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Old Friends & New Fancies

Written by Sybil Brinton

Published by Hesperus

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*Old Friends
& New
Fancies*

SYBIL BRINTON



HESPERUS

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In this little attempt at picturing the after-adventures of some of Jane Austen's characters I have made use of the references to them which she herself made, and which are recorded in Mr Austen-Leigh's 'Memoir'.

More grateful acknowledgments than I can ever express are due to my friend Edith Barran, without whom this book could not have been written.

The difficulties, as well as the presumption, of such an undertaking, are alike evident; but the fascination of the subject must be our apology to those who, like ourselves, 'owe to Jane Austen some of the happiest hours of their lives'.

– S.G.B.

CHARACTERS

The following characters are introduced into the story

From *Pride and Prejudice*

Elizabeth Bennet (now Mrs
Darcy)

Jane Bennet (now Mrs
Bingley)

Mr Darcy

Mr Bingley

Miss Bingley

Mr and Mrs Hurst

Kitty Bennet

Mr Bennet

Georgiana Darcy

Lady Catherine de Bourgh

Miss de Bourgh

Colonel Fitzwilliam

Mrs Gardiner

Mrs Annesley

From *Mansfield Park*

William Price

Mary Crawford

Henry Crawford

Mrs Grant

Mr Yates

Mrs Yates

Tom Bertram

From *Northanger Abbey*

James Morland

Eleanor Tilney (now Lady
Portinscale)

General Tilney

Captain Tilney

Isabella Thorpe

From *Sense and Sensibility*

Elinor Dashwood (now Mrs

Edward Ferrars)

Edward Ferrars

Robert Ferrars

Mrs Jennings

Lucy Steele (now Mrs Robert
Ferrars)

Anne Steele

Mr Palmer

From *Persuasion*

Captain Wentworth

Anne Elliot (now Mrs
Wentworth)

Sir Walter Elliot

Miss Elliot

From *Emma*

Emma Woodhouse (now Mrs
Knightley)

Mr Knightley

CHAPTER I

THERE IS ONE characteristic which may be safely said to belong to nearly all happily married couples – that of desiring to see equally happy marriages among their young friends; and in some cases, where their wishes are strong and circumstances seem favourable to the exertion of their own efforts, they may even embark upon the perilous but delightful course of helping those persons whose minds are as yet not made up, to form a decision respecting this important crisis in life, and this done, to assist in clearing the way in order that this decision may forthwith be acted upon.

Some good intentions of this kind, arising out of a very sincere affection for both the persons concerned, and a real anxiety about the future of the younger and dearer of the two, had actuated Elizabeth and Mr Darcy in promoting an engagement between Georgiana Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam. Georgiana was then twenty, and had lived entirely with her brother during the three and a half years of his married life. Reserved, shy, without self-reliance, and slow to form new attachments, she had been accustomed to look upon the Colonel as, after her brother, her eldest and best friend, a feeling which the disparity of their ages served to strengthen. She had therefore accepted

the fact of their new relations with a kind of timid pleasure, only imploring Elizabeth that nothing need be said about marriage for some time to come.

‘Elizabeth, when I am married, shall I have to go and stay at Rosings without you?’ she had asked; and on being assured that such might be the terrible consequences of matrimony, she had manifested a strong inclination not to look beyond the present, but to enjoy for some time longer the love and protection she had always met with as an inmate of her brother’s house.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh had thought it necessary to go through the form of expressing displeasure at the whole proceeding, in consequence of Darcy’s omission to ask her advice in the disposal of his sister’s hand, but in reality she so thoroughly approved of the match between her nephew and niece that she forgot her chagrin, and talked everywhere of her satisfaction in at last seeing a prospect of a member of the Darcy family being united to one who was in every respect worthy of the position.

Mr and Mrs Darcy were seated in the library at Pemberley one April morning when the engagement was about six months old. Their two children, a handsome boy of two, and a baby girl of a few months, had just been taken upstairs after the merry games with their parents to which this hour was usually devoted, and Elizabeth was arranging with her husband the plans for the day.

‘What has become of Georgiana and Fitzwilliam?’ enquired Darcy. ‘I understand they were going to ride together; but they both said they would prefer to put it off till twelve o’clock, when I could go with them.’

‘They have been walking on the terrace, but Georgiana has gone in now,’ replied Elizabeth, glancing out of the window. She returned to her husband’s side, and, sitting down, began to speak with great earnestness. ‘Do you think that they are really happy in their engagement? I have been watching them closely for some days, and I am convinced that Georgiana, at all events, is not.’

Mr Darcy's manner expressed surprise and incredulity. 'What fancy is this you have taken into your head, Elizabeth? No, certainly no such idea had ever crossed my own mind. You must be mistaken.'

'I do not think so,' said Elizabeth. 'Their relation to one another has not, since he has been staying here this time, its former ease and naturalness, and I have noticed other indications as well, which make me think that freedom would bring them mutual relief.'

'I am sorry for what you say, Elizabeth,' said Darcy gravely; 'but it is possible you lay too much stress on what may be merely a passing mood. When we first consented to the engagement I thought them to be excellently suited to each other, and so far I have not seen anything to modify that opinion. What has Georgiana been saying to you?'

'She has said nothing, but knowing her so well, I can see she is not happy. She is nervous, restless, unlike herself; she tries to escape being alone with Robert; she avoids with a painful embarrassment any reference to her future plans; nay, you must have noticed incidents like that of yesterday, when she almost cried and begged to be excused from going with us to Bath next week.'

'That is mere foolishness; there is no shadow of reason why she should be more afraid of her Aunt Catherine now than she ever was.'

'There is more reason, if she dreads to hear her marriage talked of as rapidly approaching, and herself and Robert referred to as a most fortunate and admirably assorted pair – you know how your aunt harangues them on all occasions.'

Darcy smiled slightly, then rose and began to pace the room. 'If your conjectures are correct, Elizabeth, and Georgiana is unhappy in the prospect of this marriage, of course it cannot go on; but I shall be deeply grieved for all reasons, and I hardly know how to ask Fitzwilliam to release her. Excellent fellow

though he is, he might well resent being thrown over after half a year for what seems like a girlish caprice.'

'I do not believe that in any case he would resent it,' replied Elizabeth. 'There would be regret on both sides – regret that they had not been able to make each other happy; but I more than suspect that if we could ascertain his feelings, we should find them to coincide with Georgiana's. In six months, you know, they have had time to reflect and to realise what the engagement means to both of them.'

'You assume a good deal, Elizabeth. I cannot believe that it is so uncongenial to Fitzwilliam.'

'That is because he is too good, too honourable to show it; and yet I am sensible that it is so – that his regard for Georgiana is that of a friend, a brother, nothing more. I suppose you cannot remember the time when we were engaged, Darcy, and Bingley and Jane also?' she added, looking archly at her husband.

'My dear, I recollect it all with the deepest satisfaction; but, you know, everyone does not display their feelings in the same way. Fitzwilliam is an older man than I am, and was never prone to raptures, and Georgiana has not the liveliness of mind of my Elizabeth.'

'I know they are not likely to be run away with by their feelings, as Mr Collins would say,' replied Elizabeth, smiling; 'but even taking Fitzwilliam's age and Georgiana's gravity into consideration, this is not at all the same thing. I am convinced that they do not find that complete joy in their engagement that people should, and that these two might if they were each engaged to the right person.'

'Do you mean that Georgiana has seen someone whom she might prefer?' asked Darcy sharply.

Elizabeth gave a decided negative to this, and her husband remained for some minutes wrapped in thought. At length he roused himself, and said: 'You had better speak to Georgiana on the subject, Elizabeth, and if it is as you suppose, we will talk

it over with Fitzwilliam together. For my sister to dissolve her engagement is a serious step, and must be well considered.'

His wife agreed, and added: 'Pray, dear Darcy, if it should come to an end, do not show any resentment in your manner towards Georgiana. She cannot help not caring enough for Fitzwilliam, and it will be painful enough for her to break with him and to know that she has disappointed you.'

'I will try not to do so, Elizabeth; but you know how much I desire a safe and honourable settlement in life for Georgiana, such as this marriage would have been.'

'We both wished it so much that I am afraid we were led into mistaking the real nature of their attachment,' said his wife. 'At any rate, since we assisted in bringing the affair about, we must share the responsibility of ending it – a fact which your aunt is not likely to allow us to forget, is she, Darcy?'

'True,' returned Darcy. 'It is regrettable that the engagement was so generally made known. However, Georgiana may stay away from Bath if she prefers.'

It was a relief to Elizabeth to have fairly talked her husband into accepting the possibility of such an unwelcome turn of affairs, for events proved her misgivings to have been well founded. She had truly gauged the feelings of Georgiana and Fitzwilliam with regard to each other and to their engagement. Georgiana confessed, with deep distress and confusion, that she knew it was very ungrateful and naughty, but – she did not seem to be able to care for her cousin in that way, and would have said so before, but that she was afraid her brother and her aunt would be angry. Fitzwilliam admitted that he had long feared his inability to make his cousin happy, but showed how very great was his dread of causing her, by his defection, to be wounded, reproached, or unkindly talked about. Elizabeth had a difficult task to smooth away all obstacles and to bring comfort to the minds of two very troubled and scrupulous people, besides her other duty of persuading her husband that the separation was

the right thing, and of shielding Georgiana from all disagreeables; but in a few days everything had been accomplished except what time alone could do.

Darcy could not altogether conceal his regret and disappointment at this termination of his hopes, and Georgiana was miserable in the consciousness that he blamed her for not having known her mind at the beginning of the engagement. Had she really cared for Fitzwilliam, he was convinced that it must have gone on to a happy conclusion; and naturally his cousin could hardly be the one to uphold a different opinion. Fitzwilliam could only assert and reassert that Georgiana was undeserving of the slightest reproach, and endeavour to divert his cousin's attention to himself.

It was arranged that he should accompany the Darcys as usual to Bath, where they were to meet Lady Catherine, and meanwhile Georgiana accepted an invitation from Jane and Mr Bingley, which on a hint from Elizabeth was warmly extended to her, to go and stay with them at the same time at their house on the other side of Derbyshire.

CHAPTER II

LADY CATHERINE DE Bourgh, with her daughter and Mrs Jenkinson, had been established in her favourite lodgings in Pulteney Street since the middle of March. It had been her custom of late years to spend six or seven weeks in Bath every spring. She had considered it to be good for her daughter's health; she also considered that her own constitution and spirits benefited greatly by this yearly change of social environment. The Rosings' card-parties lacked variety. Mr and Mrs Collins remained admirable listeners, but their conversation, like their civilities, occasionally wore a little thin. Lady Catherine, would she but have admitted it, thought that Mr Collins was too much interested in his own asparagus beds and too little in her peach houses; and the ailments of the children kept Mrs Collins at home on several evenings when it would have been convenient to the hostess at Rosings to make up a quadrille table. Obviously the most suitable spot in which Lady Catherine and her daughter could have sought change of air would have been the residence of her nephew; but Darcy and Elizabeth had very early in their married life made it clear that they did not intend their house to be turned into a hydropathic establishment for their ailing relatives, and that they would entertain their visitors at such times and for as long as they chose;

consequently Lady Catherine had been reduced to the expedient of going to Bath in the season, and to Pemberley when she was asked. She, however, reserved to herself the right of insisting that her relatives should visit her at Bath, and Darcy, who wished to give no occasion of offence to his mother's only sister, was in the habit of taking his wife and sister down there every spring for a short stay at one of the hotels, thus forming among themselves a pleasant and independent little party, which was usually joined by Colonel Fitzwilliam. This year Lady Catherine, having been there for some weeks previously, had been collecting round her a circle of acquaintances, some more and some less likely to be congenial to the relatives whose visit was pending.

'Elizabeth,' said Mr Darcy to his wife, as they stood together in Lady Catherine's drawing room at a large reception which she was giving in their honour, two days after their arrival, 'I think I see General Tilney over there; and, unless my memory is failing me, surely this is his daughter coming towards us, whom we made friends with last year.'

'Why, so it is; what a delightful surprise!' exclaimed Elizabeth. 'Dear Lady Portinscale, how glad I am to see you again! Do not say you have forgotten me, or I shall find it hard to forgive you!'

'No, indeed, Mrs Darcy, I was coming to introduce myself, in fear that you might have forgotten me. How do you do, Mr Darcy? Lady Catherine told me that she was expecting the whole party from Pemberley this week.'

'Yes, we have come to put in our period of attendance, as you see,' said Elizabeth, 'but I never dreamed of anything so pleasant as meeting you again, after what you said last year.'

'The truth is that my father has not been at all well, and as he felt himself obliged to come here for a short time, he begged us to join him for two or three weeks.'

'Your husband is here this evening?'

'Yes, he is in the next room; I see him talking to Colonel Fitzwilliam.'

‘And are your brother and his pretty wife in Bath this spring? I remember her so well.’

‘No, they are at home; but we have a brother of hers staying with us – James Morland. He has a curacy in a very unhealthy part of the Thames Valley, and he has been extremely ill with a low fever, so we have brought him here for a fortnight in the hope that it will do him good.’

‘How very kind of you to take care of him! He is fortunate to have such friends.’

‘Oh, no, it is a very small thing; and he is such an excellent young fellow – sensible and agreeable, and so hard working! My husband has the highest opinion of him; and were he less amiable, it would be a pleasure to be of service to anyone connected with Catherine.’

‘You oblige me to repeat that anyone who has you for his or her advocate is indeed fortunate, Lady Portinscale,’ answered Elizabeth, smiling; ‘but now that you know your character, pray perform the same kind office for some of the people here. They are nearly all strangers to me, and if my husband were not listening, I should say that I wonder how my aunt manages to pick them up.’

‘Lady Portinscale will soon gauge your character, Elizabeth, if you make such terribly outspoken comments,’ said Darcy, smiling. ‘You must not mind her, Lady Portinscale; my aunt’s presence has a demoralizing effect upon my wife. It is a very sad thing, but I have often remarked it.’

‘Not her presence in the ordinary way,’ said Elizabeth; ‘but today we have been through such a stormy scene together, that I may be excused for feeling that my aunt and I must go diametrically opposite ways for the rest of our lives.’

‘Really?’ said Eleanor Portinscale, with the faintest suspicion of laughter in her eyes. ‘Poor Lady Catherine! I recollect last year that you and your sister-in-law were continually brewing some kind of rebellious mischief against her.’

‘That is just the cause of the trouble now,’ responded Elizabeth. ‘My sister-in-law became engaged to Colonel Fitzwilliam last

November; but I saw that they were both so extremely unhappy in their engagement that I was instrumental in breaking it off, and this happened only last week; so that is why Robert Fitzwilliam is looking ten years younger, Georgiana is sheltering safely at home, and Lady Catherine is furiously angry with everyone all round, especially with me.'

'I am sorry,' said Lady Portinscale with gentle sympathy. 'These things cannot be done without regrets and heart burnings. I hope it will mean real happiness for them both in the end.'

'One has to take that part of it on trust,' was Elizabeth's answer; 'in the meantime it has upset my husband dreadfully, and I am afraid he will never be quite reconciled to it until he sees Georgiana happily married to somebody who has at present not appeared on the scene.'

'I suppose she felt altogether disinclined for coming with you to Bath, else she might have met friends here who would have distracted her thoughts.'

'Yes; but, of course, she would not come, and I could hardly persuade her even to accept an invitation to go and stay with my sister Jane for part of the time that we shall be away. We left her in such terribly low spirits that it is really some consolation to see Colonel Fitzwilliam looking as if a weight had been taken off his mind. It would be a sad pity that we should all have got into hot water with Lady Catherine and nobody be a penny the better for it.'

Lady Portinscale smiled. 'He is a very handsome man, and extraordinarily young-looking; he is nearly forty, is he not?'

'Yes, one would not suspect him of it. There is Captain Wentworth talking to him now; they seem to come here every year. Mrs Wentworth and Georgiana became rather friendly, and they correspond. But those relatives of hers are impossible! Why, what is going on? Lady Catherine seems to be carrying off Colonel Fitzwilliam; poor man, he was in such a congenial group! Whom can she be introducing him to? They are people I never saw before.'

‘I do not know them myself, but I have several times seen them with Lady Catherine,’ replied Lady Portinscale. ‘They are called Ferrars; at least, one of them is Mrs Ferrars, I am not sure which.’

The persons who had attracted Elizabeth’s attention were three in number; the two ladies somewhat resembled one another, being rather thin, small in stature, and very elaborately dressed in the height of the fashion. One of them might have been considered pretty, but for her sharp, almost shrewish features, restless eyes, and the discontented, irritable lines which had formed themselves in her face. The other had these characteristics in a more marked degree, together with a general air of much less refinement and sense. It was not to be expected that Lucy and Anne Steele would have altered very greatly for the better since the empty headed and overdressed fop who now accompanied them had exalted Lucy to the honour of becoming Mrs Robert Ferrars. After four years of family quarrels with Mrs Ferrars and Mrs John Dashwood, of spending more than her husband’s income, of scheming to obtain Anne a husband, of striving to push herself into fashionable society and to hold her own there; she found her only happiness in visits to gay watering places, where she could pick up new acquaintances, and in their company forget for a time the incessant worries and vexations of her home-life. Anne spent the greater part of the year with her sister and brother-in-law, occasionally diversifying her programme by a visit from Mrs Jennings, or to Elinor and Edward Ferrars, when out of kindness to Lucy they would consent to receive her for a time; but these visits of Anne’s to the rectory at Delaford were a trial to all concerned; and since, on the death of Colonel Brandon, Edward had effected an exchange of livings with a clergyman in Derbyshire, Elinor ventured to hope that Anne would no longer find it a convenience to stay with persons who resided in such an out-of-the-way part of the country. For the present, both Lucy and Anne were quite satisfied with their

surroundings. They had had the good fortune to become known to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and by the exercise of all the tact, flattery and obliging manners at their command, had rendered themselves indispensable at whatever entertainments she gave, large or small, and were being treated by her with such marked graciousness as to rouse their hopes of receiving an invitation to Rosings, a mansion of the glories of which they had heard much, as had all Lady Catherine's friends. The introduction, on this evening, to such a handsome, soldierly and aristocratic-looking man as Colonel Fitzwilliam was a piece of good luck which exceeded Anne's wildest dreams; and although, as soon as the proper civilities had been exchanged, he seized the first opportunity of returning to his men friends, Anne lost no time in confiding to Lucy her extreme satisfaction at the addition of such a very smart beau to Lady Catherine's party.

'Don't be a fool, Nancy,' was Lucy's answer, in somewhat discouraging tones; 'what's the good of expecting a man like that to look at you? And, besides, isn't he engaged to Mr Darcy's sister?'

'No,' Anne answered eagerly, 'the engagement's broke off. Miss de Bourgh told me so today. And fancy Lady Catherine introducing him to us at once! She must want us to be all friends together, mustn't she?'

'Well, it's likely you'll go and spoil it in some way; you never caught the doctor, for all his attention,' Lucy responded with true sisterly candour, 'and I expect we'll find we don't see much of Colonel Fitzwilliam. He's staying at the hotel with the Darcys, and from the look of Mrs Darcy I don't know as she'll want to do just what Lady Catherine tells her, all day long.'

'I shall go and sit by Miss de Bourgh,' said Nancy, after a moment's contemplation of this dismal prospect, 'and perhaps Lady Catherine will introduce me to the Darcys. You'd better come too, Lucy. We can't get along without knowing them now.'

Lucy consented, after some demur; and in the course of the evening their hopes of an introduction were realised, and

their self-importance greatly increased; for Mrs Darcy, curious to ascertain what kind of hangers-on had found places in her aunt's cortège this year, had conversed for a short time with them both; and with the prudence and consideration which was characteristic of her, had refrained from expressing to her husband the full extent of the unfavourable impression which they created.

'I do not much care for those new friends of my aunt's,' Darcy remarked to his wife when they reached home.

'Why, my dear, you were not even introduced to them,' exclaimed Elizabeth. 'Robert, I noticed, did not escape, but you did. Besides, they are related to the Ferrars at home; there is no getting away from that.'

'I gathered that they were, but I can hardly believe it. That man brother to Edward Ferrars! I heard him trying to argue with Robert about Nelson's tactics at the battle of the Nile, and it was enough for me. I have heard far sounder sense talked at a tenants' dinner – at the end of one, too.'

Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth laughed. 'His views upon life in general appeared to suffer somewhat from lack of breadth,' said the former, 'and I can imagine it would be possible to find him a tedious companion. As for the ladies of the party, I did not have much conversation with them.'

'I think the look of them rather frightened Robert,' said Elizabeth; 'but, on the whole, they are tolerably unobjectionable. After all, one can't always pick and choose at a place like Bath, and, anyhow, we must be civil to Aunt Catherine's friends – it is not for very long. I am really going to practise what I preach, so you need not look at me like that, Mr Darcy.'

The following evening the whole party met again at a concert in aid of a charity, which had been patronized by Lady Catherine to the extent of several pounds' worth of tickets. The morning had been spent by the Darceys and Fitzwilliam in their own occupations; but they had been obliged to dine with

their aunt, and to meet at dinner the Robert Ferrars, with Miss Anne Steele. General Tilney, Lady Portinscale's father, and his son Frederick made up the requisite number of gentlemen, and Elizabeth found much to divert her in watching, during dinner, the manoeuvres of Miss Steele, who, seated between the two bachelors, was fully occupied in efforts to make herself equally and incessantly agreeable to both of them; the dire failure of which might have aroused some compassion had she not been so completely self-satisfied and confident. Captain Tilney certainly kept up the conversation in the style that was expected of him as long as he could, and then turned to Miss de Bourgh and devoted himself to her, having been informed by his father that she was a considerable heiress, and his attentions to her must be regulated accordingly. Colonel Fitzwilliam, for his part, found three-cornered discussion carried on with great animation between himself, his aunt, and General Tilney, who sat opposite, on the military genius of the French generals, considerably more interesting than Miss Steele's observation on the Bath assemblies and her openly expressed predilection in favour of officers as partners. Elizabeth and her husband were no better off in their respective companions. The inanities of Robert Ferrars, and the pretensions of his wife, were calculated to put a severe strain on the good intentions of Lady Catherine's niece and nephew towards her guests.

'How elegantly Lady Catherine's dinner parties are always carried out!' remarked Lucy to Mr Darcy, in a kind of loud aside, as they unfolded their napkins. 'She seems to be one of those fortunate persons who always manage to have everything about them as *recherché* as it is at home, wherever they may be staying. Don't you think so, Mr Darcy? No one else could have made this apartment what it is, but with Lady Catherine's delightful appointments you could, I daresay, easily imagine yourself to be in one of the smaller dining parlours at Rosings, could you not?'

Mr Darcy was rather taken aback by this speech, and hastily making a mental review of his aunt's usual visitors, failed entirely to connect Mrs Robert Ferrars with the dining parlour, or any other room at Rosings; so his reply was not very satisfactory to his questioner.

'It seems a pleasant and convenient room. My aunt, I believe, generally takes these lodgings; and when she settles down in a place for a few weeks, naturally likes to make it comfortable.'

'Oh, but I think it is a special gift of dear Lady Catherine's,' exclaimed Lucy. 'You cannot deny it, Mr Darcy, knowing Rosings as you do. Now at our lodgings – well, I daresay the rooms are very little smaller than this – but try as I will, I cannot give them a home-like air, though I assure you I brought two large packing cases of dainty trifles from our country house.'

'Indeed!' said Darcy.

'Yes, but the lavish refinement, combined with substantial comfort, of Lady Catherine's surroundings always appeals to me so strongly when I come here. I am sure you understand what I mean, Mr Darcy, with a home like Pemberley as a standard to judge other people's houses by.'

'I had not regarded Bath lodgings from that point of view,' said Mr Darcy. 'Are you making a long stay here, may I ask?'

'Yes, we hope to remain for some weeks. I always enjoy Bath so much at this time of year; and so does Mr Ferrars. I consider it infinitely preferable to the autumn season, do not you, Mr Darcy? All the best people seem to come now, and one is not likely to meet anyone whose acquaintance one would not wish to continue afterwards.'

Mr Darcy took advantage of this pause, during which his companion helped herself to fish, to consider what reply he should truthfully make to such a sentiment; but before Mrs Ferrars could insist upon his agreeing with her, he was called upon by his aunt from the end of the table to support her in a flat contradiction of General Tilney, who was undoubtedly getting

the best of a somewhat heated argument. Elizabeth was not more fortunate in her companion. The wearisome descriptions of this or that friend's house, habits, achievements, which were all that Robert Ferrars could contribute to the conversation, were almost more than could be endured with patience throughout a long dinner, even by one who could derive quiet amusement from almost any kind of harmless absurdity; and it was with a sigh of relief that Elizabeth heard her aunt's peremptory command that everyone should go and put on their coats and cloaks, for she would not have her party arrive late for the beginning of the concert.

The ladies were distributed among various coaches, while the gentlemen walked on. Elizabeth found that her companions were to be her cousin and Miss Anne Steele; and during the drive she had leisure to remark, with great astonishment, the evident intimacy which existed between the young women. Anne tried to draw her into their discussions; but finding Mrs Darcy resolutely silent, she turned to Miss de Bourgh, and began to rally her on the becomingness of the gown which the latter was wearing, accompanying her remarks with many giggles, mysterious whispers and covert references to 'favourite colour' and 'smart uniforms' which made Elizabeth wonder that her cousin could tolerate such treatment for an instant. But poor Anne de Bourgh's nature, only half developed by reason of her ill-health and her mother's forcefulness of character, had yielded entirely to the dominating influence exercised over her by a person nearer her own age, and one who made an effort to understand and play upon her weakness. Elizabeth soon began to perceive the secret of the intimacy – Miss Steele, in her anxiety to recommend herself to the de Bourgh family, had discovered that by enlivening and flattering the daughter she might best become a person of value to the mother. Anne Steele's last words before the carriage stopped were intended to be inaudible to Elizabeth, and put the final touch to her disgust and dislike.

‘Me and Lucy will be so miserable if you give us up now these grand cousins of yours are come down, Miss Anne!’

Miss de Bourgh made what was for her a vehement motion of dissent, and when they had entered the room, Elizabeth, having piloted her charges to Lady Catherine’s side, found a seat for herself as far as possible from anyone connected with the Steele family. Her husband joined her just before the concert began, and in the double pleasure of listening to the music and feeling his proximity, she forgot the previous vexations of the evening.

‘Well, how have you been getting on?’ inquired a voice behind her, in the first pause.

‘Why, Fitzwilliam!’ exclaimed Darcy, glancing round, ‘what business have you up at this end? You ought to be squiring the young ladies down there by my aunt.’

‘Poor Robert!’ said Elizabeth. ‘He is only off duty for half an hour.’

‘That is it,’ replied Colonel Fitzwilliam. ‘I was exhausted, and seeing this empty chair, I forthwith occupied it. Besides, I want to hear the harp solo in peace and quiet. I have not heard the harp played for years, and I am exceedingly fond of it.’

‘That is the next one, I see. Hush, now! I know this man is going to sing out of tune. He looks like it.’

‘We ought to have some compensation for listening to that,’ murmured Darcy, when the song was done. ‘I believe Mr Collins would have given us a better performance.’

‘He certainly is rather like Mr Collins,’ remarked Elizabeth reflectively. ‘Here comes the harp – and what a lovely girl! Is her name on the programme? Yes, Miss Crawford.’

Mary Crawford, who since Dr Grant’s death had entirely lived with her sister, Mrs Grant, at Bath, had lost none of the beauty and charm which had captivated the heart of Edmund Bertram: indeed, the four years which had elapsed since then had given her form and air more regal elegance. The knowledge of sorrow, and regret that she had so much to injure her own

chances of happiness, had softened her nature, and now, more gentle, womanly and sympathetic, she was in many ways a different creature from the brilliant Miss Crawford of former days. Mrs Grant, while loving her devotedly and rejoicing in her companionship, still grieved in secret that no suitor worthy of her dear Mary should ever have succeeded Edmund Bertram, and that no second attachment should have taken place of one which, though renounced without bitterness, had nevertheless left a deep mark upon her sister's character. In Bath their lives were full of interest, and they made many friends; but Mary always laughed at her sister's plans for her marrying, and returned the same kind of answer. 'I expect so much, you know, and the chosen he must expect so little, that I doubt whether we should ever come to terms.'

Her sister would protest against this, knowing well the real worth of the disposition which Mary hid under a careless and sometimes cold manner; but she also knew that Mary would be more difficult to satisfy, both as regards her own qualities and those of her possible husband, in consequence of the better taste she had acquired at Mansfield. This evening, Miss Crawford, who had consented to perform solely on account of the charitable object of the concert, was out of humour with herself and all the world. Her sister being unwell, she had been obliged to accept an escort to the concert, the company of Sir Walter and Miss Elliot, whom, as residents in Bath, she had known since the time of her sister's settling there. Miss Crawford's beauty of face and figure were exactly what would recommend Sir Walter; and while condemning her sister as dull and unfashionable, nothing delighted him more than to be seen in public as squire of the charming and elegant Miss Crawford. Six months' acquaintance had caused her, on her side, thoroughly to weary of him, and on the few occasions when she could not avoid a meeting she endeavoured to converse with his eldest daughter, whom she found only a degree less tiresome and empty-headed. Tonight,

however, there was no help for it. With them she had come, with them she must remain, unluckily placed at a distance from any of her other Bath friends, her enjoyment of the music spoiled by her companions' irrelevant chatter, her only pleasure to acquit herself creditably in the piece she had chosen to play. This, at all events, was in her power, she felt, as she ascended the platform and shook off sensations of listlessness and ennui; and she succeeded so well that the audience were roused to a display of their delight and enthusiasm, and she had to return twice to acknowledge their plaudits. Next moment she perceived, or thought she perceived, that owing to an increased crowd in the lower part of the room she could not easily get back to her seat without making a little disturbance; so she slipped into a chair in the front row, which was allotted to the performers, thankful even for a short respite.

When the interval came, she remained where she was, and, a few minutes later, seeing the gentleman who had been the chief promoter of the concert trying to attract her attention, she rose unwillingly, supposing that Sir Walter Elliot had come to claim her. What was her surprise to hear Mr Durand say: 'Lady Catherine de Bourgh particularly wishes to know you. May I present you to her?'

Mary felt that she had not had much choice in the matter, but she found herself curtseying to a tall and formidable-looking elderly lady, dressed in rich brocades, who surveyed her as if from a great height, and said: 'Allow me to tell you, Miss Crawford, how much pleased I was with your late performance on the harp. I have heard every harp player of note in Europe during the last forty years, and I may say I consider you quite equal to those of the second rank. Though not a performer myself, I am quite acquainted with the difficulties of the instrument.'

Mary hardly knew whether to be more vexed or amused at this extraordinary address, and might have been inclined towards the former, had not Mrs Darcy, who had seen the

beginning of the incident, and hastened forward lest her aunt's insolent patronage should offend, interposed with a kindly: 'We have all been enjoying your piece so much. It must be delightful to be able to play like that. My aunt is such a lover of music that she cannot hide her enthusiasm.'

'And why should I hide it, may I ask?' demanded Lady Catherine. 'My judgement has often been of great service to young amateurs, among whom you might include yourself, Elizabeth.'

'Yes, I know,' replied Elizabeth, good-humouredly. 'But Miss Crawford cannot be classed with the average amateur. May I introduce myself, as Mr Durand has gone away? I am Mrs Darcy. I saw you sitting with the Elliots, so perhaps you know a great friend of mine, Mrs Wentworth.'

Miss Crawford was about to enter gladly into the subject of Mrs Wentworth, when Lady Catherine interposed, and in a few minutes, before Mary had quite realised what was happening, she found herself giving the assurance that Mrs Grant would be delighted to receive a visit from Lady Catherine and Mrs Darcy, and that she herself would be present at Lady Catherine's reception in Pulteney Street in a fortnight's time. She hardly knew how it had all come about, and she found herself wondering, as she was led back to her seat by Sir Walter Elliot, whether it was Lady Catherine's domineering manner, or Mrs Darcy's kind looks, that she had yielded to so easily. The Elliots were eager with their questions. What? She did not know that that was Lady Catherine de Bourgh? Everyone knew Lady Catherine, she came to Bath every year – a very well-preserved old lady, must be quite sixty and does not look more than forty-eight – people of property – large estate in Kent – 'an acquaintance quite worth following up, my dear Miss Crawford; of course we, with our already large circle of friends, could not attempt to include persons who only come here for a short time; otherwise we should have been very happy to have visited Lady Catherine.'