

Chapter 2

Sunday 9th April 1797

THE merry gathering in the dining parlour of Longbourn House was well into the meal. It was only an early family dinner but Mrs Bennet took care to have two full courses.

Mr Bennet could seriously tolerate but few men, Mr Wilde among them, and a comfortable familiarity had quickly become established between him and the Bennets. The young rector was seated between the eldest two Bennet girls, Jane and Elizabeth, and was discoursing cheerfully with them both, his dark hair flopping over his forehead as he turned from one to the other. He had a slightly foppish habit of brushing it back with his free hand.

The discussion appeared to be light-hearted, but Mr Bennet observed that they had moved on to the subjects of the French Revolution, the persecution of Roman Catholics and the calls for the legalisation of Roman Catholicism. Mary, the middle daughter, turned up her nose in disapproval at mention of support for the Popery. The youngest girls, Catherine and Lydia, gossiped and giggled between themselves.

The Misses Wilde said nothing, having no doubt heard it all before.

A liking for the young rector did not mean that Mr Bennet wished his daughters' heads to be filled with tales of religious fervour. He would have intervened, but Mrs Bennet's voice, raised as often to be heard above others, cut in, and Jane and Elizabeth, out of respect, turned their attention to their mother who addressed herself principally to her husband.

"You must know, Mr Bennet, that Netherfield is no longer to be let."

"I don't believe," he replied, "that I was even aware that it was *going* to be let."

"My dear Mr Bennet," she cried, "how can you be so tiresome? You must know that the neighbourhood has been alive with speculation about the new tenant, who he was, what were his circumstances. And now, it has all come to nought."

"My dear, if no one was any the wiser about the new would-be tenant, then I cannot perceive how his rejection of the place could pose any disappointment for you or anyone else."

Mr Bennet's logic failed to impress his wife.

"Oh, Mr Bennet, the prospect of a wealthy young man and his friends living locally must be an advantage to—a family such as ours. Oh," she threw up her hands dramatically, "the balls there would have been and now are not to be."

A small cry of consternation escaped Lydia. Her father ignored her.

"But you know not whether it was to be a man, young or old, wealthy or impoverished. Nor whether this personage would bring friends of any kind into our neighbourhood."

As usual, his wife was impatient at his dismissal. "Of course it would have been a man. *And* someone of substance to take a place like Netherfield." She paused. "But you remind me. Mrs Long said that the reason the gentleman failed to reach an agreement over the letting was that his friend has some sort of family difficulty and cannot join him."

"In that case, my dear, it may be a good thing that this man is not to come here. A person so irresolute as to disrupt his plans on account of merely a friend's difficulties may not be good for the area. To place such heavy reliance on the company of a friend does not demonstrate strength of character."

"It is said that a friend in need is a friend indeed," said Mary pompously.

Mrs Bennet railed at her third and fourth daughters. "Well, Mary, this person is no friend

of ours if he keeps Netherfield empty. And stop coughing, Kitty, for heaven's sake! You try my nerves so."

Thereafter, the table soon broke up.

THE family, alone again in the front parlour, considered the morning's events.

"The Reverend Wilde is indeed a handsome man, is he not, Jane and Lizzy?" Mrs Bennet smiled happily at her two eldest daughters. "And such a pleasant countenance and easy unaffected manners."

Jane and Elizabeth raised their eyebrows to each other and cast indulgent looks towards their mother.

"And I am sure," Mrs Bennet continued, "that he had an extra twinkle in his eye when addressing you both."

"A man of the cloth has no need of excessive social graces, or physical appeal," said Mary stiffly, "let alone make himself especially amenable towards unmarried women. He should please quite well enough with the depth of his catechismal learnedness and provision of spiritual guidance."

Mr Bennet sighed, took up his glass of port and rose from his chair.

"I shall be in my library if anyone needs me," he informed his family.

"And I must practise on the pianoforte," said Mary, and they both left the parlour.

"You must know, of course," Mrs Bennet continued, "that I have you marked out, Jane, for a senior member of the aristocracy, an Earl if not a Duke. A mere clergyman will not do. Though," she conceded, "such would have to be tolerated if no other eligible match presented itself."

Jane's expression was resigned.

Mrs Bennet's tone became fretful. "That Netherfield is now to remain empty is a bitter blow."

Elizabeth Bennet put her head on one side to her mother.

"And so, Mama, to what rank of gentry am I to be served up? What minor landowner would take a girl with no fortune and only modest looks?"

"I grant you, Lizzy, you are no beauty as is your sister, but if you were to abandon your air of determined independence, you might yet attract a man of higher social rank. Though I would hope for you, too, to have a husband of wealth and substance. But with Netherfield to remain empty," she added sourly, "that is one possible source of eligible husbands removed from our sphere."

"Someone in trade, then, Mama?" Elizabeth made sly eyes which Jane, only, could see. Jane raised a sardonic eyebrow at her next youngest sister.

"Why, Lizzy, how could you say such a thing?" said Mrs Bennet. "We are not lowering our aspirations to that extent." This, despite the fact that her own brother and his family lived well from his business in London.

"But wealth and rank do not always reside comfortably or naturally together in these days, Mama. Why, consider Uncle Gardiner. If a man is in a way to provide handsomely for a wife, he may rely more on his industry than his rank."

Lydia tittered prettily into her hand, knowing what mischief her older sister was about. She stood, having no further patience for this debate. At nearly fifteen years, she was a tall, well-developed girl and might have been considered elegant were it not for the fact that she was constantly on the move and never desisted from voicing her shallow opinions on any subject to anyone present.

"Lizzy has partners enough at any dance, far more so than Charlotte Lucas, though that is to be expected, such a plain thing is she. She must be five and twenty at least and still not married," she said.

“Twenty-seven, I think,” Elizabeth volunteered.

Lydia shrugged. “And now,” she said, moving towards the door, “I have bonnets to trim.”

Kitty, who always followed her younger sister’s lead, hurried out too.