

LUCY WORSLEY

The
Austen
Girls

What might
the future hold
for Jane's nieces?

BLOOMSBURY

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Illustrated by Joe Berger

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Chapter 1

Fanny's bedroom, Godmersham Park

The belle of the ball!

Anna was looking at herself in the mirror, pulling at her long curly hair, twisting it, piling it up on her head, letting it all fall down again with a theatrical sigh. 'Will I get more partners with my hair up, or down?'

'Oh, Anna,' said Fanny. 'Your hair will fall out if you pull it about so much. And when did you suddenly become Lady Full Of Herself? What if no one asks us to dance at all?'

Fanny herself was on her knees, down on the Turkey carpet, picking up the pins Anna had swept off the dressing table and scattered on the floor while pinning

up the hem of her skirt. She sighed. Of course Anna had left it far too late to get the skirt hemmed properly. Fanny's thumb was still sore from the emergency tacking she'd done without her thimble, as a favour for her disorganised cousin.

Fanny's own dancing dress was laid out waiting on the bed, almost as if a proper lady's maid had done it, that extra lady's maid her mother said they needed at Godmersham Park, but which her father insisted they couldn't afford. Gown, stockings, slippers. She'd had everything organised, yet here she was at the last minute, down on the floor in her chemise. It always seemed to be like this, with nine brothers and sisters, not to mention her cousin. Always someone else to look after. Always someone else to put before herself.

But Fanny's predicament, as usual, completely passed Anna by.

'Fanny,' Anna continued, suddenly serious, 'do you have a secret feeling, deep down, that you'll never, ever get a husband?' She was pouting at her own reflection, turning her head this way and that.

Fanny dug her fingers into the soft, rich, comforting carpet. Would she ever find a real-life husband? Would she even find a partner to dance with at tonight's ball? She just didn't know. But what she did know was that getting

married was the only topic she, her cousin and her sisters ever talked about here at Godmersham Park. Marriage – a ‘good’ marriage, as Fanny’s mother always said, to ‘the right sort of man’ – was the goal towards which Fanny’s life had been building.

Fanny often imagined that moment of the proposal, the way she would gasp, clasp her hands to her mouth and run, run, ever so fast, to tell her mother and sisters and Anna what had happened.

She couldn’t really imagine what would come next, or what it would be like to be married. Or even what the man doing the asking would look like. The proposal, that was enough. That was all she wanted.

In her most private thoughts, though, Fanny worried that all her sisters and cousins, all the other girls in Kent, indeed all the girls in England, would be engaged to be married before she was. Surely she was too quiet, her hair too limp, her skin too flaky, for anyone to choose her.

Fanny imagined herself growing older, her carpet growing threadbare, the mantelpiece empty of invitations to balls ... her mother often said how awful it must be to be a spinster.

‘Mmm,’ Fanny said at last, doubtfully, unwilling to answer her cousin’s question. She gathered up the fallen

pins by popping them between her lips. That would give her an excuse to keep quiet. Anna had somehow poked her finger into Fanny's fear of not doing the right thing, of disappointing her parents. As she always did. Anna was like that – she generally said what everyone else was thinking but dared not put into words.

Standing up, Fanny started to pluck out the pins, and to prick them neatly back into her pincushion, a raggedy affair that had been a birthday gift from her younger sister Lizzie. Anna now noticed in the looking glass what Fanny was doing.

'Fanny!' she said, throwing up her hands, her hair unravelling again. 'Pins in your mouth! You'll swallow one and choke to death!' She wrapped her hands round her throat, bulged out her eyes and began to mime a person choking to death.

Fanny couldn't help but smile, which of course made some of the pins fall back on to the carpet.

'Frances Austen,' her cousin now declaimed solemnly, as if at a funeral, 'lived for nearly sixteen sweet years on God's earth before choking on a pin. My friends, she was a good girl ... yet she died an old maid. No man in the counties of Kent or Hampshire would have her.'

'All right, all right,' Fanny said, laughing, and abandoning the pins at last. 'You're right. Despite what my

mother says, I probably won't ever get a husband. I can't think who'd ask me. And I don't know why *you*, all of a sudden, think that you're going to be the belle of the ball.'

'It's a trick,' Anna said. 'Aunt Jane taught me, it's a trick of the mind. You tell yourself, and tell yourself, that a certain thing is going to happen, and you start to believe that it's going to happen, and then ... it does. So I've decided that I *am* going to find a husband, and get married, and have a home of my own, because I really, really must. Because I can't bear not to have one any longer, and I'm going to do it tonight!'

'Oh, Anna,' said Fanny. 'Slow down. This is only just the beginning. Nobody finds a husband at her very first ball.'

'Oh, *Fanny*,' Anna replied, almost crossly. 'What a dreamer you are. Lots of girls find their husbands at their very first ball. It's the best chance we've got! You've got to strike while the iron is hot, and people think you're fresh and new.'

She was staring at her own reflection again, and there was something a little grim in her face.

Anna was nervous too, Fanny realised. Despite all her fine words and tricks of the mind.

Fanny patted her cousin's shoulder and turned away

from the dressing table. Although she'd been doing her best to pretend to look forward to the ball, she'd been feeling a little sick all day.

She'd been telling herself that it didn't matter all that much, that it was only one winter evening, a quiet country ball in the quiet county of Kent.

Her debut into high society wasn't life or death. Of course not. It would be silly to think that it was.

'Finding a husband *really is* a matter of life or death, you know, Fan.' Anna was now strangling herself with her bunch of dark hair, brutally tightening it around her neck, lolling her head to one side and rolling her eyes like a corpse.

What a ridiculous girl, Fanny thought fondly. Anna was so ... *loud* and funny and confident and beautiful, the whole time. Of course she would find a husband easily.

Whereas Fanny wasn't any of those things. She loved her sisters, she loved reading ... she never knew what to say to people. She was boring. Unlike Anna.

It was at that very moment, when Anna was in the final throes of her death agony, that Fanny's mother came in.

It was obvious at once that Elizabeth Austen was in one of her states.

‘Girls! What *are* you doing?’

Fanny’s mother was looking round the room aghast. Fanny had to concede that it did look as if a whirlwind had come in, rummaged round, and swooshed back out again. Anna always had that effect. She seemed magically to extract every item of clothing Fanny owned out of her presses and cupboards and throw them all down on to the floor.

Elizabeth Austen stood, her hands on her hips, and groaned.

‘Girls,’ she said seriously. ‘You are not ready. You are not even *nearly* ready. It’s as if you’re not taking it seriously! This first ball of your first season, you know, is a matter of—’

‘Life or death!’ Anna shouted, twitching in her corpse-like pose half in and half out of her chair.

Fanny was torn between whether to laugh, because Anna *did* look so ridiculous, or whether to try to appease the storm that must surely follow.

To her surprise, Elizabeth’s pouchy cheeks quivered as if she was amused as well. In unkind moments, Fanny’s brother Edward would mimic their mother’s way of nibbling at a bread roll. He made her seem just like an inquisitive, twitchy-nosed guinea pig. And now, instead

of exploding into one of her rages, Elizabeth stepped forward and picked up Fanny's gown from the bed.

She held it up to her own ample shoulders, pointed out one toe, and sighed.

'Oh!' she said. 'I remember when I could get into a dress this tiny, and how I used to dance. I danced all night! We all did, my sisters and I.'

For a second, she stood still, lost in her memories, rather than bustling ferociously about as she did most of the time.

Fanny stood up and went over, joining her mother in admiring and stroking the dress.

'Do you like it, Mama?'

Elizabeth had been too busy to see the finished gown when it had arrived from the dressmaker's the previous day. It had been Anna and Lizzie who'd been there by Fanny's side, hooting and whooping, as she undid the box.

'Very nice, dear,' she said. 'But choose a brighter colour next time. White will make you look like a village girl, not a Miss Austen of Godmersham.'

'But, Mother!' Fanny said. 'Aunt Jane said that white was the only colour for ...'

She faltered. In retrospect, Aunt Jane's words seemed a bit too ludicrous to repeat. Fanny also couldn't be sure whether she'd been joking, like she so often was. Fanny

looked again, doubtfully, at the white dress, and wondered if it was really ... all right.

'Aunt Elizabeth,' said Anna authoritatively, standing up, 'Aunt Jane said that Fanny *must* wear white. It's the colour for a heroine at her first ball, and Aunt Jane said that Miss Fanny Austen of Godmersham Park *must surely* be the heroine of the ball.'

Fanny wished she had just one jot of Anna's confidence. For this had been exactly what her mother wished to hear.

'You're right, Anna,' she said. 'Miss Fanny Austen will be the belle of the ball, and I suppose it's for the best that she should wear white. Modest and demure. Everyone will be looking at you anyway, Fanny! The eldest Miss Austen all grown up! Oh, how you'll glow inside. I remember that feeling of all the gentlemen watching you as you begin the first dance.'

Something else seemed to occur to Fanny's mother. She tossed the dress back on to the bed – carefully, so it wouldn't be creased – and grabbed one hand of each girl, pulling them down beside her on the mattress.

'You might,' she said, more thoughtfully than usual, 'be feeling a little nervous. I do remember that too. And you're such a nervy girl, Fanny. Anna's much more like I was. But remember this. You must show the other

young ladies how to behave. You're from Godmersham Park! You have standards to live up to! Everybody in Kent knows that Mr Edward Austen is the most important gentleman in this neighbourhood. Don't forget.'

Fanny tried to peer round her mother's substantial bosom to see what Anna made of that. She knew something of Anna's feelings about the grand Kent-based Austens of Godmersham Park, as opposed to her own less-grand family, the other branch of the Austens who lived in Hampshire.

But now her mother was rattling on, much more in her usual manner. 'I mean to get you two girls off *quickly*,' she said, 'as there are so many of your sisters, Fanny, to get off too, and a quick start sets the pace. Mrs Lewes already has three daughters married! And not one of them yet twenty.'

She prepared to stand up, pitching herself forward to get the momentum to stagger to her feet.

'So it's quite unnecessary,' Elizabeth Austen said briskly, 'to feel at all nervous. The dancing will be over in no time, and you'll be plodding up the aisle, and then children will come, and you'll miss your lost youth, like I do. Now, let's get you dressed.'

At once she began to whisk round the room, her little feet moving with remarkable speed. She was here, there

and everywhere, picking up stays, quickly and firmly lacing Fanny into them, giving two twists to Anna's hair that made it look better than anything Anna had yet achieved, and only growing impatient towards the very end, with the clasp of Fanny's seed pearls.

'There!' Elizabeth said, surveying her handiwork. Fanny wished for the umpteenth time that her own fine hair, so colourless, was luxuriant like Anna's. However carefully she tonged it, Fanny's pale hair never held a curl.

It had been a long time since her mother had looked at her, really looked at her, like that. Would she pass muster?

But Elizabeth's guinea-pig cheeks raised themselves up into a slow smile.

'Good luck, girls!' she said, with satisfaction.

Then she dropped her voice, as if she thought that nobody would hear. 'I'm certain they'll be married before Christmas,' she said.

Elizabeth pointed to the door. The general had given her orders. Fanny and Anna nodded at each other and stepped forward. There was no choice. There was no going back now.



Chapter 2

The stairs, Godmersham Park

Just outside the bedroom door Anna stopped so suddenly that Fanny cannoned into her cousin's back.

The obstruction was her father, on the landing in his best coat, the one that made him suck his stomach in before he could button it up. He now stuck out his leg, and eased himself into a low bow.

'Quite charming!' he said. 'You look charming, girls. And your carriage awaits!'

Elizabeth was smiling and clasping her hands.

'Oh, Mr Austen,' she said. 'Look how ... *marriageable* the girls are! Very pretty indeed!'

She lowered her voice to continue, but Fanny's

mother's idea of a whisper was just as loud as a normal person talking at a normal volume, and Fanny could hear her perfectly well.

'They'll be off our hands in no time,' she said in his ear. 'Then just four more of those great hungry useless expensive girls to go!'

Fanny could feel her cheeks turning pink. Being bowed to, by her own father, was all so very different from being told off for running, or shouting, or for not watching her little brother and he could have fallen under the horse's hooves and did she not have eyes in her head to see and suchlike.

Her father beamed and resumed his normal height.

'Not really girls any more,' he said in his jovial way, as if he were addressing his fellow landowners at a political dinner. 'The girls have become young ladies. Young ladies!' he repeated, so loudly that the townsfolk of Canterbury several miles away might possibly have been able to hear him. 'But there's still work to be done. We must get them hitched!'

'Mr Austen! What an inelegant expression!'

Elizabeth's tone rose to match her husband's. They often spoke to each other as if they were shouting across the hunting field.

'HITCHED,' Fanny's father said again, huffing and

puffing and straightening his coat. 'And at the very least,' he continued, 'they can dance tonight with that nice Mr Drummer. He's a fine young fellow.'

'Mr Edward Austen!' groaned his wife, striking a blow on his arm. 'No, and no again. Not Mr Drummer. He's beneath the attention of the Austen girls, even Anna.'

Fanny wondered who this Mr Drummer was, not having heard the name before. But it was Anna who forced the question into her parents' torrent of talk.

'Mr Drummer ... ?' she managed to say.

'Clergyman! Appointed him to the parish – got it all signed and sealed this afternoon.' Edward had already lost interest in the subject, and was taking Fanny's elbow to escort her down the stairs.

It occurred to Fanny, with a twinge of dread, that her father would be doing exactly the same thing in an hour's time. He'd be leading her into the ballroom beneath the eyes of all the gentfolk of Canterbury.

Fanny's skin suddenly felt hot, and she remembered all over again that she was nervous. She could almost sense the pressure of people watching and wondering if she would be chosen by a gentleman. It was more than just a dance. As Anna said, it could, it might, lead to a proposal.

But how could she possibly find herself a husband and make her parents happy, if she couldn't even picture what this imaginary man might be like?

Fanny's mother, of course, had more to say. 'We don't just want the girls *married*,' she continued, at volume, 'we want them married *well*!'

At that, there was a ragged cheer from somewhere up above.

'What's all this hullabaloo?'

Fanny and her father turned to look back up the staircase. The balustrade above was crowded with little faces.

It was as if a signal had been given, and a horde of her sisters, and indeed some of her smaller brothers too, all came running down.

'Children!' Elizabeth was exclaiming. 'You were all sent to bed hours ago!'

But there was no stopping them.

In their nightgowns down came Lizzie, Marianne, even tiny Louie, all of them, Fanny could see, thoroughly overexcited. Mrs Sackree, their nurse, was going to have a long evening of it, she thought.

'An-na! Fan-ny!' they were chanting, like little savages. 'Married! Married!'

'Want to see the *dresses*,' wailed little Louie, who had

delicate feelings, and who'd been left behind by the rest of the stampede.

'Oh, show them, show them,' Edward said. 'They'll be on the market themselves soon enough. Better show them what it's like.'

Fanny felt strangely awkward, even though these were only her sisters whom she knew as well as her own fingers and thumbs. She wasn't used to wearing such a naked-feeling dress with its low neck.

'Ooh, lovely,' shouted Marianne, 'lovely dresses, and they'll dance ... like this.' She spun round and round, as if locked in a partner's embrace.

Fanny waited for her mother to explode. But then she realised that both her parents were just watching Marianne. They had what Fanny might almost have called foolish smiles on their faces.

'That's what it was like, hey, Elizabeth?' her father said. 'But the season for wine and roses was all too short, wasn't it? All too short.'

And then the moment was over, and Elizabeth was turning away, and scoffing.

'Now, Mr Austen,' she said severely. 'No more talk of clergymen. You've been picking up ideas from that sister of yours. Fanny *should* marry money, and Anna ...

must marry money. Clergymen never have any. And please steer the girls well clear of anyone in trade.'

'It's true that my sister introduced Mr Drummer into the parish,' her husband conceded. 'Lord knows where from, exactly, but he's a very brainy fellow.'

'Your sister Jane!' Fanny's mother snorted. 'She doesn't like clergymen enough to marry one and get herself off our hands.'

The little girls had started whooping again, but their mother's voice cut through the din. 'Less of this, if you please!'

'But, Mama,' said Marianne, flopping her bottom down the stairs one by one, 'you said yourself that Fanny and Anna *must* marry –' she bumped down one step more – 'and never mind Fanny's hair or Anna's temper, they must keep a sharp lookout for a husband.'

'Marianne! I'm so ashamed.' Elizabeth spoke sharply. 'What a thing to say.'

'But you said it!' Marianne's voice was rising in pitch.

'I may have *said it*,' Elizabeth scolded, 'but it's not to be repeated. And certainly not *in front of the servants!* Now, back up to the nursery.'

'To be fair,' Anna said, 'you did say it, Aunt Elizabeth, we all heard you. Although I think Fanny's hair is very nice.'

A sudden silence.

Fanny squirmed. As ever, Anna had gone too far. If only she'd remember she wasn't really a member of the family, and that she didn't have the right to say pert things like the little girls did.

The stillness was deafeningly loud.

Her mother made it clear that Anna had done wrong by simply failing to respond.

'Mrs Sackree!' Elizabeth was saying instead. 'Come down this instant and take these wicked girls to bed. And now, for Heaven's sake, Mr Austen, get these two to the ball and ... well, no need for any further discussion.'

Mr Austen at last succeeded in setting off down the stairs at a stately trot. Once she was on the move, something different from dread, something rather like excitement, finally began to surge into Fanny's stomach.

Oh, we're off at last, she said to herself, here's the carriage. Our first ball truly has begun.



Chapter 3

The Star Inn, Canterbury

Fanny bounced at least an inch into the air at each bump in the road. Her father always made their coachman, James, drive slightly too fast.

She sensed rather than saw the passing park as they hurtled through the darkness, towards the town and the Star Inn. She'd have felt the cold of the night, Fanny was sure, if she hadn't been burning up with elation and alarm combined.

Gradually she realised that Anna was discoursing authoritatively about something or other.

'Well, Uncle Edward, if I get the chance, *I* certainly mean to waltz,' she was saying. 'I don't care if the

prim-and-proper people round here think it's indecent. They waltz at Almack's in London, I've read it in the paper, and the Duke of Wellington goes there.'

Edward Austen was spluttering and protesting, but Fanny could tell that his heart wasn't in it. He enjoyed hearing his favourite niece insisting she *was* going to try the scandalous new dance.

'Just don't dance with clergymen, either of you,' he said, in the end. 'And if you do, or if you get involved in any of the newfangled waltzing or suchlike, promise me you won't tell Mrs Austen.'

'All right!' said Anna. 'We won't tell. Fanny, you'll waltz too, won't you? Uncle Edward says we can ... as long as we don't tell Aunt Elizabeth.'

Fanny grinned into the darkness. She didn't plan to do any waltzing, but it was nice to be asked.

The sound of the wheels changed as they passed on to the paved road, now swooping down the hill into the town. To Fanny it suddenly felt all too soon to be arriving, her nerves flustered, her hair surely messed up.

But they'd halted, and Anna was shoving the door open, and the deep cold air was rushing in. She jumped down, trying not to get horse manure from the street on her satin shoes.

'I wasn't expecting to encounter *ordure* this evening,' Anna grumbled, grabbing Fanny's shoulder for support.

Anna was wearing a precious new pair of pumps, Fanny knew, a gift from her own parents. Anna's brown dress was just a hand-me-down from another lady living in Hampshire.

Fanny tried to push down the sudden recollection of the cost of her own gown. She knew that Anna had been shocked when she'd heard its price.

A lantern marked the entrance to the Star Inn, and then they were going up the wide staircase, up, up to the dancing room. They could hear the scraping sound of violins tuning up.

But where was the buzz of conversation? The sound of the crowd?

'Early, God damn it!' Edward said. 'After all that, we're early. Never mind, girls, you can make a grand entrance next time.'

Inside the long ballroom, there were so few people they could see all the way through to the blazing fireplace at the other end. It hardly looked like a ballroom at all, just an empty room.

Had Fanny braced herself ... for this?

But the Star Inn was famous for its winter balls, to

which came all the gentlefolk of Kent. Fanny had heard so much about them, every winter of her life: what dances had been danced, who'd received a proposal ... and now she was really here at last.

Perhaps, with its candles, the room did have something of a glamorous, glowing quality after all. The air smelt rich and sweet.

And it seemed that tonight London fashion had come to dance too. Seated stiffly on a row of chairs were people she didn't recognise. They weren't speaking or moving except for the languid beat of one lady's fan. They were well dressed – *too* well dressed. Fanny could imagine her mother clicking her tongue in annoyance at the sight of someone more fashionable than herself.

Oh, Fanny cringed. How silly she'd been even to half believe Anna when she'd said that Fanny's would be the prettiest dress in the room.

She shrank back behind her father. Her white gown now seemed dowdy compared to the rose-and-yellow outfit of the lady with the fan.

But it was very difficult to disconcert her father.

He went stomping ahead, Anna keeping pace with him, patting her hair, fluffing her brown skirt, turning her head to the side. Fanny knew that she was trying to show off her profile. It really was the most striking angle

of her face. Yet Fanny secretly thought it just looked like Anna was turning her nose up.

‘Good evening!’ Edward was saying. ‘I see Sir William isn’t here yet, so we will just have to do the honours and introduce ourselves. I am Mr Austen, of Godmersham Park, outside the town, you know, a subscriber to the Star Inn Ball for many years, and this is my niece Miss Austen, and my daughter, who is ... erm ... Miss Austen too. Two young ladies. This is their first ball!’

Fanny died a little inside. Why did he have to mention that? It made her and Anna look so ... unsophisticated.

But there was no time to worry about that now. The moment had come for which they had long been practising in Fanny’s bedroom. Fanny glanced at Anna, and knew she was thinking the same thing. They stood side by side, crossed one ankle behind the other, *locked the knees, locked the knees, that was the secret*, and together, slowly, they curtsied. There! It was done. They’d been introduced to strangers, making them officially ‘out’ in society, and therefore ready to be married.

Fanny stood back up again. It hadn’t been that bad. If anything, the room was so astonishingly empty that it was almost an anticlimax.

She’d been concentrating so hard on her curtsy that she hadn’t heard a word of the introductions. The rosy

lady was extending a gloved hand, returning Fanny's clasp so limply that she feared that the fingers inside might actually be dead. But now, who was this? Fanny felt an unaccustomed thrill running down her spine. Here was a young man with glowing golden hair, and curious dark smouldering eyes, bowing down before her. She noticed, with a little shock, how long his black lashes were, long as a girl's. She herself had that same combination of pale hair and dark eyes, she knew it was odd, but on him it was striking ... almost beautiful. He didn't look up through his long lashes, though, as she found herself wishing that he would. Instead, he lazily tossed his longish hair back into place as he stood, and then ... sat back silently down on his seat.

Fanny felt disbelief. He'd just sat down again! As if he had no intention of talking to her. Could he really ... yes, he was! ... he was examining his nails. As if he had all the time in the world.

Fanny could hear her father chatting to the young man's friends, Anna putting in a word here and there, and then here at last was Sir William, the master of ceremonies, a red-faced, squashy-looking gentleman, who often visited them at Godmersham, and who'd known Fanny since she was tiny.

‘My lord Smedley!’ he was saying to the golden young man. ‘Here’s the charming Miss Austen. Her very first ball, you know. Won’t you invite her to dance?’

Fanny had been teetering between triumph and disaster all evening, but now everything seemed to have come together in a golden explosion of wonder. The ball-room! A dance partner! And now it seemed that she would be opening the ball, her first ball, hand in hand with a member of the aristocracy.

She imagined her mother’s proud smile.

She curtsied again, trying to look demure, not smug. For once everything was going just as it should.

She was looking right at Lord Smedley, getting ready to say yes and yet trying not to appear *too* eager, when the blow came.

Lord Smedley looked up, looked away, looked back at his nails.

‘I’m afraid,’ he said, distantly, tossing out the words as if tossing down banknotes to pay an unwelcome debt, ‘that I don’t dance.’

Fanny’s stomach plunged down, down through the floorboards, down to the stables below. How mortifying!

She opened her mouth, but closed it. She’d almost

said, far too quickly, 'Of course, of course, I do apologise for having ...'

Having what? Having assumed?

It had been Sir William, she reminded herself, who'd suggested they dance.

But Anna was there. And of course, Anna would be on Fanny's side.

'How strange of you, my lord,' she was saying, loudly, as if to draw attention to his strangeness, as if he were the odd one, not Fanny.

She put her arm through Fanny's, making as if to draw her away to somewhere much more exciting.

'How strange it is, Sir William,' Anna continued, at even higher volume, 'that my lord Smedley here says he doesn't dance, yet has come to a ball! He must have been mistaken as to the purpose of the gathering.'

The conversation between the young lord's rosy companion and Fanny's father faltered and died, and they turned to see what was happening.

'I'm afraid,' Anna concluded triumphantly, 'that his lordship has mistaken the Star Inn for the barber's shop, and thinks that very soon the *manicurist* will come along to cut his nails!'

There was a burble of laughter; even the rosy lady

joined in. Fanny herself pretended to laugh as well while she and Anna turned away to go to sit by themselves.

Anna had helped, but it had still been humiliating beyond measure.