

silent till they reached the house. Their father then went on to the library to write, and the girls walked into the breakfast-room.

“And they are really to be married!” cried Elizabeth, as soon as they were by themselves. “How strange this is! And for *this* we are to be thankful. That they should marry, small as is their chance of happiness, and wretched as is his character, we are forced to rejoice. Oh, Lydia!”

“I comfort myself with thinking,” replied Jane, “that he certainly would not marry Lydia if he had not a real regard for her. Though our kind uncle has done something towards clearing him, I cannot believe that ten thousand pounds, or anything like it, has been advanced. He has children of his own, and may have more. How could he spare half ten thousand pounds?”

“If he were ever able to learn what Wickham’s debts have been,” said Elizabeth, “and how much is settled on his side on our sister, we shall exactly know what Mr. Gardiner has done for them, because Wickham has not sixpence of his own. The kindness of my uncle and aunt can never be requited. Their taking her home, and affording her their personal protection and countenance, is such a sacrifice to her advantage as years of gratitude cannot enough acknowledge. By this time she is actually with them! If such goodness does not make her miserable now, she will never deserve to be happy! What a meeting for her, when she first sees my aunt!”

“We must endeavour to forget all that has passed on either side,” said Jane: “I hope and trust they will yet be happy. His consenting to marry her is a proof, I will believe, that he is come to a right way of thinking. Their mutual affection will steady them; and I flatter myself they will settle so quietly, and live in so rational a manner, as may in time make their past imprudence forgotten.”

“Their conduct has been such,” replied Elizabeth, “as neither you, nor I, nor anybody can ever forget. It is useless to talk of it.”

It now occurred to the girls that their mother was in all likelihood perfectly ignorant of what had happened. They went to the library, therefore, and asked their father whether he would not wish them to make it known to her. He was writing and, without raising his head, coolly replied:

“Just as you please.”

“May we take my uncle’s letter to read to her?”

“Take whatever you like, and get away.”

Elizabeth took the letter from his writing-table, and they went up stairs together. Mary and Kitty were both with Mrs. Bennet: one communication