



Longbourn

• A NOVEL •

Jo Baker

LONGBOURN

{ JO BAKER }



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For Clare, with thanks

for her attention, forbearance, patience

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What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant?

{ VOLUME ONE }

The butler ... Mrs. Hill and the two housemaids ...

There could be no wearing of clothes without their laundering, just as surely as there could be no going without clothes, not in Hertfordshire anyway, and not in September. Washdays could not be avoided, but the weekly purification of the household's linen was nonetheless a dismal prospect for Sarah.

The air was sharp at four thirty in the morning, when she started work. The iron pump handle was cold, and even with her mitts on, her chilblains flared as she heaved the water up from the underground dark and into her waiting pail. A long day to be got through, and that was just the very start of it.

All else was stillness. Sheep huddled in drifts on the hillside; birds in the hedgerows were fluffed like thistledown; in the woods, fallen leaves rustled with the passage of a hedgehog; the stream caught starlight and glistened over rocks. Below, in the barn, cows huffed clouds of sweet breath, and in the sty, the sow twitched, her piglets bundled at her belly. Mrs. Hill and her husband, up high in their tiny attic, slept the black blank sleep of deep fatigue; two floors below, in the principal bedchamber, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet were a pair of churchyard humps under the counterpane. The young ladies, all five of them sleeping in their beds, were dreaming of whatever it was that young ladies dream. And over it all, icy starlight shone; shone on the slate rooves and flagged yard and the necessary house and the shrubbery and the little wilderness off to the side of the lawn, and on the coveys where the pheasants huddled, and on Sarah, one of the two Longbourn housemaids, who cranked the pump, and filled a bucket, and rolled it aside, her palms already sore, and then set another bucket down to fill it too.

Over the eastern hills the sky was fading to a transparent indigo. Sarah, glancing up, hands stuffed into her armpits, her breath clouding the air, dreamed of the wild places beyond the horizon where it was already fully light, and of how, when her day was over, the sun would be shining on other places still, on the Barbadoes and Antigua and Jamaica where the dark men worked half-naked, and on the Americas where the Indians wore almost no clothes at all, and where there was consequently very little in the way of laundry, and how one day she would go there, and never have to wash other people's underthings again.

Because, she thought, as she fixed the pails to the yoke, ducked into it, and staggered upright, really no one should have to deal with another person's dirty linen. The young ladies might behave like they were smooth and sealed as alabaster statues underneath their clothes, but then they would drop their soiled shifts on the bedchamber floor, to be whisked away and cleansed, and would thus reveal themselves to be the frail, leaking, forked bodily creatures that they really were. Perhaps that was why they spoke instructions at her from behind an embroidery hoop or over the top of a book: she had scrubbed away their sweat and their stains, their monthly blood; she knew they weren't as rarefied as angels, and so they just couldn't look her in the eye.

The pails slopped as Sarah stumbled back across the yard; she was just approaching the scullery door when her foot skidded out from underneath her, and her balance was gone. The moment extended itself, so that she had time enough to see the pails fly up and away, off the yoke, emptying themselves, and see all her work undo itself, and to realize that when she landed, it would hurt. Then the pails hit the ground and bounced, making a racket that startled the rooks cawing from the beeches; Sarah landed hard on the stone flags. Her nose confirmed what she had already guessed: she had slipped in hogshit. The sow had got out yesterday, and all her piglets skittering after her, and nobody had cleared up after them yet, and nobody had had the time. Each day's work trickled over into the next, and nothing was ever finished, so you could never say, Look, that's it, the day's labour is over and done. Work just lingered and festered and lay in wait, to make you slip up in the morning.

After breakfast, by the kitchen fire, feet tucked up under her, Lydia sipped her sugared milk and complained to Mrs. Hill.

"You don't know how lucky you are, Hill. Hidden away all nice and cosy down here."

"If you say so, Miss Lyddie."

"Oh, I do say so! You can do what you like, can't you, with no one hovering over you and scrutinizing you? Lord! If I have to listen to Jane thou-shalt-notting me one more time—and I was only having a bit of fun—"

Next door, down the step into the scullery, Sarah leaned over the washboard, rubbing at the stained hem. The petticoat had been three inches deep in mud when she'd retrieved it from the girls' bedroom floor and had had a night's soaking in lye already; the soap was not shifting the mark, but it was biting into her hands, already cracked and chapped and chilblained, making them sting. If Elizabeth had the washing of her own petticoats, Sarah often thought, she'd most likely be a sight more careful with them.

The copper steamed, a load of linen boiling away in there; in front of her the fogged window was laddered with drips. Sarah stepped neatly from the duckboard by the sinks to the duckboard by the copper, over the murky slither of the stone floor. She slopped the petticoat into the grey bubbling water, lifted the laundry stick, and prodded the fabric down, poking the air out of it, then stirring. She had been told—and so she must believe—that it was necessary to wash a petticoat quite white, even if it was to be got filthy again at the next wearing.

Polly was elbow-deep in the cold slate sink, sloshing Mr. Bennet's neck-cloths around in the rinsing water, then lifting them out one by one to dunk them in the bowl of cold rice-water to starch them.

"How much more we got to go, d'you think, Sarah?"

Sarah glanced around, assessing. The tubs of soaking linen; the heaps of sodden stuff at various stages of its cleansing. Some places, they got in help for washday. Not here, though, oh no. At Longbourn House they washed their own dirty linen.

"There is sheets, and pillowslips, and there is our shifts, too—"

Polly wiped her hands on her apron and went to count the loads off on her fingers, but then saw how startlingly pink they were; she frowned, turning them, examining her hands as if they were interesting but unconnected to her. They must be quite numb, for the time being, at least.

“And there are the napkins to do, too,” Sarah added.

It had been that unfortunate time of the month, when all the women in the house had been more than usually short-tempered, clumsy and prone to tears, and then had bled. The napkins were now soaked in a separate tub that smelt uneasily of the butcher’s shop; they’d be boiled last night in the dregs of the copper, before it was emptied.

“I reckon we have five more loads to do.”

Sarah huffed a sigh, and plucked at the seam under her arm; she had already sweated through her dress, which she hated. It was a poplin described by Mrs. Hill as *Eau de N*, though Sarah always thought of it as *Eau de Bile*; the unpleasant colour itself did not matter since there was no one to see her in it, but the cut really did. It had been made for Mary, and was meant for pastry-soft arms, for needlework, for the pianoforte. It did not allow for the flex and shift of proper muscle, and Sarah only wore it now because her other dress, a mouse-linsey-woolsey, had been sponged and dabbed and was patchy wet, and hanging on the line to let the air the piggy stink out of it.

“Dump them shifts in next,” she said. “You stir for a bit, and I’ll scrub.”

Save your poor little hands, Sarah thought, though her own were already raw. She stepped back from the copper to the duckboards by the sinks, stood aside to let Polly pass. Then she scooped a neck-cloth out from the starch with the laundry tongs, and watched its jellied dregs fall back into the bowl.

Polly, thumping the stick around in the copper, plucked at her lower lip with blue-stained fingernails. She was still sore-eyed and smarting from the telling-off she had had from Mr. Hill, about the state of the yard. In the morning she had the fires to do, and then the water to take up, and then the Sunday dinner was under way; and then they had ate, and then it had got dark, and who can go shovelling up hog-doings by starlight? And hadn’t she had the pans to scour then anyway? Her fingertips were worn quite away with all the sand. And, come to think of it, wasn’t the fault in the person who had let the sty’s gate-latch get slack, so that a good snouty nudge was all it took to open it? Shouldn’t they be blaming not poor put-upon Polly for Sarah’s fall and wasted work—she glanced around and dropped her voice so that the old man would not actually hear her—but Mr. Hill himself, who was in charge of the hog-stand upkeep? Shouldn’t *he* be obliged to clean up after them? What use was the old tatterdemalion anyway? Where was he when he was needed? They could really do with another pair of hands, weren’t they always saying so?

Sarah nodded along, and made sympathetic noises, though she had stopped listening quite some time ago.

By the time the hall clock had hitched itself round to the strike of four, Mr. and Mrs. Hill were serving a washday cold collation—the remnants of the Sunday roast—to the family in the dining room, and the two housemaids were in the paddock, hanging out the washing, the damp cloth steaming in the cool afternoon. One of Sarah’s chilblains had cracked with the work, and was weeping; she raised it to her mouth and sucked the blood away, so that it would not stain the linen. For a moment she stood absorbed in the various sensations of her tongue on cold skin, stinging chilblain, salt blood, warm lips; so she was not really looking out, and she could have been mistaken, but she thought she saw movement on the lane that ran across the hillside opposite; the lane that linked the old high drovers’ road to London with the

village of Longbourn and, beyond that, the new Meryton turnpike.

“Look, Polly—d’you see?”

Polly took a peg out from between her teeth, pinned up the shirt she was holding to the line, then turned and looked.

The lane ran between two ancient hedges; the flocks and herds came that way on their long journey from the north. You’d hear the beasts before you saw them, a low burr of sound from cows still in the distance, the geese a bad-tempered honking, the yearlings calling for mother left behind. And when they passed the house, it was like snow, transforming; and there were men from the deep country with their strange voices, who were gone before you knew they were really there.

“I don’t see no one, Sarah.”

“No, but, look—”

The only movement now was of the birds, hopping along through the hedgerow, picking berries. Polly turned away, scuffed her toe in the dry ground, turfing up a stone; Sarah stood and stared a moment longer. The hedge was thick with old tea-coloured beech leaves, the holly looked almost black in the low sun, and the bones of the hazel were bare in stretches where it had been most recently laid.

“Nothing.”

“But there was someone.”

“Well, there isn’t now.”

Polly picked up the stone and lobbed it, as if to prove a point. It fell far short of the lane but seemed somehow to decide the matter.

“Oh well.”

One peg in her hand, a second between her teeth, Sarah pinned out another shift, staring gazing off in that direction; maybe it had been a trick of the light, of the rising steam in low autumn sun, maybe Polly was right, after all—then she stopped, shielded her eyes—and there it was again, further down the lane now, passing behind a stretch of bare laid hedge. There was a man. Because it was a man, she was sure of it: a glimpse of grey and black, a long loping gait, a man used to distances. She fumbled the peg out of her mouth, gestured, hand flapping.

“There, Polly, do you see now? Scotchman, it’s got to be.”

Polly tutted, rolled her eyes, but turned again to stare.

And he was gone, behind a stretch of knotted blackthorn. But there was something else now; Sarah could almost hear it: a flicker of sound, as though he—the scotchman that he must be, with his tallystick scotched with his accounts, and a knapsack full of silliness and gewgaws—was whistling to himself. It was faint, and it was strange; it seemed to come from half a world away.

“D’you hear that, Pol?” Sarah held up a reddened hand for quiet.

Polly swung round and glared at her. “Don’t call me Pol, you know I don’t like it.”

“Shhh!”

Polly stamped. “It’s only ’cos of Miss Mary that I have to be called Polly even at all.”

“Please, Polly!”

“It’s only ’cos she’s the Miss and I imnt, that she got to be called Mary, and I had to be changed to Polly, even though my christened name is Mary too.”

Sarah clicked her tongue and waved for her to shush, still peering out towards the lane.

Polly's outbursts were all too familiar, but this was new: a man who walked the roads with pack on his back and a tune on his lips. When the ladies were done with his wares, he'd come down to the kitchen to sell off his cheaper bits and pieces. Oh, if only she had something nicer to wear! There was no point wishing for her linsey-woolsey, since it was just as ugly as her *Eau de Bile*. But: chapbooks and ballads, or ribbons and buttons, and tin-plated bracelets that would stain your arm green in a fortnight—oh, what happiness a scotchman represented in this out-of-the-way, quiet, entirely changeless place!

The lane disappeared behind the house, and there could be no further sight or sound of anyone passing by, so she finished pegging out the shift, snapped out the next and pegged it too, clumsy with haste.

"Come on, Polly, pull your weight there, would you?"

But Polly flounced away across the paddock, to lean on the wall and talk to the horses that grazed at liberty in the next field. Sarah saw her rummaging in her apron pocket and handing over windfalls; she stroked their noses for a while, while Sarah continued with their work. Then Polly hitched herself up onto the wall and sat there, kicking her heels, head bowed, squinting in the low sun. Half the time, Sarah thought, it is like she has fairies whispering into her ear.

And out of tenderness for Polly—for a washday is a fatiguing thing indeed, while you are still growing, and while you are not yet yourself quite reconciled to your labours—Sarah finished off the work alone, and let Polly wander off unprimanded, to go about whatever business she might have, of dropping twigs into the stream, or collecting beechnuts.

When Sarah carried the last empty linen basket up from the paddock, it was getting dark and the yard had still not been cleaned. She slopped it down with grey laundry-water from the tubs, and let the lye-soap do its work on the flagstones.

Mrs. Hill was burdened with a washday temper; she had been alone at the mercy of the bell all day: the Bennets made few concessions to her lack of assistance while the housemaids were occupied with the linen.

When Sarah came through from clearing the scullery, hands smarting, back aching, arms stiff with overwork, Mrs. Hill was laying the table for the servants' dinner. She slapped a plate of cold souse down and glared at Sarah, as if to say, *Abandon me, and this is what you can expect. You only have yourself to blame.* The pickled brawn was greyish pink, jellied, and convenience when cooking was not to be contemplated; Sarah regarded it with loathing.

Mr. Hill sidled in. Beyond him, in the yard, Sarah caught a glimpse of one of the labourers from the next farm along, who tucked in his neckerchief and raised a hand in farewell. Mr. Hill just nodded to him, and shut the door. He wiped his hands on his trousers, tongue exploring a troubling tooth. He sat down. The souse wobbled on the table as Mrs. Hill cut the bread.

Sarah slipped into the pantry, where she gathered up the mustard pot and the stone jar of pickled walnuts, and the black butter and the horseradish, and brought this armful of condiments back to the kitchen table with her, setting them down beside the salt and butter. The feeling was returning to her hands now and her chilblains were a torment; she rubbed them, the flank of one hand chafing against the other. Mrs. Hill frowned at her and shook her head. Sarah sat on her hands, which was some relief: Mrs. Hill was right, scratching would

only make them worse, but it was an agony not to scratch.

Polly ambled in from the yard with a cloud of fresh air, rosy cheeks and an innocent look, as though she had been working as hard as anybody could be reasonably expected to work. She sat at the table and picked up her knife and spoon, and then put them down again when Mr. Hill dipped his grizzled face towards his linked fists. Sarah and Mrs. Hill joined their hands together too, and muttered along with him as he said Grace. When he was done there was a clattering and scrabbling of cutlery. The souse shivered under Mrs. Hill's knife.

"Is he upstairs then, missus?" Sarah asked.

Mrs. Hill did not even look up. "Hm?"

"The scotchman. Is he still upstairs with the ladies? I thought he'd be done up there by now."

Mrs. Hill frowned impatiently, slapped a lump of the jelly onto her husband's plate and another onto Sarah's. "What?"

"She thinks she saw a scotchman," Polly said.

"I *did* see a scotchman."

"You didn't. You just wish you did."

Mr. Hill looked up from his plate; pale eyes flicked from one girl to the other. Silence. Sarah poked at the pickled brawn; Polly, feeling this to be a victory, shovelled hers up into a grin. Mr. Hill returned his baleful gaze to his plate.

"There's no one called at the house at all," Mrs. Hill said. "Not since Mrs. Long this morning."

"I thought I saw a man. I thought I saw him coming down the lane."

"Must have been one of the farmhands."

Mr. Hill scraped the jelly up to his mouth, his jaw swinging back and forth like a cow's, to make best use of his few teeth. Sarah tried not to notice him; it was a trick to be performed at every meal time: the not-noticing of Mr. Hill. No, she wanted to say; it was not one of the farmhands, it could not have been. She had *seen* him. *And* she had heard him, whistling the faint, uncatchable tune. The idea that it could have been one of those rawboned lumpen boys or one of the shambling old men you'd come upon sitting on stiles, gumming their pipes—she was just not having it.

But she knew better than to protest, in the face of Mr. Hill's silence, Mrs. Hill's brittle temper, and Polly's general contrariness. Mrs. Hill, though, seeing her disappointment softened; she reached over and tucked a loose strand of Sarah's hair back inside her cap.

"Eat your dinner up, love."

Sarah's smile was small and quickly gone. She cut off a piece of souse, smeared it with mustard, and then horseradish, then blobbed it with black butter, spiked a slice of pickle with walnut, and placed the lot cautiously between her lips. She chewed. The stuff was hammy, jellied, with melting bits of brain and stringy shreds of cheeks and scraps of unexpected crunch. She swallowed, and took a swift gulp of her small beer. The one good thing about today was that it would soon be over.

After dinner, she and Polly and Mrs. Hill sat, silent with fatigue, and passed the pot of goose-grease between them. Sarah dug out a whitish lump and softened it between her fingertips. She eased the grease into her raw hands, then flexed and curled her fingers. Though still sore, the skin was made supple again, and did not split.

Mr. Hill, out of kindness to the women, washed up the dinner things ineffectually in the scullery; they could hear the slapping water, the scraping and clattering. Mrs. Hill winced for the china.

Later, Mr. B. would ring the library bell for a slice of cake to go with his Madeira wine, making Mr. Hill start bad-temperedly awake and shamle off to give it to him. An hour or so after that, Mrs. Hill would fetch away his crumby plate and smeared glass, and Sarah would gather the ladies' supper things from the parlour and carry them down on a chinking tray, and that would be that. On washday, the supper dishes could wait for tomorrow's water. On a washday, too, Sarah did not have the attention necessary to read whatever book she had borrowed last from Mr. B. Instead she had a lend of his old *Courier*, and read out loud, for Mrs. Hill's benefit, the news from three days ago, soft with folding and refolding, the ink smudging on her goose-greased hands. She read softly—so as not to disturb the sleeping child or the drowsy old man—the account of new hopes for a swift victory in Spain, and how Buonaparte had now been put on the back foot, and would soon be on the hop, the notion of which made her think of the war as a dance, and generals joining hands and spinning. And then there was a noise.

Sarah let the paper hang from her hand. "Did you hear that?"

"Eh?" asked Mrs. Hill, blinking up from the edge of sleep. "What?"

"I don't know, a noise outside. Something."

A soft whinny then, and the bump and thud of horses unsettled in their stalls.

"I think there's someone out there." Sarah set the paper aside, went to lift the child's sleeping head off her knee.

"It's nothing," Mrs. Hill said.

Polly sat up, still three-quarters asleep. Mr. Hill muttered, blinked, then reared up suddenly, wiping his chin. "What is it?"

"I heard something."

They all listened for a moment.

"It might be gypsies—" Sarah said.

"What would gypsies want here?" Mr. Hill asked.

"Well, the horses."

"Gypsies know horses; gypsies would have more sense."

They listened again. Polly leaned her head against Sarah's shoulder, eyes closing.

"It's nothing. It's probably a rat," said Mrs. Hill. "Puss'll see to it."

Sarah nodded, but still listened. Polly's breathing softened again, her body going slack.

"All right, then," Sarah said. "Bed."

As Sarah stripped the lacing from her stays, moonlight seeped underneath the curtains, and soaked right through their weave. In her shift, she drew back the drapes and looked out across the yard, at the moon hanging huge and yellow above the stables. All was clear almost, as day; the buildings stood silent, the windows dark; there was no movement. No gypsies certainly, not even the slip-scurry of a rat.

Might it be the scotchman? Might he be bedding down for the night here, and away at dawn before anybody knew? His pack empty, he'd be off to restock at one of the market or manufacturing towns. Now that would be a thing indeed, to live like that. To be there and

gone and never staying anywhere a moment longer than you wanted; to wander through the narrow lanes and the wide city streets, perhaps even as far as the sea. By tomorrow, who knew: he could be at Stevenage, or maybe even London.

Her candle guttered in the draught. Sarah blew out the flame, dropped the curtain, and crept into bed beside Polly's sleeping warmth. She lay looking across at the veiled window; she would not get a wink, not tonight; she was quite sure of it, not with the bright moonlight and the knowledge that the pedlar might yet be out there. But Sarah, being young, and having been on her feet and hard at work since four thirty, and it now striking eleven, was soon breathing softly, lost in sleep.

“Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable.”

They were lucky to get him. That was what Mr. B. said, as he folded his newspaper and set it aside. What with the War in Spain, and the press of so many able fellows into the Navy; there was, simply put, a dearth of men.

A dearth of men? Lydia repeated the phrase, anxiously searching her sisters’ faces: was that indeed the case? Was England *running out of men*?

Her father raised his eyes to heaven; Sarah, meanwhile, made big astonished eyes at Mr. Hill: a new servant joining the household! A *manservant*! Why hadn’t she mentioned it before? Mrs. Hill, clutching the coffee pot to her bosom, made big eyes back, and shook her head: shhh! I don’t know, and don’t you dare say a word! So Sarah just gave half a nod, clamped her lips shut, and returned her attention to the table, proffering the platter of cold ham: all would come clear in good time, but it did not do to ask. It did not do to speak at all unless directly addressed. It was best to be deaf as a stone to these conversations, and seem as incapable of forming an opinion on them.

Miss Mary lifted the serving fork and skewered a slice of ham. “Papa doesn’t mean your beaux, Lydia—do you, Papa?”

Mr. B., leaning out of the way so that Mrs. Hill could pour his coffee, said that indeed he did not mean her beaux: Lydia’s beaux always seemed to be in more than plentiful supply. But of working men there was a genuine shortage, which is why he had settled with this lad so promptly—this with an apologetic glance to Mrs. Hill, as she moved around him and went to fill his wife’s cup—though the quarter day of Michaelmas was not quite yet upon them, being the more usual occasion for the hiring and dismissal of servants.

“You don’t object to this hasty act, I take it, Mrs. Hill?”

“Indeed I am very pleased to hear of it, sir, if he be a decent sort of fellow.”

“He is, Mrs. Hill; I can assure you of that.”

“Who is he, Papa? Is he from one of the cottages? Do we know the family?”

Mr. B. raised his cup before replying. “He is a fine upstanding young man, of good family. I had an excellent character of him.”

“I, for one, am very glad that we will have a nice young man to drive us about,” said Lydia, “for when Mr. Hill is perched up there on the carriage box it always looks as though we have trained a monkey, shaved him here and there and put him in a hat.”

Mrs. Hill stepped away from the table, and set the coffee pot down on the buffet.

“Lydia!” Jane and Elizabeth spoke at once.

“What? He does, you know he does. Just like a spider-monkey, like the one Mrs. Long’s sister brought with her from London.”

Mrs. Hill looked down at a willow-pattern dish, empty, though crusted round with egg. The three tiny people still crossed their tiny bridge, and the tiny boat crawled like an earwig across the china sea, and all was calm there, and unchanging, and perfect. She breathed. Mi

Lydia meant no harm, she never did. And however heedlessly she expressed herself, she was right: this change was certainly to be welcomed. Mr. Hill had become, quite suddenly, old. Last winter had been a worrying time: the long drives, the late nights while the ladies danced or played at cards; he had got deeply cold, and had shivered for hours by the fire on his return, his breath rattling in his chest. The coming winter's balls and parties might have done for him entirely. A nice young man to drive the carriage, and to take up the slack about the house; it could only be to the good.

Mrs. Bennet had heard tell, she was now telling her husband and daughters delightedly, how in the best households they had nothing but menservants waiting on the family and guests, on account of everyone knowing that they cost more in the way of wages, and that there was a high tax to pay on them, because all the fit strong fellows were wanted for the fields and for the war. When it was known that the Bennets now had a smart young man about the place, waiting at table, opening the doors, it would be a thing of great note and marvel in the neighbourhood.

"I am sure our daughters should be vastly grateful to you, for letting us appear to such advantage, Mr. Bennet. You are so considerate. What, pray, is the young fellow's name?"

"His given name is James," Mr. Bennet said. "The surname is a very common one. He is called Smith."

"James Smith."

It was Mrs. Hill who had spoken, barely above her breath, but the words were said. James lifted her cup and sipped; Elizabeth raised her eyebrows but stared at her plate; Mrs. Bennet glanced round at her housekeeper. Sarah watched a flush rise up Mrs. Hill's throat; it was so new and strange that even Mrs. Hill had forgot herself for a moment. And then Mr. Bennet swallowed, and cleared his throat, breaking the silence.

"As I said, a common enough name. I was obliged to act with some celerity in order to secure him, which is why you were not sooner informed, Mrs. Hill; I would much rather have consulted you in advance."

Cheeks pink, the housekeeper bowed her head in acknowledgement.

"Since the servants' attics are occupied by your good self, your husband and the housemaids, I have told him he might sleep above the stables. Other than that, I will leave the practical and domestic details to you."

"Thank you, sir," she murmured.

"Well." Mr. B. shook out his paper, and retreated behind it. "There we are, then. I am glad that it is all settled."

"Yes," said Mrs. B. "Are you not always saying, Hill, how you need another pair of hands about the place? This will lighten your load, will it not? This will lighten all your loads."

Their mistress took in Sarah with a wave of her plump hand, and then, with a flap toward the outer reaches of the house, indicated the rest of the domestic servants: Mr. Hill who was hunkered in the kitchen, riddling the fire, and Polly who was, at that moment, thumping down the back stairs with a pile of wet Turkish towels and a scowl.

"You should be very grateful to Mr. Bennet for his thoughtfulness, I am sure."

"Thank you, sir," said Sarah.

The words, though softly spoken, made Mrs. Hill glance across at her; the two of them caught eyes a moment.

“Thank you, sir,” said Mrs. Hill.

Mrs. Bennet dabbed a further spoonful of jam on her remaining piece of buttered muffin, popped it in her mouth, and chewed it twice; she spoke around her mouthful: “That’ll be all for now, Mrs. Hill.”

Mr. B. looked up from his paper at his wife, and then at his housekeeper.

“Yes, thank you very much, Mrs. Hill,” he said. “That will be all for now.”

When first Mr. Bennet had married, economy was held to be perfectly useless ...

Sarah carried a chamber pot down from the Bennets' room, crossing the landing towards the narrow back stairs. She went carefully, head turned aside. Just nightwater, thankfully; not the dreadful slopping thunk of solids.

It was pissing it down outside, and confined by bad weather for the morning, the young ladies made the house rattle with noise. From upstairs came the sound of Mary practising on the piano—it seemed, to Sarah's untrained ear, rather pleasant: lots of notes, in quick succession, and most of them sounded like the right ones—a laugh from Lydia, hammering footfalls, and then an angry outburst from poor Kitty—"Too many people in this house! Just too many people!"—and then Elizabeth's calls for peace, and then Jane's emollient tones, and then, for a while at least, calm. Oil on troubled waters, Jane was: a blanket over flames.

Sarah clumped down to the ground floor, past the open door onto the hall, where she caught the low mutter of Mr. B.'s voice coming from the library; he'd often address himself to the empty air, or rather to his book: it was the only way, he'd say, that he could be sure of a decent conversation in that place.

Just past the open doorway, Sarah stopped, mid-step: there was another voice. It was not the book that he'd been talking to had spoken back. It was a woman's voice, pitched low, so that the words themselves could not be distinguished, but Sarah recognized the speaker instantly. It was Mrs. Hill. And she just kept on talking.

Sarah took a step back and peered down the hallway. The library door was shut. The glossed wood, the polished brass doorknob: all was as it ever was, and as it should be. And yet the door seemed somehow quite particularly, pointedly shut.

The pot was growing heavy in her hands, and she could hear the rain hissing down outside and the gutters dripping, and Mrs. Hill still talking, low, urgent, insistent, the words themselves teasingly unclear. It was a cardinal sin to eavesdrop; Mrs. Hill herself had impressed this upon both Sarah and Polly in their training, but this was just too much. Sarah set the pot down on the bare boards, slipped out of the servants' corridor and crept, breath held, along the main hall.

A hand on the cool wood of the library door, she listened. She still could not hear *what* was being said; she could only hear that *something* was; so it wasn't really eavesdropping, was it? And still Mrs. Hill talked, and talked, and the longer she talked the stranger it became that she was still talking. Mr. B. would lend you a book, but he didn't want to hear what you thought about it. He'd say thank you for any service you performed, but he wouldn't even catch your eye. How could she have so much to say to him, and why—and this was the truly baffling thing—was he just letting her go on saying it?

Then something changed. Three words from Mr. Bennet, like dropped stones: *You may go*. Sarah guessed. She raced on tiptoe back down the hall, slipping through the open door into the servants' corridor. Heart pounding, she crouched to lift the chamber pot, then peered

back the way she'd come. But Mrs. Hill did not emerge. And from inside the library it was like when the ginger beer went wrong—the top burst off the bottle, the contents foaming over until what must be spilt was spilt: a torrent from Mrs. Hill. Sarah's eyes widened. How could she be so angry? How could she *dare* to be?

And then—Sarah nearly dropped the chamber pot, had to clutch and steady it—Mr. Bennet did not simply send Mrs. Hill away, but instead raised his voice over hers, and then there was a tangle, the voices spiralling up and growing louder, then suddenly hushed, to be followed by a furious hissing, which stopped abruptly, like a cut thread. There were footsteps, and then a fumbling at the inside of the door, and the handle turned. But Sarah had already slipped away, out through the side door, and was closing it behind her, and turning to face the rain; she did not see Mrs. Hill come out of the library, shut the door, and stand there a moment, chest heaving, to calm herself, struggling with the constriction of her stays.

As Sarah headed away from the house, she could hear Mary still picking out her music, and another squabble brewing between Kitty and Lydia, and in a moment Jane and Lizzy would intervene again, and the rain fell thick and heavy on Sarah, who crossed the gravel and heaved open the door of the necessary house, and leaned into the cold stinking little room to slop the contents of the chamber pot through one of the holes, down into the foul pit below. Everything was as it always was, and yet everything was different.

Six years old, heartsick, and all alone in the world, Sarah had blinked up at Mrs. Hill, a person of substance with her clean apron and her white cap and her vast kitchen. Mrs. Hill had chivvied the Parish Overseer out of the door, and clapped it shut behind him, and said he was a fox set to guard chicks, and then had drawn up a stool at the kitchen table for Sarah and then produced bread-and-milk in a pretty blue-rimmed china bowl, and grated sugar over it. Then she had sat down to watch Sarah eat. All shyness flown, Sarah, straight from the poorhouse, had scraped the bowl clean in a trice. And so Mrs. Hill, tutting and shaking her head, calling it criminal the way they starved these poor children, had taken the bowl, and filled it again with good bread and sweet creamy milk, and set it down in front of Sarah, and then scraped more sugar over the top of it.

And for that second bowl of bread-and-milk with sugar on the top, and for all the uncountable kindnesses since, to her and then to Polly when she had joined them—similar saucer-eyed and starving—Mrs. Hill deserved better than this. Sin or no, Sarah knew she would not eavesdrop again: nothing good could come of it.

... *the entrance of the footman* ...

Sarah's thoughts were tugged away across the courtyard by the sound of old furniture being shifted, of wood crumping down on flagstones, all of it accompanied by a faint whistling. The rain had stopped now, and the new man was hard at work clearing out the stable loft. The tune seemed familiar but she couldn't quite catch it. It fluttered around her like a moth, distracting.

Not that the task in hand required particular attention. She was elbow-deep in the sludge sink in the scullery; condensation beaded the lead water-tank, its tap dripped, and the washing-up water had become grey and cool and greasy. Polly, having dried up a stack of plates, wandered through into the kitchen with them; Sarah could hear her dragging a stool over, then clambering up on it to reach the shelves and put the plates away. And all the time all that Sarah could actually think about was the man across the way.

Of men, she had scant experience. She steered around Mr. Hill: he was old and worn-out and offered nothing by way of interest or engagement. She had very little to do with Mr. B who was, after all, only really present in the physical sense. She kept her distance from the farm lads; it was kinder to ignore them than to pay them any attention at all—say good morning and they'd be blushing and mumbling and wiping their hands down their britches and staring off out across the fields, as if there was something of great interest on the horizon.

The egg pan sank deep into the sink; Sarah watched the glair whiten and lift. Jane did well with men—with gentlemen. One of them had even written her some poems. How did you get a man to do a thing like that?

Jane, well, she sat nicely, and smiled, and she listened with her head tilted, and replied politely when spoken to, and she always seemed quietly pleased to be spoken to, and to dance if she was asked to dance. But Jane was really very lovely indeed—a beauty, in fact—and she was dealing with *gentlemen*, not *men*. An ordinary girl, Sarah thought, such as herself would be taking quite a risk with that approach—she straightened her shoulders, smile tilted her head—on an ordinary man. Only a gentleman would have that kind of time on his hands, would have the leisure to devote his hours to winkling a female out of herself.

Sarah looked down at her sore, pruney fingers, and the limp folds of her bile-coloured dress. She lifted her hands to sniff them: grease and onions and kitchen soap. This must be the smell she carried with her, wherever she went, whenever it was not something worse. Sarah was not confident that she was lovely at all; far from it.

She lifted the ham pan, dipped it into the sink. Water bubbled up over the copper sides and cascaded in.

“These done?” Polly asked.

“Yes, take them.”

Elizabeth. She was a different, much more active, creature, when it came to dealing with

gentlemen. Sarah had seen it at dinners, and at supper-and-cards, when she handed round the anchovy toasts. Elizabeth was always ready with a what-do-you-call-'em, a *witticism*. Bright-eyed and quick and lovely, making the young men blush and stammer, and the old fellows smile and wish they were half their age, and that bit sharper in their wits.

Sarah bit at what was left of a nail. She wasn't up to that.

Lydia and Kitty—whom Sarah sometimes struggled to think of as two separate persons, but saw instead as one collective creature of four limbs, two heads, and a bundle of frocks and ribbons—Kitty and Lydia always had a hum of men around them. Curl-tossing, a bold look: wasn't hard to copy—she copied it now, as there was no one to see her do it. They pitched themselves at every unmarried man who came their way, which made for rowdy card-parties and dances. Their approach required nothing more of a girl than enthusiasm, stamina and a copper-bottomed sense of self-importance. But really, did it amount to anything? Any man, all, gentle or otherwise, would surely be squeamish about attaching himself to a woman who had already flirted with every other man of her acquaintance.

Sarah lifted the copper milk pan, tilted it, watched her reflection spindle up and down the side: tadpole head, tapering body; swelling body, shrinking head. Bringing the pan close up she regarded herself with a bull's eye. There was little benefit in making a show of yourself when you were a wrung-out dishrag of a thing.

She could not model herself on Mary, either; she was unfledged still, a shabby nestling, her plumage not yet grown.

Mr. and Mrs. B., then. Married love. No good in that at all. The mistress had no understanding of her husband; she persisted in tackling him head-on, when, as everybody else already knew, you were better off taking a more circuitous path, and weaving your way around the obstacles.

If anything, the Hills were a better model of understanding between the sexes. Mrs. Hill maintained a calm and mild demeanour towards her husband, and Mr. Hill was always respectful, and deferred to her in all material things, and insisted too that others show deference and respect. Sarah had had plenty of cross words off both of them in her time, but she had never once heard a cross word between them. Maybe that was just what it was like when you had been married for ever: all fell still as a pond, and passionless.

She was, she realized, entirely on her own, and without example or a guide.

The best that she could think of—and it did have a pleasing simplicity to it—was to be civil. To be civil and polite and welcoming; natural manners were always considered the best—she'd heard Miss Elizabeth say so.

So she would say, "Good morning." That would start things off.

She rubbed the mist from the window and looked out. Low sun now, after all the rain. The light was golden: it caught on the damp flagstones and made them brilliant. And there he was. He was wiry, of middling height, his shirtsleeves rolled back and his forearms bare and weather-tanned, and he moved with a pleasing briskness about his work. His shirt, she supposed, had once been white, but was greyish now with wear; he kept his long dark hair tied back in a queue. She noticed all this through a welling sense of delight.

"Polly!" she called. "Polly, come and see."

Polly came down the step from the kitchen, wiping her hands. They both leaned in again to the sink, and peered out through the clear patch in the misty window.

“Oh my—”

Sarah put her arm around Polly's waist. The girl rested her head against Sarah's shoulder.

“That,” said Sarah, “is one job we won't have to do.”

They watched in silent happiness as the new man swept the yard.

When she went out—cap neat, cheeks pinched, teeth rubbed shiny with a corner of her apron—to feed the gallinies, she could hear him moving around in the stable loft. Could she go inside and call “Good morning” up the ladder to him? Then he might look—or even climb—down, and she could say thank you for all his hard work, and he'd have to reply to that, and that would be almost a conversation in itself.

Mrs. Hill came bustling out of the house; Sarah looked down at the bowl of chicken scrap and then up at the housekeeper: she could summon no excuses for loitering there. Mrs. Hill, though, was too busy to notice Sarah's dawdling. She had a sheaf of old clothes slung over her arm, and was dragging the clothes-horse out behind her. She thumped it down, then set about battling with its wooden rungs.

“Can I help you there, missus?”

“I can manage, thank you, Sarah.”

Mrs. Hill heaved the clothes in a heap on the stone bench, then lifted a jacket off the top of the pile. She shook it out, and turned it round, inspecting it. She snapped it out again, and draped it over the top rung of the clothes-horse. Seeing Sarah still lingering there, she said, “Them chickies do need fed, miss, though. Hop to it.”

The rest of the morning Sarah kept crossing the yard. He could not stay in the stable loft all day, she told herself; he *must* come out at some point, and when he did, she would say “Good morning,” and he would say “Good morning” back. Then she would thank him for sweeping up the yard for them, and he would say “You're welcome,” and it would go from there, and that would be that.

But if he did emerge at all, in the middle part of that day, she missed him. She caught the smell of fresh whitewash, though, and from time to time the sound of him whistling.

The afternoon stretched out like catgut. She thought he might come across to the kitchen to beg a cup of tea. She wondered if she ought to take a cup over for him, but then she'd have to ask Mrs. Hill to brew up, and dinner preparations were now in full flood, and Mrs. Hill would not welcome the suggestion that she pause in the middle of all that, just to put the kettle on.

Sarah was chopping the fennel, the aniseed-smell of it sweet and clean, her lip caught between her front teeth while she considered the likeliness and otherwise of tea; Mrs. Hill was gutting the carp, with Puss twining and coiling around her ankles, demanding notice; she dropped the innards for it to catch. Polly, meanwhile, pumped the bellows at the fire, watching as the fuel flared and sparked. They could hear Mr. Hill thumping around below them, down in the cellar, where he was selecting the wine. Mrs. Hill took up her scaling knife and set to scraping the milky-silver scales from the flank of the fish. Then her hands were still.

“The apple pie!”

“Apple pie?”

“I forgot all about it.”

“I thought it was to be gooseberry.”

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