Mr Bingley Is Come To Netherfield

The house is all in uproar.

Spotty Prue, the unimaginative one, the one who cannot play the pianoforte and insists upon demonstrating the fact at any and every opportunity, is on the roof, near the corner where the parapet has fallen away and the lead begun to curl up and dislodge, threatening to throw herself off and utterly squash the cabbages below.

A useful intent I must say, says Mr Bennet, I must say, I must. I confess I'd not credited her with such altruism, I hadn't. But tell her before she does it to put the flashing to rights – get Boggins to take her up a pail of mortar, by jove, and a trowel – and then we'll at least be letting her room to a lodger with less fear of a mouldy patch forming in his top-left corner, what.

Blarty Pam, the spare silly one, next to last, kept in reserve in case the silly one ever runs away, or rather, since she runs away fortnightly, in case she ever never returns, which thus far she has not, except of course, that is, today, though somewhat soon to get our hopes up, anyway, Pam's job really is to giggle and sob in support of her junior, to which end she is on the sofa dutifully sobbing and invisibly scheming how very silly she is bent upon being when she succeeds to the position.

Well at least she's not sewing, or embroidering or crocheting, says Mr Bennet, at least she's not at that, any of that. I confess I'm at a loss with regard to the warehousing of it all, I am. If I've to fit another cupboard in the spare room to hold all this excess of needlework and nappery I'll be tempted to sob on the sofa myself, by jove. Get Noggins to take her a cup of tea, and a handkerchief, already embroidered, what.

Flirty Priss, the truly silly one, silliness and soldiers her sole concerns, was last seen running through the orchard in her indoor slippers immediately after the news came, her bonnet ribbons fluttering free, signalling either that her latest elopement has chanced to coincide with the matter of the moment by sheer happenstance, or else the import of the intelligence impressed itself upon her silly brain with quite extraordinary rapidity and she has run thither without thought of suitable footwear nor pause to secure her millinery.

I can't say I regret it, says Mr Bennet, I can't, I can't say I do. I confess that, second only to bare feet, indoor slippers are the easiest upon my budget to maintain, repair, or replace, they are. The expence annually of ten specimens of each description, from slippers for receiving guests in a parlour through the whole gammut of cordwainery to riding-boots

and wellies, hardly bares thinking of by jove. And while I think ont, get Moggins to count her shoes in her shoe rack and wardrobe and scattered elsewhere (I daren't imagine how scattered they may be) and make inventory, before she's dragged back by a constable, or slopes back alone in the night with squelchy feet, or rides back in all her state a married woman or as good as, or possibly doesn't, what.

Pretty Prim, the paragon, the unexpectedly perfect one, the Jane, the Berengaria of Navarre, the rosebud, is hovering decorously in the garden, as is only to be expected, cutting flowers to fill a basket, whether for the table or the drawing room, or her father's study, if not perchance to take to church, should it happen to be her week on the quarterly rota.

Not a blessing nor a curse, yet the both, says Mr Bennet, both, nor yet neither. I confess I've contemplated it often, these twenty-odd years, I have, the miraculous circumstance of creating perfection at a first attempt. Perfection in the female line at any rate, though I'd dearly have liked one of the other sort, by jove, and as you can't fail to have noticed I tried again and again, and again. Hoggins needn't disturb herself from peeling the turnips, for she needs take her nought, I need send her not a thing, nothing, I can't augment perfection, what.

And Penny, no epithet, the sensible one, the one who is we, or us, not perfect, not silly, not at all, who will make do with Prim's walking shoes when she gets new ones and doesn't mind the hem of her frock getting a little muddy, if the errand be urgent or the walking pleasant, or invigorating (ah, the bloom of those cheeks), is knocking gently on her father's study door, ajar, stepping gently in through the slim aperture, and closing it gently behind her as the uproar subsides, as though she brought calmness with her, into the room, or for that matter wheresoever she goes.

Come in my dear, come in, says Mr Bennet, do come in, do. I confess I was hoping to hear your gentle knock, I was, so that at least I can have sensible conversation with someone. What's to do, my dear Penny, what's to do d'you think? You know I get better counsel from you than from Scroggins, the attorney, I've a mind to engage you at a fraction of his rate, say a sixteenth plus bed and board and shoes, and frocks – now there's a thought eh? pay the old flatterer in frocks and ribbons, by jove. I know, I know you never wanted ribbons my dear, while Priss and Pam wanted nothing more, by which I mean, nothing more eagerly desired than ribbons, plus a good deal more. But I'm easier listening to you than anyone in the world, so how *say* you dear girl, perch here and advise me, what's the to-do and what're we to do about it, what.

She rests on the uncomfortable chair-arm and tells him that Pamela, bless her good soft heart, has been reading a romance, unbound, that was given her by a shop boy, who found it in the bottom of a crate, that had come from town full of bed linen, the same method by which

plague is distributed, or used to be, but not likely to be fatal, sobbing on the sofa being more in the way of an allergy than an ailment; that Priscilla, bless her silly little socks, has run away with a trumpeter of whom she will tire fairly quickly, as he is a dull fellow and penniless, trumpeting and making love being all he is studied in or good for, which is not wholly to be held against him as he has excellent use of lips and fingers in both, and will entertain Priss with all the indulgent silliness she could want or wish for, for at least a fortnight, but then – where will be the ribbons, where the balls, where the jocular intercourse of the cultivated drawing room or dance floor? for they will live in a garret and have no society, nor yet a pianoforte, so back she will come, merely shopsoiled, and quite possibly chastened (at this point, it should be interposed, Mr Bennet either coughs or makes a throaty sigh); that Primrose, bless her pure beautiful soul, will be bringing her flowers to the drawing room, and perhaps have a few for his study too, for she is not on the rota this week, or next, which is fortuitous but fortunate under the circumstance that presents itself, as she may conveniently be 'at home' at any time Mr Bingley may chance to call, and will we may be sure accept his proposal with modest alacrity the instant he has made it or, in all probability, several clauses before he is even aware of having done so; and that Prudence, bless her clever fluffy feathers, is not threatening to throw herself from the roof in despair nor yet in protest (nor indeed is she fixing the lead flashing, alas) but is experimenting with her latest invention, a winged apparatus that attaches to her shoulders and is gripped and operated by her hands, enhancing their reach by some six or eight feet to either side, and will miss the cabbages entirely as it carries her the several yards to the potato patch and deposits her gently in the soft brown mud thereof (how fortunate, yesterday's rainstorm), making her – Adelard of Bath notwithstanding – the first woman in the world to fly, if not arguably the first man, or perhaps not.

I'm much relieved, much relieved, says Mr Bennet, that I am. I confess I am, I'm much relieved indeed, my dear. And what of Penelope? bless oh thrice bless her, heart and soul and socks and all. What of my sensible counsellor, my rock, my thread, my unfaltering guide, my spare Penny, my number two daughter, my best beloved? I shouldn't say it, I know I shouldn't, daughters must be indifferent equal, unless by age or inversely, or marital status come the day, but I do, I say it, by jove, you are, you are. How shall I bear to part with you when the richest and most discerning man in Derbyshire sets aside his haughtiness to come and beg you of me? what.

She gets up and kisses him on the forehead. Rest assured, papaaa, I shall not go.

■

© Tony Simcock 2023 onwards