

# Mild Kindly Looks, Spectacles and Kiddisoaps: Where Has All the Passion Gone? A Look at Marriage in *Jane & Prudence*

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## INTRODUCTION

*Jane & Prudence (J&P)* is rich with insights into marriage and, of the four novels chosen, the only work where our main character is married. At its center are Jane, married to clergyman Nicholas Cleveland, and her friend and former pupil, Prudence Bates, ambivalently unmarried. From the first chapter, it is clear marriage is a core construct of *J&P*: at an Oxford reunion, Jane reflects on *her* marriage even as she hatches a plot to find a suitable mate for Prudence; Prudence conveys mixed feelings about her unmarried state; Miss Birkinshaw, Jane and Prudence's former tutor, articulates the societal imperative that women marry; and the various clergymen's wives form a kind of Greek Chorus echoing Miss Birkinshaw's sentiments. In fact, marriage-related words appear no fewer than thirty-four times in Chapter 1.

The relationship between companionship and passion is the focus of Pym's exploration of the marital state. This dynamic is established early and revisited regularly as Jane reflects wistfully upon this both in her own marriage and that of Fabian Driver to the now deceased Constance. The importance of passion, particularly for men, is established in hilarious fashion by Miss Doggett in her "men want only one thing" mantra.

Add to this already spicy mix, the ingredients of marriage as business transaction and marriage as power struggle and we have quite a delicious marital stew cooked up by Pym. As prelude to exploring Jane and Nicholas's relationship, I will discuss Pym's observations about:

- the societal pressure on women to marry;
- the duties women were expected to perform as wives – typically in service to their husbands;
- the balance of power in relationships between the sexes; and,
- the perception that passion is the sole domain of the male species.

Regarding the nature of the relationship between Jane and Nicholas, I will explore the following questions:

- Can passion be maintained or is companionship the most one can expect in a marriage?;
- Does Jane regret her failings as a clergyman's wife?; and,
- Is she part of a marriage of equals?

### *The Pressure on Women To Be Married*

Regarding the pressure to marry, Pym establishes the societal expectation that women must marry from several points of view. Jane – even as she expresses doubts about her own marriage – hatches a plan to find a suitable mate for Prudence. Jane feels a "...married woman [is]...in some way responsible for her unmarried friends" (122). Prudence – even as she disdains the married "frumps" who were her classmates – expresses discomfort with her unmarried status. Miss Birkinshaw offers the view that to be an unmarried woman is to somehow be less than complete – a view echoed by the various clergymen's wives. Later in the novel, Jessie Morrow, a thirty something spinster, interjects the economic argument for women to marry.

In that eventful first chapter, our narrator tells us: Prudence is 29, ‘...an age that is often rather desperate for a woman who has not yet married’ (7) and Jane is 41, ‘...an age that may bring with it compensations unsuspected by the anxious woman of 29’ (7).

Prudence feels both anxiety and ambivalence about her single state: ‘[She] was conscious...of still being unmarried, though women of 29 or 30 could and still did marry’ (8). Later, when observing the rather dreary garb of her former classmates, she reflects that: ‘One could hardly blame people for classing all University women as frumps...and yet most of them had married – that was the strange and disconcerting thing’ (8).

And, in Chapter 1, we are treated to a wonderful minor character, Miss Birkinshaw who, in her musings, makes quite clear the rarified territory the marital state occupies:

Miss Birkinshaw liked her old students to be clearly labeled – the clergymen's wives, the other wives and those who had “fulfilled” themselves in less obvious ways. (10)

Is there any doubt as to *that* pecking order?

And, if there were any doubt, it is quickly dispelled when we hear an unnamed clergyman's wife comment ‘in a patronising tone’ that work like Prudence's “... must be ample compensation for not being married” (10).

In addition to the societal pressure to marry, there are also economic considerations. In Chapter 13, Jessie tells Miss Doggett and Jane that she “will not be a distressed gentlewoman” (125). When Miss Doggett tells Jessie there's little she can do about this, Jane counters that: “She may make a good marriage” (125). But the idea of marriage as a business transaction is not gender-specific. Early on, our narrator informs us that, when Fabian married Constance, she ‘brought him a comfortable amount of money.’ (57).

Late in the novel, Pym introduces an alternative track to marriage – the comfortable spinster. Eleanor Hitchens, an unmarried classmate of Prudence whom we meet briefly in Chapter 1, comforts Prudence after her break up with Fabian: “You ought to get married...That would settle you” (200). But, as Eleanor speaks further and contemplates the advice she's given Prudence, Eleanor reaches a different conclusion. Let's listen in:

“...I suppose I'll never get a man if I don't take more trouble with myself,” Eleanor went on, but she spoke comfortably and without regret, thinking of her flat in Westminster, her week-end golf, concerts and theatres with women friends...[and]...a good supper afterwards. Prue could have this kind of life if she wanted it...One had to settle down sooner or later into the comfortable spinster or the contented or bored wife (200).

Our author is validating an alternate path for the unmarried woman – the comfortable spinster – a role that recurs regularly in Pym's novels. Later, we will revisit the options Pym provides for the marital state – contented or bored – nary a mention of romance or passion!

### *The Duties of Women in Marriage*

Let's turn to another important and recurring theme: the subservient roles women typically played as wives.

Wives' duties usually revolved around making life easier for their husbands. This is evident in Jane's periodic pangs of guilt about her failure to be the proper clergyman's wife and her musings about what a good wife Prudence would make. We even get a glimpse of a marriage from another novel – Mildred Lathbury to Everard Bone (*Excellent Women*). This glimpse specifically addresses the issue of a woman providing support to her husband.

Let's begin with Jane. As we first meet her, she thinks back to the early days of her relationship with Nicholas:

When she and Nicholas were engaged Jane had taken great pleasure in imagining herself as a clergyman's wife... But she had been greatly disillusioned... Jane's outspokenness and fantastic turn of mind were not appreciated; other qualities which she did not possess and which seemed impossible to acquire were apparently necessary. And then, as the years passed and she realised Flora was to be her only child, she was again conscious of failure.

These are very strong words and express a sense of Jane's having failed to live up to society's expectations of her. Our narrator confirms that the outside world would indeed agree with Jane's assessment. Jane is described as a 'great novel reader, perhaps too much so for a vicar's wife' (15) who 'hardly yet grasped where the kitchen was... a part of the house she took very little interest in' (18). Later, she herself wonders if Nicholas really minded her missing the Mother's Union tea:

... "After all," Jane said [to Nicholas], "I don't really feel so very much of a mother, having only one child, and you know how bad I am at presiding at meetings..." (66).

Even a task as simple as pouring tea seems to have eluded Jane:

"I always do it rather badly," said Jane, "The ability to pour tea gracefully didn't come to me automatically when I married" (112).

Jane also turns her attention to Prudence and how good a wife she would prove to be for Fabian Driver:

...She would certainly make an admirable mistress... She could give cultured little dinner parties with candles on the table and the right wines and food (124).

Miss Doggett weighs in with her views on the duties of wives when she discusses the recent marriage of characters Excellent Women:

"That nice Miss Lathbury has got married...He [Everard] is a brilliant man... She helped him a good deal in his work... She even learned to type so she could type his manuscripts for him" (125).

Jane, who is part of this conversation, initially agrees stating: '... "he would be quite sure she would be a useful wife," she added a little sadly, thinking of her own failures' (125). But she reconsiders a bit later when discussing with Miss Doggett a possible Prudence/Fabian marriage:

"Typing a man's thesis, correcting proofs, putting sheets side-to-middle, bringing up children, balancing the house-keeping budget – all of these are nothing, really," said Jane in a sad, thoughtful tone. (126)

Prudence also has a view on how well her friend has played the role of the clergyman's wife:

...here she [Jane] was trying, though not very hard, to be an efficient clergyman's wife, and with only very moderate success (83).

We will return to the question of how hard Jane tries to master the role of clergyman's wife but first let's look more closely at men and passion.

### *Passion: Is It Really What Men Want?*

Before discussing Jane's regrets about the loss of passion in her marriage, it is important to understand the view described in J&P of men as passionate creatures. On the surface, the message appears quite straightforward: men are by nature more passionate than women. But in the Pymian world, things are often not as they first appear.

Various minor and major characters comment on the passionate, baser nature of men, often using food as a humorous metaphor. Let me recite a brief litany of these references:

Mrs. Mayhew: 'a man must have his meat' (30); Prudence, to Geoffrey Manifold: "You men have such enormous appetites" (45); Mrs. Crampton: "a man needs his eggs" (52); Jane: "man needs bird" (52); Jessie: man needs meat; Miss Doggett: "...a man needs a cooked breakfast" (90); Jessie: "Men seem to need a lot of food at all times."

Miss Doggett asserts that "men want only one thing" (70). A smile, of course, comes to one's lips, when the Narrator goes on to explain that 'Miss Doggett...looked puzzled; it was as if she had heard that men wanted only one thing, but had forgotten for the moment what it was' (70). Pym uses humor to suggest it is not so easy to determine what men really want and perhaps it is quite different from what Miss Doggett perceives.

Jessie Morrow comments tartly on men and passion when she tells Jane about Fabian Driver's relationship with his deceased wife, Constance:

"Her husband was more interested in other women than he was in her. Her death came as a great shock to him – he had almost forgotten her existence."

But Pym turns this on its ear later in the novel when we are given Jane thinks about Fabian's philandering ways:

[Jane] had a theory that...[Fabian] tended to make love to women...because he couldn't really think of much to say to them. (96)

When Jane, Nicholas and Prudence discuss Flora's qualifications as a wife, we begin to understand that passion may be a two way street. Nicholas says: "Flora is shaping very well as a cook...She will make a good wife for somebody one of these days" (82). Jane has a different view:

"But men don't want only that..." Her sentence trailed off vaguely, for perhaps she too had difficulty remembering what it was that men wanted. (82)

Here Pym reinforces the view that men are perhaps not as single minded as Miss Doggett believes but also gives us a hint that Jane is missing passion in her life.

Food is also a useful transition to begin discussing the passion Jane seeks in her life. Here's a wonderful exchange between Jane and Prudence as they prepare a supper:

"Have you some garlic?" Prudence asked.

"Garlic?" echoed Jane in astonishment. "Certainly not! Imagine a clergyman and his wife going about the parish smelling of garlic! I should have liked the kind of life where one ate food flavoured with garlic, but it was not to be." (156)

So let's explore the lack of spice in Jane's marriage.

### *Jane and the Loss of Passion*

As the novel opens, Jane rues the onset of middle age and its corrosive effects on the passion in her marriage to Nicholas:

"Ah, those delphiniums," sighed Jane. "I always used to think Nicholas's eyes were just that colour. But I suppose a middle-aged man – and that he is, poor darling – can't have delphinium-blue eyes." (7)

In a later chapter, Pym returns to this theme as Jane describes how her relationship with Nicholas has changed over the years:

Mild, kindly looks and spectacles, thought Jane, this was what it came to in the end. The passion of those early days, the fragments of Donne and Marvel...all these faded into mild kindly looks and spectacles. There came a day when one didn't quote poetry to one's

husband any more. Could she have noted...[that day]... and mourned it if she had been more observant? (48)

Jane feels this waning of passion in her marriage more acutely when confronted with Nicholas's reaction to the heavily made-up Prudence:

...[Jane] found herself quite unable to look at Prudence, whose eyelids were startlingly and embarrassingly green... Was this what one had to do nowadays when one was unmarried? she wondered... The odd and rather irritating thing about it was, though, that Nicholas was gazing at Prudence with admiration; it was quite noticeable. So it really did work... Would [Nicholas] look at her with renewed interest if she had green eyelids? [Jane] wondered. (84)

Nowhere is this loss of passion brought into more poignant and humorous perspective than in the kiddisoap incident. Pym uses Fabian and Nicholas in a wonderful counterpoint. In two contiguous passages, we experience Jane flirting with Fabian, followed by her being displaced in Nicholas's affections by... soap animals!

As Jane leaves Miss Doggett and Jessie, she spies Fabian coming towards her:

Perhaps a sight of his beautiful, worn looking face was what she needed on the first evening of spring. Her heart lifted for a moment in quite an absurd way as she prepared to greet him. "Have you been for a walk?" [Jane said]. She raised her eyes to his... "You take an umbrella for a country walk?... Oh, I never think of things like that," said Jane, tossing her head... (128)

Jane returns home and encounters Nicholas holding a package:

The absurd first-evening-of-spring feeling came back to her suddenly and she wondered if he had perhaps felt it too and brought her a present. "Look," [Nicholas] said... "I thought I'd put them in my little cloakroom..." On the table stood four soap animals... "Kiddisoaps, for children, really... I shall arrange them on the glass shelf"... He went happily away, humming to himself. (129)

In sharp contrast to Miss Doggett's view of "what men want," Jane reaches a different conclusion:

If it is true that men only want one thing, Jane asked herself, is it perhaps to be left to themselves with their soap animals...? (129)

The evening ends when 'Nicholas came in with their Ovaltine on a tray and it was time to go to bed' (129). Alas... not exactly champagne and chocolate covered strawberries!

Jane has one last encounter with the kiddisoaps:

...the sight of Nicholas's soap animals reminded her of her love for him and she might have wept had she not been past the age when one considers that weeping can do good or bring relief. (137)

It is crystal clear that these are not tears of joy.

### *Companionship vs. Passion*

And yet there is most certainly the joy of companionship – and perhaps still some passion – in Jane's marriage. In Chapter 1, we gain insight into the richness of her relationship with Nicholas:

...a husband was one to tell one's silly jokes to...and do the tipping at hotels, thought Jane with a RUSH (emphasis mine). And although he certainly did these things, Nicholas was a great deal more than that. (10)

It is left to the reader to determine the exact dimensions of a 'great deal more.'

In Chapter 2, part of an exchange by our couple, who are discussing various clergymen, reinforces this point. Nicholas says: “Not all High Church clergymen are plain looking” (16). Jane counters with: “Nor all Moderate ones, darling” ...for her husband's eyes were still blue and he had kept his figure’ (16).

Fabian Driver gives us a glimpse of the warm companionship shared by Nicholas and Jane when he sees them returning from lunch at Miss Crampton's:

Fabian...had a confused feeling of irritation and envy as he watched them. It must have been Jane's smiling up at her husband and the awful coat she was wearing, the kind of coat a woman could wear only in her husband's presence, he thought (53).

As we near the end of the novel, Jane seems to come to terms with her marriage:

But wasn't that what so many marriages were – finding a person boring and irritating and yet loving him? Who could imagine a man who was NEVER boring or irritating? Perhaps this was after all what men liked to come home to, someone restful and neutral... (192)

Not exactly the stuff of romance novels!

### *Jane & Nicholas – Are They Equal Partners?*

Earlier, I highlighted Prudence's perception that Jane is not trying very hard to fulfill the duties of a clergyman's wife. Prudence may be on to something. Despite the regrets Jane expresses, there is no evidence she makes a serious effort to modify her behavior. And, there is little evidence that Nicholas is upset with Jane's lack of domesticity or has applied pressure for her to comply with the scripted role of clergyman's wife. In fact, the kitchen scene where Miss Doggett reveals the Fabian/Jessie relationship to the Clevelands captures perfectly the marriage of equals enjoyed by Nicholas and Jane. Our couple is seen collaborating on a domestic project – preserving plums. Each is wearing an apron – a uniform suggesting equal status. Even as early as Chapter 1, we are given a clue about this marriage of equals when a clergyman's wife warns Jane that her husband should not introduce anything significantly different to his new congregants. Jane replies: “...we [emphasis mine] shall not attempt to introduce startling changes” (12). She had every opportunity to say “he” but chooses “we” instead.

Also, Jane signals the shifting nature of the roles of men and women in their relationships when she learns from Prudence that Fabian has not yet proposed marriage:

“Why don't *you* ask *him*?” Jane said recklessly. “Women are not in the same position as they were in Victorian times. They can do nearly everything that men can now.” (161)

Pym seems to mark this as a transition period for women with the use of “recklessly” and “nearly.” This view of the emerging power of women in relationships is evident in Jessie Morrow's interactions with Fabian Driver. Jessie, in response to Fabian's brooding, says: “Women are very powerful – perhaps they are always triumphant in the end” (110). Fabian seems to agree as he begins to have second thoughts about the pending marriage: ‘Life with Jessie suddenly seemed a frightening prospect...It was as if a net had closed around him.’ (199)

### *CONCLUSION*

To conclude, Jane's regrets are much more about getting older than doubting her love for Nicholas and his for her. Despite her musings, she is essentially happy in her relationship. Nicholas has not made demands on her to fulfill the role of clergyman's wife which suggests she is fulfilling a much more important role – as equal partner and soul mate.

Pym deals with the issue of passion in marriage in interesting ways. While we have Miss Doggett's mantra of men wanting only one thing, Pym is not convinced that they want it in their marriage. Fabian seeks it outside his first marriage and chooses the plain Jessie Morrow as his second wife over the more

attractive Prudence. Nicholas does not appear to need passion and, contrary to Miss Doggett's refrain, it is Jane who possesses a much more passionate nature.

Our author strikes a blow for women's equality in leaving us with a Prudence who does not appear to need marriage after all and Eleanor Hitchens who appears quite content outside the institution of marriage.

In the end: Jessie gets her man, Fabian his just desserts, Prudence her dalliances, Nicholas his kiddisoaps and Jane her mild kindly looks.