable’? It is not on a unit of time with which I am familiar.”

Michaels chuckled.

Thank God he had a sense of humor.

“The debts should be cleared in ten years, or less depending on what you are willing to tolerate. The heaviest burden, though, is in the first three. Then there is another break after five, and then after seven.” Michaels shoved a sheet of paper at him.

“So, you say we will live like paupers on the streets begging for three years, then rent an attic room in a fourth rate town house after that?”

“If you wish, sir. That would pay off your debts several years earlier. I can add that as an option if you so choose. I just began with the belief that you would prefer to have a roof over your head for the entire period.”

Fitzwilliam threw his head back and laughed. “Yes, indeed that is probably a better plan. Or I could simply marry an heiress and avoid all this unpleasantness altogether.”

“I draw the line at arranging marriages. For that you will have to consult your mother, the countess.”

He was right, Mother would only be too happy to be given such a charge. “I will discuss all this with you in depth tomorrow morning. But, I would prefer to meet in your home, not here.” Fitzwilliam glanced at the door.

“I shall inform my housekeeper.” He removed a folio from the desk and tucked it back in his portfolio, probably afraid that Fitzwilliam would lose it before tomorrow.

His concern was not wrong.

Fitzwilliam pulled a letter out of the sticky top

drawer of his desk. "I have been studying these suggestions that Darcy sent me. I would like your opinion. He says three-crop rotation is antiquated and moving Rosings to a four crop system will dramatically increase our yields. He has also offered me a loan of one of Pemberley's seed drills for the spring and a harvester in the autumn, as well the horses to go with it."

"Mr. Darcy's suggestions are quite sound. Moreover, if you are interested in modernizing the agriculture here, I attended several lectures whilst in London. I took notes and will leave them for you. If you opt to go forward with these ideas, the increase in income will enable Rosings to discharge its debts even sooner. I made my estimates with the most conservative assumptions I could."

"Such an optimist."

"It is my experience, no one is disappointed when they have better than they expected." Michaels cocked his head and flashed his eyebrows.

"Yes, yes, I know. It is wisdom and good practice and exactly why Darcy recommended you." It was also a hint to be more appreciative of what he had been given. Fitzwilliam leaned back and raked both hands through his hair. "You will not object if I send your plan of economy to Darcy to look over? He may be able to wring a few more shillings out, restricting me to bread and water or some such rot."

"That is a punishment fit only for errant sailors, sir. As I understand, it is not for officers."

"Indeed not. Carry on, then Michaels, and I shall see you tomorrow."

Michaels shoved more papers across the desk at him and strode out. He always walked so briskly, al-

ways so efficient. Did the man ever relax or enjoy himself?

Even his choice of bride was efficient. The plainest, hardest working of the Bennet sisters, she had little remarkable about her, save how unremarkable she was. Just the kind of wife for a man who specialized in retrenching estates and repaying debt.

Fitzwilliam retrieved to the brandy decanter and poured himself a large glass.

Discarded Prologue Chapter 3

Sunday came, exactly as it did every week. Hunsford parish church appeared exactly as it always did too: stark slate floor and grey stone walls. Sturdy dark wooden pews scarred with use, just a few more than absolutely necessary to accommodate the churchgoers of the parish. The odor of candle tallow mingled with the sweat of hardworking people. A few cobwebs hung in the corners. Windows, a large one at the front and several smaller ones along the side walls, all in need of washing and dusty window sills. Yes, Mary should probably get to that soon, but these days she could hardly leave Charlotte alone.

There had been a time when Lady Catherine would have would have dragged Charlotte and her maid out on Monday morning and overseen her efforts to give the little chapel a proper clean. But those days were probably long gone now.

Mary, wearing the same modest blue calico gown and straw poke bonnet that she wore every Sunday, sat beside Charlotte at the right-hand front of the church, exactly as they did every week. The parishioners took their seats as they did every Sunday.

Mr. Collins somberly minced his way to the pulpit at the right side of the front of the church. Did he enjoy the way all eyes were on him as he paraded past all the pews? Although he loudly professed his humility to all who would listen, it seemed that a man so assured of his humility would necessarily be prideful of it.

One more topic to avoid bringing up with him. It might have made for interesting conversation though.

He climbed the modest three steps—Lady Catherine would not permit him to place himself any higher than that above his patron—up into the hexagonal dark wooden pulpit devoid of any but the plainest of decorations: rounded trim at the top bottom and edges of each side. A hush fell over the chapel.

He cleared his throat and paused dramatically. “I publish the Banns of marriage between Graham Allen Michaels of Hunsford parish and Mary Susanna Bennet of Hunsford parish. If any of you know cause or just impediment why these two persons should not be joined together in Holy matrimony, ye are to declare it. This is the first time of asking.”

Mary pressed her back into the hardwood pew her eyes locked on the large plain glass window behind the pulpit. Bright sunlight reflected off a spot on the pulpit where vicars’ hands had rubbed the wood dark and shiny over decades of preaching.

Whispers and cloth-muffled shuffles rose, gathering with the force of storm clouds, overcoming her resolve. She glanced over her shoulder.

Too many people were looking at her. Just as many were scanning the chapel, probably for Michaels. Others focused on the party from Rosings Park.

Colonel Fitzwilliam occupied the family pew just across the aisle from Mary and Charlotte. He sat beside Lady Catherine, but the look on his face suggested he would rather be elsewhere. Mrs. Jenkinson whispered something to Lady Catherine who cackled.

Mr. Collins cleared his throat, waited for silence, and returned to the order of service.

“Are you well?” Charlotte whispered, shifting uncomfortably in the pew.

“It will pass.” It seemed the whole of the congregation was talking about her. Being talked about was intolerable. “And you?”

“The baby is restless.” She rubbed her belly.

“Mrs. Grant is here this morning, there at the far side near the window.” Mary pointed with her chin.

“Yes, yes, I will speak with her. You may stop pushing me now. I am quite convinced.”

“I shall then desist and be meek and mild and proper now.” Mary folded her hands in her lap.

“I hardly think that is possible.” Charlotte snickered and ducked her head, fighting to remove the expression from her face before her husband noticed.

Mr. Collins would not appreciate it and would likely misunderstand, thinking his wife was laughing at him in church. The poor man lacked a discernable

sense of humor at most times, and during holy services was the worst.

Charlotte was right though, Mary was unlikely to become meek, mild and proper under any circumstances. Many thought that of her, but the charade had been impossible to maintain with Charlotte over all the months she had been living with the Collinses. Quiet was not the same thing as meek, and reserved did not mean mild. Mary had her fair share of opinions about how things should be. Woe to the one who asked and actually wanted to hear them. She merely held her peace until someone did.

To date though, Charlotte and Mr. Michaels had been the only ones who had.

Mr. Collins dismissed service and the congregation dissolved into a crowd milling in the cheerful morning sun just outside the church.

Mr. Michaels found her straight away and beckoned her aside, under a small stand of shade trees, just far enough away from the crowd for a little private conversation but not so far as to raise the attention of the gossips. "Good morning, Miss Bennet. Pray forgive me. I arrived a little late this morning."

"Late to services, sir?" Mr. Collins approached from behind them.

Mary cringed.

"That is not at all a desirable behavior. I cannot condone it. Think of the precedent it will set among the parish." Mr. Collins stopped just in front of Michaels, dividing his glower between Michaels and Mary.

“I understand, Mr. Collins. I assure you that it was not by reason of intention or neglect on my part. I was called away for a bit of an emergency—”

“What happened?” Mary turned her shoulder to Collins.

“Not to worry, the issue is quite resolved, I believe. There was just a small misunderstanding on the road with Lady Catherine.” Michaels glanced over his shoulder toward a sandy spot near the church door where Lady Catherine, flanked by Mrs. Jenkinson, held court. Her fondness for that particular spot was not accidental. Her proximity to the stone building caused her voice to broadcast farther than it would if she stood anywhere else.

Collins’ face changed entirely, his initial critical tone fading. “Is her Ladyship well?”

“I am satisfied that she is. The matter is resolved and no further discussion need be had.” He offered Mary his arm.

“I am most gratified to hear that, sir. Most gratified.” Collins’ eyes wandered to Lady Catherine, now slowly making her way past the crowd on Colonel Fitzwilliam’s arm. Collins nodded at them and minced off toward them.

“I do hope he can keep his mouth shut.” Michaels muttered under his breath.

“He does seem to upset her as often as not.” Mary winced as Collins reached Lady Catherine and started talking.

Michaels leaned very close. “She pitched Colonel Fitzwilliam from the carriage half way to the church. She did not recognize him and refused to permit a strange man to ride in her carriage.”

“This is the first time I have heard of her not recognizing him,” Mary whispered behind her hand.

“I came on them in the road as it was happening. The colonel was naturally agitated, trying to convince her of who he was. It was not a pretty sight. I offered he should ride with me in the gig rather than walk. Perhaps that way it would appear that he and I had attended some estate business prior to services and quell some of the questions. I can only imagine the gossip if the Colonel arrived on foot after she arrived in the carriage.”

“You realize that Mr. Collins does not approve of doing business on a Sunday morning.”

“He approves less of talk about Lady Catherine’s madness.” Michaels patted her hand tucked in the crook of his elbow.

“What are you discussing, so low and private?” Charlotte waddled up to them, her drab, high-necked gown showed the outline of her belly. It would not fit for much longer.

“Certainly not what you would expect.” Mary said, with a quick glance toward Lady Catherine.

Charlotte’s smile faded a little. “Would you have dinner with us this afternoon, Mr. Michaels? It has been so long since we have enjoyed your company.”

“I should like that very much, thank you.”

Charlotte nodded and shuffled off toward Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine.

“I think I shall follow the carriage back to Rosings just in case Lady Catherine suffers any more confusion. In any case, I should speak to the Colonel about a few matters—”

She squeezed his arm, a little harder than might be decorous. “It is Sunday. You should rest. You need

to, you work far too late into the night, and you start far too early in the morning. Once you begin, it is difficult for you to stop.”

“Why do you not come out directly and say it? You expect that I might miss dinner altogether and thus offend the Collinses.”

Mary stared at her feet.

“And offend you as well?” He laid his hand over hers and pressed firmly. “You are right. The situation at Rosings though has been so overwhelming it has brought out a level of single-mindedness in me that I know is both a blessing and a curse.”

“Do not think I am being critical of you. I am not. It is pleasing that you work so diligently, and that you are so good at what you do.” But it was difficult to be overlooked consistently for it.

“I am glad you understand. Forgive me, Lady Catherine’s carriage is about to drive off. I must leave now. But I shall see you at dinner. I promise I will not be late.” He freed his arm from her grasp and hurried off toward his gig.

Mary ducked slight behind one of the trees, not exactly hiding, but not advertising her presence either. He always intended to keep his promises, and his intentions were good. Still, there was a better than average chance that he would be late in spite of them.

It was good that he should be so hard-working and devoted to those he served. Or at least Mr. Collins said so. He certainly tolerated and even encouraged Mr. Michaels’ intensity of focus to Lady Catherine’s affairs.

If only she were as sure as Mr. Collins.

Mr. Darcy’s devotion to Lizzy was the stuff of novels, running after her to rescue her from the

clutches of Lady Catherine. And Lydia—who would have thought? She inspired her Mr. Amberson to walk to Pemberley and demand an audience with a man so far above him that they should never have otherwise met.

Apparently passionate tempers like Lizzy and Lydia inspired grand shows of devotion.

Mary's did not.

But, comparing herself to her sisters never brought pleasure. There was nothing good to be had from it. Michaels cared for her, exactly the way all conduct books declared he should. He had prepared an excellent settlement and intended to fully provide for her. Complaining about such a man was the height of ingratitude.

The brass inlaid mahogany bracket clock on the parlor mantle chimed five o'clock and Charlotte instructed the maid to set the table for dinner. The Collinses and Mary gathered in the parlor to await their dinner guest. Weak rays of daylight streamed through the windows, but they had lost the warmth of afternoon, leaving a faint chill in the air. But it was too early for candles or a fire, so the room hovered between day and night far earlier than necessary.

Mr. Collins paced from the fireplace to the old fashioned portraits on the far wall, between the sofa where Charlotte sat and settee where Mary perched, dodging around the leather armchairs placed a little too close to walk between. In time with each footfall, he pontificated on Lady Catherine's opinions regarding the virtue of timeliness. It would have been annoying enough had those been his own opinions.

But they were only Lady Catherine's, and that made him insufferable.

The floorboards under the worn carpet squeaked and groaned with each step, as if to agree with every word. They were the only things in the room that did.

The clock chimed six times, and Mr. Collins excused himself to his room where he could watch the lane from his windows as though that might make their guest appear sooner.

"I am sorry, Charlotte." Mary studied her hands. Her fingernails had become rather ragged. How unladylike.

"There is nothing for you to apologize for. Truly, I am not offended. I am well aware of the situation. Truly, I do not mind." Charlotte's voice dropped to a whisper as she glanced at the parlor door. "The situation at Rosings Park is so unpredictable now. It is not at all surprising that he might be caught up there."

"I suppose so. The same things would happen with my father. He would dash from the house the moment Lady Catherine sent for him and might not return for days." Those were actually very pleasant days in the Bennet house. Best not dwell on that.

Charlotte pushed herself off the sofa and waddled toward Mary. "Mr. Michaels is not your father. You must remember that." She laid her hand on Mary's shoulder.

"I know. I am being foolish." She dabbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

"You will be pleased to know, Mrs. Grant was very accommodating. She will be here tomorrow morning. I would like you to be there with me to hear what she has to say."

Technically, that was exceedingly improper. A maiden should not be privy to such conversations. But her delicacy had been lost long ago. At least Mr. Michaels was too practical to take offense at that.

Charlotte paced around the room, slow and ponderous, hands beneath her belly as if to hold it up. “I cannot explain it. I just have a very uneasy feeling about ... everything. I do not know how to explain it. I am sure all women have such feelings about their confinements. I just cannot shake the sense that something is going to go dreadfully wrong.”

She hurried to Charlotte’s side. “My mother often felt that way about her own confinements, especially since Papa was unwilling to pay for a midwife to do anything but attend the actual birth. She would have been very happy for a woman’s assistance in the days afterwards.” She bit her lip and held her breath. Both-eration, she had become far too comfortable talking to Charlotte.

“Unwilling to pay?”

Somehow it fit that the room was almost too dark to inhabit now, despite the still early hour. A fitting place for secrets and untold truths.

“That was the reason my sisters and I cared for her and for the household during her confinements—and there were many. We lost several brothers in infancy. Before we came to Kent, my mother made do on quite a small income.” Probably half of what Charlotte currently enjoyed, but there was no need to offer that detail as well. “Papa spent a great deal of time and money on trying to rub shoulders with the right people and be seen in the right places that he might acquire a valuable patron. The rest of the household had to scrape by on what was left after that. He got

what he wanted, though, with Lady Catherine and now with Lord Matlock.” Her voice sounded bitter in her own ears.

“I think things are very different for your father at Matlock. The Earl is very different to his sister.” Charlotte leaned against the window sill, clearly uncomfortable.

A good warning to guard her tongue more carefully. People, even dear friends, were uneasy with unpleasant truths.

“I am sure you are correct. But still, he now serves an earl and his heir. That is better than a mere dowager Lady. Kitty’s letters suggest Papa is hopeful that they will have a lifetime of commitment to that family. He is very good at being committed to a patron.”

A loud rap at the door made Mary jump.

Mr. Collins trundled in a candlestick in hand, Mr. Michaels just behind.

“Please forgive my delay. It was difficult to break away from Colonel Fitzwilliam.” He glanced at Mary.

Something about the look in his eye suggested that there was a great deal more that he needed to tell her. At least his excuse of service to the colonel had to be acceptable to Mr. Collins.

“Shall we to the dining room?” Charlotte did not wait for an answer, shuffling past them and out the door.

The quaint, cozy dining room could easily accommodate more than twice their number, though the oblong oak table was really too large for the space making them edge awkwardly around it as they tried to seat themselves. Decorated in a manner befitting their station, all overseen by Lady Catherine’s hand, it

had the flavor of Rosings all over it. Not so much Rosings, but a stripped-down impoverished version of it that Lady Catherine saw fitting for those beneath her.

No crystal glittered in the candlelight. The pewter candlesticks muted rather than reflected the candles glow. Few mirrors graced the room, only those that could be excused as economies—reflecting the light so as to reduce the necessary number of candles. Deep burgundy paint covered the walls, paintings—mostly apprentice-effort florals and landscapes—hung in odd places covering up scratches and spots the paint had chipped away. The chairs all matched, but the seats were covered in serviceable dirt-colored fabric. Only the one at the head of the table had arms.

Eight platters—china, earthenware and pewter, all plain and sturdy—held fragrant offerings. The most notably, a joint of roast pork that made her mouth water. Mr. Collins carved the it, a larger cut of meat than they usually enjoyed. But now that Lady Catherine was less likely to countermand her orders at the butcher, Charlotte exercised greater freedom at her table.

“Are things well at Rosings?” Mr. Collins piled sliced pork on his plate and sat down.

“They remain in the state that they have been for some time.” Mr. Michaels used that special, patient tone that belied great impatience with the conversation.

“So then your news from London was favorable?” Did Mr. Collins think himself so subtle that none could tell he was hoping for more intimate news from the manor?

“It was as expected. I have discussed it at length with Colonel Fitzwilliam.” Mr. Michaels took a large mouthful of stewed spinach, one which would take a long time to chew.

“We have had some news of our own.” Charlotte caught Mary’s eye briefly.

Bless her gentle ability to shift the conversation. She was truly a social asset to her husband, even if he did not realize it.

Mr. Collins sat up a little straighter. “Yes, indeed we have. I received a most interesting letter yesterday. As you know, I have been blessed as the recipient of the entail to an estate in Hertfordshire. We have been waiting for news of the birth of the current owners’ new child. A son, of course, would be the heir to the estate.”

“Was the mistress of the estate safely delivered of her child?” Mary took a tiny bit of pease pudding, one she could swallow quickly if she needed to respond—or redirect the conversation—quickly. The peas had not been cooked quite long enough and the cook and skimped on the bacon, leaving them just a touch mealy and lacking in salt. Edible, but not entirely pleasing.

“A son was born, but did not survive the week. Sadly, his mother was succumbed to childbed fever as well.” Did Collins really have to talk through a mouthful of pork?

No wonder Charlotte was contemplating disaster.

“Tragic,” Mr. Michaels murmured.

“The story becomes sadder, yet.” Somehow Mr. Collins’ voice did not match the sentiment. “The owner of the estate, overindulged in drink and was

found drowned in a pond on the estate several days later.”

“An interesting turn of events to be sure.” Mr. Michaels’ eyes darted up and a little to the right. He was thinking, perhaps planning. “So now the estate goes to you?”

“So it would seem sir, so it would seem. I was wondering, if your duties at Rosings do not require all your time, is it possible for you to assist me with some of the official business regarding in this matter?”

There was an ulterior motive to today’s invitation after all.

“I shall be pleased to assist, sir. I offer my condolences and congratulations to you at the same time. How ironic that such a tragedy for part of your family can become such a blessing to another.”

“It is interesting how the hand of Providence comes to work.” That was not humility in Mr. Collins eyes.

“What then will become of Hunsford Parish?” Mary’s stomach roiled.

“That is a quandary to be sure. I must go to attend the estate. They cannot function, at least for the first few years without a master in attendance. After that if I can, I might hire a bailiff to manage the property and rent the house to a worthy tenant. But, at the very least, I will be unable to fulfill my duties here during that time. I suppose a curate would be the ideal solution, however, I fear that Lady Catherine would be highly opposed to my hiring someone of my own choosing. She is ever so particular, as she well should be in her position, about who will tend the parish flock.”

In the past, Lady Catherine would insist on hiring the curate herself or hiring a bailiff for the estate and managing that to her satisfaction. As it was now, she would probably just throw a fit. A long, protracted one, that someone how Mary would be called upon to manage.

Collins set down his knife and fork and leaned in against the table. "In truth I am uncertain what to do. I fear upsetting her ladyship with the news. She is so fragile. Even if I tell her that I will stay at my post, she may take it very badly."

"That is very likely." Mr. Michaels rubbed his chin. "Perhaps, I should broach the subject with the colonel. At the very least, he should know before Lady Catherine finds out. Might I discuss it when I meet with him tomorrow afternoon?"

"Would you like me to go with you, to talk of how Lady Catherine might be ... comforted during this time?" Mary whispered. Mr. Collins probably would not like the implication that Lady Catherine required management.

"I would very much appreciate your assistance. With all the other concerns weighing upon him, the colonel has little patience for Lady Catherine. I think your calm input would be of great value." Mr. Michaels' sharp glance silenced Mr. Collins before he could offer his opinions on the matter.

Cut Scene: Still room

This was cut from the end of the barn fire.

“The barn fire will be contained very soon. You must send for the surgeon and the apothecary.” Mary braced both hands hard on the ground as hot winds abraded her burns. She gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut until the wave of agony passed. “Call for Mrs. Anderson, the vicar’s wife from the next parish, Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Leighton, their housekeepers as well. See that the injured are taken to the manor—set up the servants’ hall for them. Check the stores. We will need lime-water and oils—linseed and sweet—yellow basilicum ointment and—”

“I am not sure what we have in the stores.” Parkes crouched beside her and steadied her. “I am certain we have no yellow basilicum.”

“Set one of the girls to make some. We will need it in great amounts.”

“I am not even sure how to make it.”

Mary slapped her forehead and sat back hard. She clenched her first and sucked in several deep breaths, counting until the harsh words on her tongue subsided.

Not everyone had lived with a physician who pontificated loud and long on preferred remedies and formulas. And the need to be prepared for the vicissitudes of life.

Apparently, those of high enough rank did not need to anticipate vicissitudes. She clutched her temples. Impatience with Parkes would serve no one well right now.

“Have you a copy of Buchan’s *Domestic Medicine* in the house?” Pray let at least that much be available.

“I am not sure. Lady Catherine has had a physician in attendance for so long that –”

“I see. Now is not the time to go digging about the library for one. I know there is one in the mistress’ parlor of the parsonage. Send someone to fetch the Collins’ housekeeper and have her bring it to me. After this is finished, you will make certain that there is a copy kept in your office. I will return to the house now and check the stores and still room myself.”

“Yes, of course.” Parkes waved down a young groom who looked anxious to be away from the dead and injured. Then she took a pile of wet sacks from a young maid and directed her run back to the manor with Mary.

“Start moving the casualties to the house immediately.” Mary called over her shoulder, forcing herself into a trot back to the house.

How was it possible that a place as large as Rosings could be so ill-prepared for such an event? Truly, it had nothing to do with adequacy of resources, and

everything to do with the mentality of its mistress. It was one thing to rely upon the physician she patronized for major issues, but there was no reason the household should not be prepared to handle more mundane crises. No wonder Lizzy had always seen to the needs of the servants. How many of those needs could have been addressed by a simple copy of Buchanan's text? How much unnecessary expense at the apothecary's could have been spared by preparing remedies at home?

The waste!

She would address that matter with Fitzwilliam if—no when—when he recovered from his injuries. And with Michaels, too. Any new place to economize would be most welcome news to him.

She entered through the kitchen and lit a candle from the fireplace. Half eaten platters and dishes from dinner were scattered along the work tables, left where they landed when the kitchen staff answered the call of "Fire!" Empty halls echoing with unnatural stillness provided an eerie foil from the bedlam outside.

The still room—even more still than usual—invited her in with dusty herbal scents that hung upon the quiet, stuffy air. It should have been full, shelves brimming with baskets and jars, bundles of drying stuffs hanging from the rafters. The floor should have been a jumble of boxes, large earthenware crocks and more baskets. How long had it been since someone had actually seen to its stocks? One more thing to deal with later.

She picked along the walls, candle held close to the shelves, squinting in the flickering light. Pray let there be something useful here!

Yes! A half-full basket of dried poppies! Those would provide sufficient poppy tea to relieve the injured for at least a week, perhaps more. Several bottles of prepared calamine forgotten on a shelf! Dusty, but still useful.

On another wall, a high shelf offered a box of yellow wax, one of white resin and a jar with frankincense. Those would make sufficient yellow basilicum for the time being.

Excellent. It would not take too much time to prepare. If only—yes!—there it was! A box of quick lime on the floor, enough for gallons of lime-water.

Providence had granted enough to meet their immediate needs. Trials and hardships would always be there, but thankfulness was still a virtue she could hardly afford to do without.

A scullery maid, sent by Parkes, scurried in. They carried the supplies to the disordered kitchen where the maid quickly cleared a work table to receive them.

Proportions, what were the proportions? It had been a long time since she had helped Mama prepare the ointment. Mary paced in front of the low kitchen fire, pressing her temples and muttering to herself. Yes! One part yellow wax, one of frankincense and one of white resin to be melted together then added to four parts of melted lard.

She had not forgotten. She could do this.

The maid fed the fire, encouraging it to something more useful. A large melting pot went on the hob near several kettles of water. Those were for the poppy tea.

Now, lime water for washes. A pound, yes that was it, a pound of quick lime—that was close enough—and how much water? One gallon, no, that

would not be enough. It must be two. She added the lime into a large basin and poured the water over, wincing at the violent reaction. Filter paper? Where would that be?

The maid ran for it and returned before Mary could even ask. She was a quick study. Perhaps it was time to move her into higher work, perhaps assign her to the still room.

“Bring me clean jugs and corks for the lime water while I finish the basilicum.” Mary added the lard to the melting pot and stirred until it was thoroughly incorporated. She removed the pot from the fire, covered it with a clean cloth and set it outside to cool.

The kettles were boiling. Where were the poppies? There. Why had they not been properly cleaned? Blast and botheration. She probably should be grateful that they were even available, but was it really too much to ask that they might have been properly prepared?

Had Parkes even noticed? Or was she kept too busy to properly manage the still room by Lady Catherine’s incessant demands?

Stop. That could be dealt with later. Focus on the immediate needs.

She plucked debris from the poppy heads and added them to the hot water. They would steep on their own on the hearth. Had it been long enough for the lime water to settle yet?

No, not yet.

She turned to the scullery maid. “I will return for the poppy tea shortly. Watch the lime-water and find me when all the lime has settled. See that no one touches any of this before I return.”

The girl nodded, a slight look of terror in her eyes.

Cut Scene: Funeral

This was cut from right before Charlotte goes into labor

The pallbearers placed the lids on the coffins and lifted them to their shoulders. In perfect step they marched single file from the sitting room to the hall and out the front door, into to the lingering fog and to the wagon waiting to carry the coffins to the church. The mourners followed in a slow, dignified procession.

Mary fell into step with them, drawing strength from the comforting ritual.

Just behind her, Fitzwilliam tried to convince Charlotte to stay behind, but she refused. If Mary was going, so would she. Stubborn, foolish woman. Mourning was no contest.

At least she did accept the use of the little white phaeton that Anne and Lady Catherine had often used. Fitzwilliam was right, Charlotte probably could not accomplish the walk to the church. But it meant

that Mary was now compelled to drive the phaeton when she would much rather have had the walk for silent reflection.

It was not Fitzwilliam's fault. He was trying to be a good host.

At least he had got the trying part right.

Mary dragged her hand down her face. She really needed to try harder. Gratitude and graciousness were what she needed today. Bitterness served none well.

Charlotte endured all the bumps and jostling of the ride to the church with nary a word. Her posture offered all the complaints necessary. But she was very pale, her face often knotted with a faraway expression. She really ought to be back at the manor resting.

How did Fitzwilliam manage to get to the church before they did and still have strength enough to tie up the horses and assist Mrs. Collins down from the phaeton? The way he grimaced, though, suggested the effort cost him dearly.

He handed Mary down as well, glancing at the phaeton's reins with a touch of chagrin.

At least he understood he had been highhanded. She nodded at him. That made the corner of his lips lift a mite as he escorted them inside.

Except for the predominance of black garb and black bands around arms and hats, the church looked no different than it always did: grey stones and dark wood, strong and reliable. Mourners parted and made way for them, bowed heads acknowledging their grief. Such open acknowledgment and acceptance—a knot tightened in Mary's throat.

"Are you well, Mrs. Collins?" Colonel Fitzwilliam ushered her into her customary pew.

Charlotte grimaced and fell into the pew.

“Are you having pains?” Mary whispered in her ear.

“It is nothing. They are the same ones that have come and gone for the last month.”

“I am not so certain.” Mary slid in beside her.

“It will be well. Do not worry on my account.” Charlotte fixed her eyes on the front of the church.

That was easy for Charlotte to say. She might be the one near her time, but Mary would be the one needed to manage everything when it came.

One more ungracious thought. She rubbed the base of her skull—a headache was among the last things she needed now.

The vicar began with a reading of the traditional funeral Psalms. Mary silently mouthed the words with him. The familiar litany soothed the deep ache in her heart just enough to render it bearable. Sharing responses with the rest of the mourners helped, too. Though none might share her exact grief, their common sorrow gathered her in warm, embracing arms. For at least a few moments, she was not alone. Final prayers, offered by the group in one voice, one purpose, echoed with the sharp, poignant sting. It was probably silly, but it seemed as though the very stones of the walls cried out along with them.

Charlotte clutched her belly and hunched forward, a soft, low moan escaping her lip.

No! No! No!

What child chose to be born on the day of his father’s funeral? What kind of a twisted humor would choose now to bring life into the world?

The service was dismissed and Mary waved Fitzwilliam to them. “Pray help her into the phaeton and send for the midwife. It is her time.”

“Now?” He withered at her look.

Good. He could hardly have chosen a more stupid thing to have said.

She climbed into the shaky old phaeton and urged the horse into as fast a clip as she dared—which was hardly a brisk pace— along the rutted, uneven lane. The old phaeton springs and the barely cushioned seats offered little to soften the jarring ride.

Charlotte wrapped one arm across her belly and clutched at the seat with the other. “Oh, oh! Mary, I do not think I can do this.”

“Neither of us have very much choice in the matter. We will endure what must be.” She probably ought to be more comforting ...

“But the dinner guests will hear my travail!” Her words ended in a wail. “A woman should be silent at such a time, penitent—”

“Stop—I want no such rhetoric.” Mr. Collins was not going speak from the grave before he was even buried. “If you need to cry out, so be it. Collins never had a right to try to govern such a time as this.”

“But Lady Catherine—”

“Will have a suitable dose of laudanum to keep her quiet and comfortable for as long as is necessary. She has no place to dictate how any of this is to go, either.”

“But it is her house!”

“Charlotte, that is entirely enough. I have never known you prone to hysteria. I will not stand by and allow you to take that path now. Take a deep breath, like that, and another. Find that well of good-sense I know you have and dwell there. You have an heir to birth, one who will take on his father’s legacy.” And if she were wrong, they would deal with that when it

came. For now, Charlotte did not need another worry or distraction.

And neither did she.

Cut Scene:

Tending Lady Catherine

This was cut from the middle of Charlotte's labor

The maid all but ran along at Mary's side to Lady Catherine's chamber at the opposite end of the house, their steps lost in the heavy carpeting. Mary paused twice, leaning on one of the dozens of hall chairs along the way, to catch her breath. At least there was absolutely no worry that Lady Catherine might hear anything from Charlotte's travail.

As Lady Catherine's carved mahogany door came in sight, shrill demands pierced the air.

"She has heard the guests downstairs and is insisting on attending them," the maid whispered, face pale. "She was half-dressed when I was sent for you. She asked about the bandages and tried to remove them. It is as if she does not feel the pain."

"Find Parkes and fetch fresh bandages and oint-

ment.” She propelled the girl toward the nearest servants’ door.

“Who did this to me? I demand to know! Who did this? Why were they permitted to do such a thing?” Lady Catherine’s shrieks cut through the closed door like a freshly-honed knife.

Mary strode in. As long as she looked confident, Lady Catherine was likely to go along with whatever she said. How she actually felt was mostly irrelevant.

Candles—far more than necessary lit every corner of the room, heating it nearly as much as the fire in Charlotte’s room. Flickering light glittered off the ormolu that covered nearly article in the room including the fireplace furnishings. The fireplace itself was dressed in marble that matched the front stairs. Every piece of wood—the bed, small round table, chairs and curved-front press—was carved and gilded or painted with Egyptian themes matching the garish sphinxes on her “throne” downstairs. Bed curtains and draperies—pulled shut over the tall windows—all matched: rich embroidered deep wine-colored wool. There could be no mistaking that this was Lady Catherine’s chamber.

“Why will no one tell me what happened? You there, Bennet girl, tell me why has someone wrapped me in these horrid things?” Lady Catherine stopped pacing in the middle of the room and extended her burnt arm. Her sweat-soaked nightdress clung indecently to her boney frame.

Near the bed, Mrs. Jenkinson huddled in a large arm chair, pleading with strained eyes. The lady’s maid cowered in a corner as though ready to hide behind the curtains to avoid detection.

Why did everyone expect she would know what to

do?

“Lady Catherine, pray sit down. We would not have you hurt yourself further. You have been so very brave and stoic through all this, such an example to all of us.” Mary took Lady Catherine’s uninjured elbow and guided her to Mrs. Jenkinson’s chair. Mrs. Jenkinson jumped aside and helped Lady Catherine to sit.

“Of course I have. It is my place to set an example for those around me. I am glad someone here recognizes what I do.”

Mary ducked as she waved her arms, emphasizing her point.

“Indeed we all do and we are very thankful for your gracious condescension even in the time of your own tribulation.” Mary peeled away the disheveled bandages from her arm.

Lady Catherine stared as though seeing it for the first time. “That does look like quite a tribulation.” She stretched out her arm turned it this way and that. “Are you certain that it is mine? The arm does not look like mine.”

“You are indeed too brave, your ladyship.” Mary patted her other hand.

The maid scurried in with fresh bandages and a pot of yellow basilicum. Mary took them and dismissed her with a wave. The girl was far too rattled to be of any use. She beckoned Mrs. Jenkinson nearer. Lady Catherine’s lady’s maid joined them as well.

“It is time to freshen your bandages, before you take your rest.” The wounds had not begun to fester, that was a good sign—very surprising, but good.

“It is not the time for rest. There are guests downstairs. I must attend them.” Lady Catherine started to

rise.

Mary laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Colonel Fitzwilliam does not wish you to tax yourself with guests. He is managing them very well."

"Him? He has no sense of etiquette or order. I will be humiliated! I will not have it. And you still have not told me, who did this to me? The magistrate and constable must be called! They cannot go unpunished." Lady Catherine waved her injured arm.

Mary caught her wrist and pointed with her chin to the lady's maid who scooped up the ointment and began to coat Lady Catherine's burns.

"There was an accident, your ladyship. No one did this to you. Your gown, it caught fire." That was the truth, even if it was missing in a few key details.

"My gown? Which gown? How? A fireplace? A candle?" Lady Catherine shrank back in her chair, her voice shrinking with her. "I have always been afraid of fire."

Mary wrapped bandages, starting at the wrist. "That is a very sensible thing to fear. I think we all dread the possibility."

"Father used to warn me so very strictly that I was to keep a safe distance from the fireplaces and never, never to read in my bed. That is why I rarely read you see—did you know that? I do not like to read because it requires candles so often, and candles cause fires, very dreadful ones, you know."

"I shall remember what you have said. It is very wise. I thank you for sharing it with me." Mary, throat so tight she could hardly speak, tied off the bandage and moved to Lady Catherine's leg. "May I change these as well?"

Lady Catherine stretched out her leg, studying her

foot closely. "It must have been very indecorous—did anyone see?"

"No one of any importance, your ladyship. And those who did were struck by your bravery." Mary undid the knot holding the bandages.

Lady Catherine touched Mary's arm. "Was ... was there anyone else..."

Mary bit her lip and held her breath.

"That is not for you to worry yourself with, your ladyship." Mrs. Jenkinson took over wrapping Lady Catherine's wounds.

Mary rose, legs shaking far more than they should. Luckily the bedpost was in reach. A few deep breaths steadied her for the journey to the press, where she had left the bottle of laudanum. Clever maid—she had brought a small crystal glass of red wine and water along with the bandages. Mary measured in the medicine by drops.

There, that should keep her asleep through Charlotte's labor ... at least if it continued to progress as quickly as it seemed to be going.

"What is that you are doing, you, Bennet girl? I must know what you are doing."

"I am preparing your cordial, Lady Catherine. Here. The surgeon, Mr. Peters, said you are to have it when we change your bandages."

"Surgeon? What surgeon? I have seen no surgeon. Nor have I seen the apothecary about. Where have they been?" Lady Catherine's eyes flashed. A temper tantrum was in the offing.

"Here now, your hand is shaking. Let me help you." She lifted the cup to Lady Catherine's lips.

"But I am not sure—" She tried to push the cup away.

“That is why we sought the surgeon’s recommendations. He is sure.” Mary gently pressed the cup at her.

Sputtering slightly, she drank. “But I did not see him. I must see him. I insist! He is devious and must be watched, you know. I insist on seeing him when he is next at Rosings.”

“Of course, Lady Catherine. We will make it so. Now, pray, let us help you back to bed. The cordial makes you sleepy, and you say it is unladylike to fall asleep in a chair.”

“Of course it is! A lady should never be found asleep by anyone! It is undignified. What will people think?” Her bandaged arm waved drunkenly.

Mrs. Jenkinson took one arm, and Mary grasped under Lady Catherine’s other shoulder and helped her to rise.

How thin and frail she had become. Had it been just since the fire, or had her fine clothes been hiding the frailty very well?

Lady Catherine tottered like a child first learning to walk, barely making it to her bed before she fell, almost too weak to continue. There was something poignant about seeing the great lady so reduced.

A tap on her shoulder—again?

“Mrs. Grant says you are wanted most urgently.” The young maid cringed.

“Mrs. Jenkinson, stay with her until she is well and truly asleep. See that she is not left alone after that.” Mary followed the girl out into the bright cool hallway. “Has something gone amiss?”

✿ Cut Scenes: Marriage Articles

This was cut from just before the wedding.

Late that night, after a cozy family dinner and evening spent soundly beating Darcy in commerce played with confits, Fitzwilliam wandered into Darcy's study. The low fire burning in the fireplace matched the one burning within him. Given his druthers, he would have gone to his betrothed tonight—really what was a few days when the promise had been offered and accepted?

For another woman, most other women, it would have been nothing, but to her—he could not bring himself to even ask. Losing Michaels less than a week before they were to wed was too fresh. Had Michaels been a more passionate man, he might have left her with child and without a husband to claim the child. Yes, the risk was small—Fitzwilliam had no intention of dying in the next few days. But then, neither had

Michaels.

Deep orange firelight, accented with a faint scent of wood smoke, painted the chairs and small table immediately in front of the fireplace. With no candles lit, the rest of the room was bathed in a quiet sort of darkness, the kind that bespoke rest, not ambush. Shadows of the desk, bookcases, and cabinets faded into the quietude, safe to ignore for the present.

Darcy peeked around the side of his wingback and waved him in, pouring a second glass of brandy and setting it on the table between the two chairs.

As gracious an invitation as one ever got from Darcy. He sauntered in and accepted both the seat and the drink.

“You are not fooling anyone, you know.” Darcy propped his feet on a low stool and sipped his drink.

Lovely. What he did not need was a lecture. He grumbled, leaning back into the worn leather upholstery that seemed to know exactly how to conform itself to his shape.

“I understand, though, and it speaks a great deal in support of all you have said about your affection for Mary.” Darcy drew a sip of brandy.

“I am glad I meet your approval.” Fitzwilliam resisted the urge to toss back the entire glass at once. Besides, it was the sort of brandy that deserved to be savored, not guzzled.

“I overheard Elizabeth discussing a call upon Mrs. Tennington tomorrow. The widow might make an excellent companion for our aunt.”

“I did not come here to obtain your approval for anything. This is quite unlike you, and it is making me decidedly uncomfortable.”

“Then let me remedy that immediately.” Darcy

turned to face him, elbow digging into the wingback's arm. "There is one matter that you have not attended to that I believe you must before you can marry. In fact, I utterly insist upon it."

"You mean to interfere with our wedding?"

"I will, to protect my sister Mary."

"From what?"

"You have no settlement papers. She should not—she will not—marry you without them."

"Oh, bloody hell." Fitzwilliam ground the heels of his hands into his eyes.

"I thought you might agree. Granted she, like Elizabeth, has few real assets to bring into the marriage. However, you must make provision for her and any future children—"

"Damn you for being right. How long is that going to take? I recall my sister's settlement took months to reach."

"She brought a fortune into the marriage. There was a great deal to negotiate—gifts from both families, her pin money, the settlements upon their children. My own settlement for Elizabeth was far simpler to create. In some ways, it is a blessing that Mary is not so encumbered."

"But what about Bennet? I cannot imagine he—"

"During the affair with Lydia, I was empowered by him to accept a marriage settlement on his behalf. I had the foresight—or I suppose one could argue, the arrogance—to word that document in such a way that it included all the unmarried sisters, not just Lydia."

That was just like Darcy. "You expected to find husbands for them all?"

"No, I simply dislike the man enough that I wanted to remove the possibility of dealing with him on

the matter again. So, you do not need to satisfy Bennet with the settlement.” He looked so smug, so very proud of himself. So annoying.

“But I need to satisfy you.”

“I like to think I am more reasonable. I took the liberty of informing my solicitor that we would be calling upon him in the morning and that we need the job done as quickly as possible.”

“That is to say, you have offered him a substantial bonus for doing the job with alacrity? You know, I do not want charity from you.” A mouthful of brandy, potent and just a bit sharp, kept the rest of Fitzwilliam’s thoughts unsaid.

“Consider it a wedding gift. Or would you rather wait weeks, instead of days?”

“Days? How much are you paying him?”

“Keep in mind, this is for my benefit as well. If the worst were to happen and she were left without marriage articles, to whom do you think her upkeep would fall?”

“You take too much upon yourself.”

“Perhaps, but I cannot change my ways.” Darcy settled back into his chair and stared into the fireplace.

“Do you think that I have?”

“No.”

That was a chilling indictment.

Darcy swirled the brandy in its glass, almost but not quite spilling it over the edge. “But, I am not so certain I have really understood what your ways were. You put up an excellent front, but there is far more beneath than I think I understood.”

“Elizabeth told you that.”

“Even if she did, I am convinced she is right.”

Darcy did not say it, and probably would not. But he did not have to. His posture, his tone conceded his approval as well.

A warm, fuzzy feeling gathered in his chest. Gah! What a sentimental fool he was! He did not need anyone's approval, even Darcy's.

But somehow, it was pleasing to have it.

He settled back into the soft leather and sipped his brandy in companionable, brotherly silence.

Author's Note 1

Giving birth in Jane Austen's day: confinement, lying-in, and churching

Unlike women today who often give birth in hospitals or birthing centers, women of Jane Austen's day almost exclusively gave birth at home. Preparation for confinement fell almost exclusively to the mother. Among the most significant of those preparatory decisions was where she would be confined. (Vickery, 1998)

Confinements

The decision was a significant one. A woman's confinement, also called her lying-in, lasted a month to six weeks starting when the baby was born, through her subsequent recovery. In some cases, women imminently due to give birth were also confined to the house and treated as invalids. (But only in cases where there was sufficient assistance available to take over the mother-to-be's duties, of course.) Dur-

ing confinement women were expected to stay indoors, preferably in bed. Most felt well enough to emerge from confinement after a month. (Honestly I think they'd have to be really ill not to be utterly stir-crazy by then. But then again, I get stir crazy confined by a day or two of rain.)

The medical community believed that an extended period of strict rest was necessary to help protect against the postnatal dangers threatening the mother and the baby. Considering the number of women who died in childbirth and those who experienced complications including puerperal fever, hemorrhage, thrombosis and milk fever, the precaution made a great deal of sense.

Some women chose to return to their mother's home to give birth. Others brought female relatives to their home for the event. It was not unusual for rooms used for lying-in to be rearranged or redecorated in anticipation of the event. (Martin, 2004) Ideally, the mother would have two interconnected rooms. The inner room would contain the mother's lying-in bed, usually kept dark through labor, delivery and at least the first week afterwards. The outer room would serve as a waiting room of sorts, a place for friends and relatives to gather. (Lewis, 1986)

For those who could afford it, London, because of its reputation for skilled doctors, was regarded as the best place for a confinement, especially for the birth of an anticipated heir. When a family went to town for a confinement, it could disrupt the household for weeks, even if the family maintained a house in London. And since delivery dates could not be accurately predicted, all this often happened at the very last minute. (I can't think of anything I would less rather do

at the very end of a pregnancy than be confined for hours on end in a bouncy-jolty carriage, moving households to somewhere else.)

During the confinement, especially one with all the pomp and circumstance of a London confinement, the mother often received visits from friends and relatives. Frequently these were women who had “shared in the drinking of caudle, the hot spiced wine mixture she had imbibed to ease her labor pains,” her ‘gossips.’ (Lewis, 1986) Country confinements had the advantage of fewer ‘drop-in’ sort of visitors. The new parents could exercise a little more control in who came to visit.

“The confinement itself was composed of a set of clearly defined stages in the recovery process. While these provided something of a guideline for the recovery of all women, they were flexible enough to allow for individual differences. ... Generally, the stages ...consisted of increasingly long forays from bed to sofa; thence to the outer or dressing room of the lying-in chambers; downstairs, possibly to dine with the family; and finally to take her first leave of the premises. The entire process lasted from four to six weeks.” (Lewis, 1986)

Churching

A woman’s confinement ended when the mother had been “churched” and her child christened. Considering the very real risks to both mother and infant, it is not surprising that the Church had a special service of thanksgiving after (surviving) childbirth. The Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, called it the Churching of Women. Traditionally, a woman paid her first visit upon leaving home to her church for this service which emphasized a woman's

gratitude toward God for her full recovery. (Lewis, 1986)

Although sanctioned by the Old Testament ([Leviticus 12](#)), churching was a prickly issue within the Church. Some condemned it as a remnant of the Jewish religion or as a Catholic rite. Still, it continued as a pervasive practice, especially in rural areas. (Collin, 2001) This may have been because of superstitions about women bringing bad luck following childbirth unless ritual cleansing took place.

The ceremony was generally sought after by women, a ceremony that focused on them and acknowledged the perils they had faced. It was also an opportunity to rejoin society after extended isolation and often an opportunity to feast with the friends who had helped her through her labor (her 'gossips.')

(Knöde, 1995)

Women who experienced a still birth or whose child died soon after were still churched. But, women who gave birth to illegitimate children were not until they publicly repented before the whole congregation. "There are also records of a debate whether a woman who had died in giving birth should be buried in the church graveyard if she had died unchurched. Popular custom occasionally had another woman undergoing the ceremony for the woman who had died, but such practice was not favoured by the church. It was eventually decided that an unchurched woman could be buried, but in a number of cases they were buried in a special part of the graveyard and superstitious beliefs had it that women between 15 and 45 were not supposed to be going to that particular part of the graveyard." (Knöde, 1995)

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Author's Note 2

Debt In The Regency Era

Living on Credit is not a new thing

It's easy to believe that living on credit is a modern thing. The news abounds with tales of woe regarding consumer debt, mortgages, student loans, and other lines of credit. How would Jane Austen have reacted to such news? Probably with great aplomb and a declaration that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

During the Regency era “almost all members of the middle and upper classes had accounts with different suppliers, who extended credit to their patrons. ... Only if the amount was small or they were traveling did they pay cash. In fact, only the poor did not live on credit in one guise or another.” (Forsling, 2017) In fact, more people depended on credit than ever before resulting in perpetual overcrowding in the debtor's prisons.

Although debt, both personal and national, were rife in Regency society, attitudes toward debt were largely divided across class lines. “Aristocratic claims for leadership had long been based on lavish displays and consumption while the middle class stressed domestic moderation. In particular, aristocratic disdain for sordid money matters, their casual attitude to debt and addiction to gambling ..., were anathema to the middling ranks whose very existence depended on the establishment of creditworthiness and avoidance of financial embarrassment.” (Davidoff, 2002)

Many small and otherwise flourishing businesses failed due to bad debts, especially among the upper classes. Some went so far as to begin refusing credit and to only sell for 'ready money'. The notion that debts of honor had to be paid and paid quickly while debts to merchants could be put off indefinitely only exacerbated the situation.

Robbing Peter to pay Paul

Gaming debts were regarded as sacrosanct which might not have been so significant an issue had there not been so many of them. The Regency was a time when Englishmen, especially the wealthy and high-born, were ready to bet on almost anything. Though gaming for high stakes was illegal by Austen's day, authorities mostly seemed to turn a blind eye to it, (Fullerton, 2004) perhaps because it was considered largely an upper class vice.

Different social classes offered different reasons for the immorality of gaming. The upper classes feared losing their money to the lower class, giving them income without having earned it and opposing the work ethic. The rising middle class also saw gaming as opposing the values of stability, property, domesticity, family life and religion. (Rendell, 2002) Regardless of the reason, there was widespread agreement that gaming was a problem, thus legislation was passed against it.

Unfortunately anti-gaming laws, much like prohibition in the US, only forced gambling from public venues into private clubs where individuals bet on any and nearly everything. Organized sports including cricket, horse racing, prize fighting and cock fighting attracted spectators willing to bet on the outcome.

Huge fortunes, even family estates could be won and lost at games of chance. Even the outcome of the Napoleonic Wars were subject to betting.

Moneylenders and bankers made themselves available at private clubs to assist gentlemen in settling their debts of honor which were not otherwise enforceable by law. The cost of this service though (beyond the interest on the debt of course), was creating a legally enforceable debt from which one had not been so previously.

Debtors' Prison

English bankruptcy laws were particularly harsh, demanding personal repayment of all debt, including business debt, and often incarceration. Ironically, there was no disgrace about being sent to gaol during the era, provided it was for an acceptable crime like debt or libel. (Murry, 1999) The Royal Courts administered three prisons primarily for debtors: the Fleet, the King's Bench and the Marshalsea, though debtors might be imprisoned at other facilities as well. (Low, 2005) At any given time during the era, upward of a 10,000 men were imprisoned for debts as small as four pence. (Savage, 2017)

Debtors were probably the largest proportion of the era's prison population and had privileges not granted to ordinary criminals, including the right to have their family stay with them and to have other visitors. They could also often arrange to be supplied with beer or spirits. (Low, 2005) "During the quarterly terms, when the court sits, (Fleet) prisoners on paying five shillings a-day, and on giving security, are allowed to go out when they please, and there is a certain space round the prison, called the rules, in which

prisoners may live, on furnishing two good securities to the warden for their debt, and on paying about three per cent on the amount of their debts to the warden.” (Feltham, 1803)

The process of obtaining an arrest warrant for debt was expensive. Often several tradesmen would have to band together to see a writ for debt issued. (Kelly, 2006)

Once the writ was obtained, the debtor (once caught, of course, as it was not uncommon for debtors to flee in the face of a writ, even so far as to leave the country) would first be confined to a spunging or lock-up house. A spunging-house was a private house maintained for the local confinement of debtors to give them time to settle their debts before the next step, debtors' prison. “...For twelve or fourteen shillings a-day, a debtor may remain [at the spunging house], either till he has found means of paying his debt, or finds it necessary to go to a public prison, when the writ against him becomes returnable. We have heard that great abuses prevail in these spunging-houses, and that many of the impositions practised in them deserve to be rectified. ... It would be wrong to quit the sad subject of prisons, without observing that such is the bad arrangement of the laws between debtor and creditor, that ruin to both is greatly accelerated by the expensiveness of every step in the proceedings, insomuch that not one debtor in ten ever pays his debt after he enters a prison. (Feltham, 1803)

Why Debtor's Prison?

Given that once a debtor was in prison, they lacked the ability to earn money making the payment

of his debt even less likely, this approach to debt seems ridiculous. So why was it done?

First, it was assumed that the debtor's family and friends would be available to help pay off their debts. So imprisoning the debtor might help motivate them to action. Second, it was perceived as a deterrent to getting into debt in the first place. (Clearly, given the numbers in debtors' prison it was a total failure on that count.) (Savage, 2017)

The third reason is perhaps the most difficult for the modern reader to understand. To the people of the time, the issue was bigger than simply insuring the debtor paid off their debts. "The 'moral' imperative to make the debtor aware of their responsibility for not living beyond their means was judged more important. ... To understand the mind-set of the time, it's important to remember two things: taking on more debt than you could pay was seen as a form of theft; and, ... (t)heft broke the Biblical commandment, "Thou shalt not steal". The causes of becoming too indebted to pay also pointed to the presence of other sins: idleness, covetousness, greed, deceitfulness. ... Sin demanded punishment and repentance not support," thus jailing the debtor fulfilled the moral imperative. (Savage, 2017)

Myth of the smock wedding

Just because there was a moral imperative to punish debtors didn't mean that those who owed money accepted their fate easily or didn't attempt creative means by which to discharge their debts. Running to avoid one's creditors was common. Beau Brummell fled to France to avoid debtors' prison. In some cases a debtor could be pressed into naval service in

exchange for the Navy to cover their debts.

Marriage, particularly for the upper class, was also a handy means of bringing in quick cash to alleviate a family's money woes. The (disastrous) marriage of the Prince of Wales to his cousin, Princess Caroline of Brunswick in 1795 came about so that Parliament would pay off his debts.

Not all men were happy to marry a woman with debts, especially a widow still responsible for her late husband's debts. Consequently, the practice of a 'smock wedding' came into being. At such a wedding, the bride would be married naked, bringing nothing into the marriage. In practice, she usually was barefoot and garbed in a chemise or sheet. The salient point was that she was technically bringing nothing into the marriage, thus her husband-to-be was thought not liable for any debts she might have. (Adkins, 2013) It is too bad that snopes.com was not around in the era, because it could have told them that the 'smock wedding' way out of debt was an urban myth and would not stop the new bride's creditors from knocking at their door.

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Author's Note

Land Stewards: Professional Help In Running An Estate.

We often hear about gentlemen employing stewards to help manage their estates. Who were these men, though, and what did they do?

Small estates, like Longbourn of *Pride and Prejudice*, could be managed by the master of the estate with the assistance of a non-professional man, called a bailiff. Typically a bailiff would be one of the major tenants on the estate, hired to act as a go-between to collect tenants' rents. In the era, it would have been considered vulgar for a gentleman to collect the rents himself.

Larger estates, like Darcy's Pemberley or Lady Catherine's Rosings Park, were major economic endeavors that necessitated professional help in the form of a steward.

Qualifications

Where the bailiff simply collected rents for the master of the estate, the steward was responsible for actually running the business of the estate and thus was integral to its success. He had to be an educated man, often the son of clergy, a smaller landowner or a professional man. He needed a head for numbers, scrupulous record-keeping skills, an exceptional knowledge of all aspects of agriculture, and excellent people-skills. Typically he would be university trained as a solicitor, necessary because of his dealings with contracts. A steward was not considered a servant,

but rather a skilled professional with a higher status than the family lawyer.

For these reasons, a steward was addressed as 'Mister'. Not long after the regency era, the term 'steward', with its servile connotations, was dropped in favor of the more professional term 'land agent.'

Duties

Stewards were tied to the estate and did not travel with the master of the estate. They managed all the activities associated with making the estate profitable, including record and account keeping, managing contracts, and overseeing the agricultural aspects of the home farm.

A good steward kept meticulous accounts and records of everything—seriously everything. In addition to the expected accounting that would go with such an enterprise, he kept logs of work done, including repairs to buildings, fences and roads, as well as records of the parkland, game animals, livestock and crops. He also maintained a rent roll of tenancies and records of the farm boundaries. Further, an estate employed a number of department heads, such as the head gardener, head gamekeeper, and the like. The steward kept records for all these departments and paid the wages of their workmen.

Beyond these duties, stewards also spent a lot of time touring the estate on horseback, dealing with the people of the estate face to face. He collected rents, found new tenants when necessary and leased land, supervised the tenantry, directed any work and improvements done on the land, settled squabbles that arose among the tenants or workers, purchased animals, seed and so on. (Shapard, 2003)

Salaries

A steward's salary related both to the size of the estate and his expertise. Typically, a steward's salary would range from £100-300 annually. In addition he would have use of a private house on the estate. For reference, Austen's Longbourn had an income of about £2000, which probably put hiring a steward out of their range.

Risks

Although not nearly as hazardous as many professions of the era, working as a steward was not without risks. Although employers relied heavily upon their stewards for their efficient management of their estates, that did not prevent employers from doubting their honesty, especially as the large sums that many of them handled offered opportunities for speculation. Accusations of wrongdoing could ruin a man's reputation and (wrongful) conviction for the same could result in prison time or worse, depending on the amount of money involved.

Since the steward was also in charge of collecting the rent from the tenants, he could be an unpopular figure. Historical records show assaults on stewards and in one case, the murder of one. So, in a very literal sense, his people-skills could be a life-saver.

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About the Author



Though Maria Grace has been writing fiction since she was ten years old, those early efforts happily reside in a file drawer and are unlikely to see the light of day again, for which many are grateful. After penning five file-drawer novels in high school, she took a break from writing to pursue college and earn her doctorate in Educational Psychology. After 16 years of university teaching, she returned to her first love, fiction writing.

She has one husband and one grandson, two graduate degrees and two black belts, three sons, four undergraduate majors, five nieces, is starting her sixth year blogging on Random Bits of Fascination, has built seven websites, attended eight English country dance balls, sewn nine Regency era costumes, and shared her life with ten cats.

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