



Drawn to Love

Author: *Lyr Newton*

Category: Historical

Description: Drawn To Love is a light, romantic, sweet novella of around 27,000 words, focused on Elizabeth and Darcy's love story in familiar yet unique settings.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Fitzwilliam Darcy is a proud, arrogant, and unpleasant sort of man. What is hardly known to anyone is that he also possesses a tender heart, an inclination for the arts, and a real talent for playing the pianoforte as well as drawing and painting. Such talents he keeps hidden, buried under the weight of his responsibilities.

After his disastrous proposal at Hunsford, Darcy struggles to conquer his passion for Elizabeth Bennet, as well as the unbearable pain of her rejection. He withdraws to Pemberley alone, taking care of his duties as master and landlord and waiting for his sister and the Bingleys to visit him for the summer.

All his struggles are in vain, though, and Elizabeth's image remains still vivid in his mind and in his soul, so much so that it becomes his muse. His inspiration comes to life in several sketches, in which he attempts to find a little comfort.

Elizabeth's own torment is not much different. Mr Darcy's shocking marriage proposal brought out the worst in her, and she rejected it in a most outrageous manner. Now, while she does not regret her refusal, she blames herself for offending the gentleman so deeply and favouring his adversary, Mr Wickham.

When the Gardiners take her on a long trip to the Lakes, she sees a glimpse of joy in dark times. But their destination changes suddenly, and she finds herself in Derbyshire. Even worse, Mrs Gardiner has decided to pay a visit to Pemberley, even before arriving at the inn in Lambton. With a heavy heart and deep embarrassment, she holds her breath as the carriage rolls her closer to Pemberley House. Her distress turns into the deepest turmoil when they suddenly see Mr Darcy himself, carrying an easel, which he drops in surprise, revealing several portraits of a woman whose identity cannot be doubted.

The accidental encounter could offer Elizabeth and Darcy the opportunity for more torment and pain as well as for peace and joy. Yet, their trust in their own feelings and in each other's has been

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

The carriage rode down the rutted roads, the horses travelling at a fast pace. It was almost the end of their long journey from Longbourn to Derbyshire, and it was a journey which Elizabeth enjoyed — but not without a heavy heart.

Since April, Elizabeth had not had a single peaceful day or restful night.

Mr. Darcy's shocking and dreadful marriage proposal had been the biggest surprise she had experienced in her entire life.

She had never suspected any partiality on his side; quite the opposite, she had been certain of his disdain for her and her family, just as she had been sure that he was responsible for Jane's misery and Mr. Bingley's departure.

'You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you,' Mr. Darcy had told her in a moment of heated confession, and those words had not ceased to torment her ever since.

She had never imagined that the proud, arrogant, spiteful Mr. Darcy would ever express his ardent love and admiration to anyone, and that she was the last woman in the world to whom such a declaration could be addressed.

In fact, she had been certain Mr. Darcy did not know the meaning of such words, nor that he could feel such sentiments for any lady.

He had always seemed so ready to find fault in people.

He was her severest critic; how was it possible that he had been in love with her all

those months — so much in love that he had proposed to her against his will and better judgment — as he had admitted?

She did not regret rejecting him; at that time, her feelings for him had not permitted another answer, and her resentment for his interference which led to the separation of Jane from Mr. Bingley only added to her dislike.

But she deeply regretted the manner of her rejection, the offences she threw at him, and — most devastating and deeply shameful — that she had trusted Mr. Wickham so utterly and completely and allowed herself to be deceived by that man's handsome appearance and horrible character.

The Gardiners had invited her to join them on a journey to the Lakes, and she had gladly accepted.

Her uncle and aunt were her favourite people, who never failed to bring her comfort, and, even though she had not revealed the secret of Mr. Darcy's proposal to them, she still felt better in their company.

"My dear Lizzy, I hope you are not disappointed that we cannot see the Lakes this time," Mrs. Gardiner said. "I am sorry that your uncle's business forced us to shorten our trip."

"Dear aunt, I could never be disappointed in your company," Elizabeth replied. "I hope you know that. I have already enjoyed our journey very much."

"And I hope you will find further pleasure in it, now that we are in Derbyshire."

The mere mention of that county troubled her, for she associated it with Mr. Darcy. She had been nervous about this destination since she had heard of it, but Mrs. Gardiner insisted upon it, as she had grown up in Lambton, only five miles from

Pemberley.

“I know you do not have pleasant memories of Mr. Darcy, considering his arrogant and uncivil behaviour towards you, but I insist on viewing Pemberley, even if only from afar. It is the most beautiful park I have ever seen, and the house itself is stunning and perfectly situated. You will surely enjoy it despite its proud owner. You may associate it instead with your favourite, Mr. Wickham,” Mrs. Gardiner teased her.

“Unfortunately, Mr. Wickham ceased to be my favourite a while ago,” she admitted. “During my stay in Kent, I learnt some disturbing details which proved that we had been ignorant of his true character.”

“Oh dear, how strange!” Mrs. Gardiner replied. “Are you sure? He has the appearance of such a good, amiable man.”

“He might have the appearance of it, but nothing else,” Elizabeth said. “His character and his honour are both questionable, and his amiability means nothing by comparison.”

“That is a harsh statement, my dear. Then, could the story of his past misfortunes, brought about by Mr. Darcy — which your mother and Lydia told me about ten times — be untrue?”

“I suspect so. It might be that the late Mr. Darcy recommended Mr. Wickham be given a living, but perhaps the present Mr. Darcy discovered things that induced him to not indulge that desire.”

“And may I ask how such suspicions arose? You seemed quite favourable towards Mr. Wickham when we met at Christmas.”

“From a reliable source, I assure you. My past favour towards Mr. Wickham was nothing else but proof of silliness on my part. And this is precisely why I am reluctant to see Mr. Darcy again. I am not so much upset by his past arrogance as I am embarrassed by my silly misjudgement.”

“Did you and Mr. Darcy have further misunderstandings when you met in Kent?”

“We did,” Elizabeth admitted after a brief hesitation. “And, much to my mortification, I personally accused Mr. Darcy of being cruel and unfair to poor Mr. Wickham. Poor Mr. Wickham, indeed!”

“Dear Lizzy, you speak so passionately about this matter, and you are too harsh on yourself. If you were deceived by Mr. Wickham, so were we all. How could you know his words were untrue? In fact, if we are to meet Mr. Darcy again, it will be a good opportunity for you to explain your error and apologise for it.”

“I cannot hope for an amicable conversation with Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said. “We have never been friends, and now it is less likely than at any other time. Meeting him would be the most embarrassing moment — for both of us. A moment that I heartily wish to avoid.”

“You have no reason to fear,” Mrs. Gardiner replied.

“Even if Mr. Darcy is at home, Pemberley Park is so large that we are unlikely to meet anyone. There are plenty of visitors all the time — if someone sees us, they will not know who we are. We can drive through the park, admire the house from a distance, and continue our journey to Lambton.”

“It sounds like a perfect arrangement,” Mr. Gardiner responded joyfully. “I am curious to see a place you have praised so much, my dear.”

“You will see that the praise is all deserved,” Mrs. Gardiner declared.

Elizabeth chose to remain silent; she could not further contradict her aunt without raising suspicions, so she just gazed through the window, while the carriage continued to roll onwards.

Besides, she admitted to herself that she was curious too. She had heard so much about Pemberley that it would be a great waste to be close to it and refuse to see it. At least from afar, as she would not — by any means — agree to go near the house.

Mrs. Gardiner gave directions to the coachman, and the journey continued, as well as the conversation, to which Elizabeth paid less and less attention.

She was occupied with the view, wondering when she would catch the first glimpse of Pemberley Park and struggling with the turmoil of the thought that she might see Mr. Darcy.

To have the audacity to come to his home, to invade his privacy, was outrageous even to her.

His response at seeing her after the terrible offences she had thrown at him, she could only imagine and fear.

Her concern was not so much for herself — she deserved his resentment — but for her uncle and aunt.

It was more than possible that if Mr. Darcy knew of their presence, he would ask for all of them to be thrown from his property quite unceremoniously, and she would have to explain the reason to her relatives.

Her courage betrayed her, and she was about to beg her aunt to alter their plans again

when Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed with a sigh, “Look, Lizzy! We are just entering Pemberley Park! And look there, far away in the valley. There is Pemberley House.”

Elizabeth’s heart raced, and she held her breath while her eyes searched for the object of Mrs. Gardiner’s awe. When she finally noticed it, her sigh matched her aunt’s.

“Take the path towards the lake, and from there follow the road to Lambton,” Mrs. Gardiner instructed the coachman, then added, “Wait till we get closer, Lizzy.”

The carriage rode steadily through the large park, and a great variety of ground was revealed to their eyes.

Her uncle and aunt spoke animatedly, but Elizabeth’s mind was too full for conversation and too busy to admire every remarkable spot.

They gradually ascended for half a mile until they reached the highest point, where the wood ceased, and their eyes were instantly caught by the stunning image of the house situated on the opposite side of a valley, still a significant distance away.

It was an impressive building, standing well on rising ground, having a stunning lake in front of it and backed by a ridge of high, woody hills.

The building looked handsome, and the grounds were flawless, without any artificial appearance.

Elizabeth was delighted, thinking she had never seen a place so beautifully situated.

At the same time, a cold wave of sadness and sorrow enveloped her, while she began to realise what it meant to be the mistress of Pemberley.

The notion that Mr. Darcy had offered her all that beauty and a position probably

desired by many other women seemed difficult to believe, and the recollection of her rejection became even more tormenting.

“It is no wonder that Mr. Darcy is such a proud man,” Mr. Gardiner uttered. “I would be too if I owned such an estate. He must be very severe and fastidious in judging women since he must select the worthiest one to be the mistress of all this.”

While her uncle spoke mostly in jest, it mirrored Elizabeth’s thoughts well, and she felt a sharp pain in her chest.

“Being the mistress of Pemberley is also a great responsibility,” Mrs. Gardiner added. “Lady Anne Darcy was admired by everybody. Her memory and legacy must be precious to her son. I wonder when and who will take her place.”

Elizabeth smiled despite her turmoil. For a moment, she imagined how it would have been if she were already Mrs. Darcy and could welcome her uncle and aunt to Pemberley.

Her brief reflection, however, vanished when her reason told her that Mr. Darcy would likely not appreciate visits from her relatives from Cheapside.

Even if she had not despised him when he proposed, even if her feelings had been favourable towards him, she could not have agreed to enter into a marriage which would separate her from her family.

The carriage was following the road through the park, getting closer to the house, and now allowed a full view of its splendour.

“Dear aunt, we are not going any closer to the house, I hope!” Elizabeth said.

“No, my dear. At least not today. We shall go to Lambton and enquire whether the

family is at home. If they are not, I shall try to persuade you to return for a proper visit.”

“If the family is not at home, I might be easily convinced.” Elizabeth smiled.

Several minutes later, they spotted a few men at work. They glanced at the carriage only briefly, then returned to their duties.

“Look, Lizzy, that is the greenhouse! And look at the gardens. Is it not charming?”

“It is wonderful,” she admitted in a small voice. “Wonderful,” she repeated, her heart pounding.

“Oh, it looks even lovelier than I remember,” Mrs. Gardiner continued. “I truly hope Mr. Darcy is not as arrogant and unpleasant as you said, Lizzy. I would be very sorry for the legacy of his parents. And for this beautiful place that he owns.”

“I believe once you come to know him better, Mr. Darcy might have other qualities that overshadow his arrogance,” Elizabeth answered, trying to sound light. “Owning Pemberley is certainly one of them.”

Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by the sound of loud barking, and from near the lake, three dogs — seemingly rather large ones — ran through the trees towards them.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

“Well, someone is either welcoming us or trying to send us away,” Mr. Gardiner jested.

“Intruders are rarely welcomed,” Elizabeth replied.

“Do not worry, there have always been dogs at Pemberley, but they are never aggressive. I remember even when I was a child,” Mrs. Gardiner added.

“I do not worry. I have never been afraid of any dog,” Elizabeth said.

The barking increased as they approached, and the horses neighed and threw up their heads with fear.

The coachman tried to calm them, pulling the reins and calling to them, but one of the horses reared.

The other one remained steady, but the movement caused a commotion, and the carriage left the road, rolling onto a grassy bank and leaning precariously to the side.

Somebody called the dogs, and they immediately obeyed, walking away.

The horses, however, remained restless, shaking the carriage. With horror, Elizabeth saw her aunt trying to find support against the door, which opened, and the lady fell to the ground with a cry.

“Roll away from the carriage!” Mr. Gardiner cried desperately, and Mrs. Gardiner did so just in time; then the wheel broke, and one side of the carriage dropped heavily,

throwing Elizabeth to the side.

Jumping out nimbly, Mr. Gardiner hurried to attend to his wife, but Elizabeth was left in the still shaking carriage.

“Do not worry, I am well,” Elizabeth heard Mrs. Gardiner say. “I have only hurt my leg a little.”

“A little? There is a nasty bruise and lots of blood!” Mr. Gardiner replied.

“Oh come, my dear. Not lots of blood! I have had worse wounds as a child, and I am sure you and Lizzy did too,” the lady jested. “Help me stand up — it is nothing.”

“I am so sorry...I do not know what happened! I shall go and fetch help,” Elizabeth heard the desperate voice of the coachman declare.

“Lambton is less than five miles away,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “Take a horse and ride there. Find my cousins and tell them what happened. They will come and convey us to the inn in no time. There is no reason for panic.”

Gripping tightly to the doorframe and taking tentative steps, Elizabeth finally climbed down from the carriage.

“Lizzy, are you well?” Mr. Gardiner enquired.

“Perfectly so,” she answered, hiding her trembling hands behind her back. “Tell me, how may I help? What should I do?”

“Nothing, my dear. Just sit here on the grass and let us admire Pemberley while we wait for help,” Mrs. Gardiner replied, still in a better mood than the others.

The coachman worked to unharness one of the horses, and Mr. Gardiner tried to stop the bleeding on his wife's leg. Elizabeth watched in silence, with a strange grip in her chest.

The barking suddenly resumed, as well as the horses' neighing.

Through the trees, a man appeared, surrounded by the three dogs who had caused the earlier commotion. The man stepped forwards hastily, but then his pace slowed until he stopped. And so did Elizabeth's heart.

Only a few steps away stood Mr. Darcy, wearing only trousers and a shirt, open at the neck, his hair in disorder, staring at her with his mouth and eyes widened in obvious disbelief.

The sound of something heavy falling to the ground startled her, and she noticed an easel, which he must have been carrying but had dropped in surprise.

Next to the easel, several pieces of paper were spread across the grass.

They were paintings — portraits of a woman whose identity made the grip in her chest tighten.

Her image was there, at Mr. Darcy's feet, while the real her remained still, breathless, gazing at him.

He immediately knelt and gathered the sheets, hiding them behind the easel, then finally stood up, whispering in a low and incredulous voice, "Miss Bennet?"

"Mr. Darcy..."

"What...? Why...? What happened? What are you doing here?"

“I-I beg your forgiveness, sir. I am visiting Derbyshire with my uncle and aunt. We were on our way to Lambton — my aunt’s relatives live there... We were just...our carriage broke...”

She watched Mr. Darcy frown. He was looking at her doubtfully, probably questioning the truth of her words. Then his gaze moved over her shoulder.

“I am afraid my dogs frightened you. They are usually friendly, only protective when they meet new people. I am very sorry...I shall fetch help immediately. And a doctor...”

“Oh no, sir, please do not trouble yourself,” Elizabeth heard her aunt’s voice declare.

“We thank you for your kindness, but certainly there is no need for a doctor. My cousins own a shop and the inn in Lambton — where we are bound. Our servant will go and fetch him. We apologise for bothering you.”

“It is no bother, I assure you,” Mr. Darcy said with obvious agitation. “Miss Bennet, would you do me the honour of introducing me to your relatives?”

The request took Elizabeth by surprise, and she needed a moment to regain her composure. She performed the introductions hesitantly, noticing that all three of her companions looked equally uneasy.

Mr. Darcy seemed well acquainted with Mrs. Gardiner’s relatives in the area, and some pleasantries were exchanged between them.

“Mrs. Gardiner, I would kindly suggest that you allow my men to look at the carriage while your servant fetches your cousins. And I must insist you wait inside the house. I shall fetch a phaeton to convey you there.”

“Sir, you are exceedingly generous, but we do not want to intrude,” Mrs. Gardiner replied, her amazement apparent.

Elizabeth was so shocked by his unexpected kindness that she could barely speak.

“Indeed, Mr. Darcy, we could not possibly disturb you even more. We did not know you were at home... We planned only to ride through the park and continue our journey without troubling anyone...”

She knew she was mumbling and could not hold his gaze for more than a moment. He was there, only steps away, dressed — or better said, undressed — as she had never seen him before, holding the easel.

She had expected he would not want to ever see her again — even less speak to her — and feared he might be rude to her uncle and aunt. And yet, he was friendly, generous, and caring — proving that she had misjudged him once again. His kindness and impeccable manners made her ashamed of herself.

“It would be my pleasure if you came into the house. Unless, of course, it would be unpleasant to you,” he added, and Elizabeth could feel his stare on her face. Finally, her eyes dared to meet his.

“Of course not. Quite the opposite,” she whispered.

“We are honoured by your invitation, sir,” Mr. Gardiner said. “We hesitated to accept it in consideration of your comfort, Mr. Darcy.”

“Good. Then it is settled. I shall leave you now. I hope your wait will be short.”

With that, he hurried towards the house with the easel under his arm and the three dogs following him.

Elizabeth's knees betrayed her, and she leant against the broken carriage, trying to breathe.

"Dear Lord, I cannot believe that was Mr. Darcy!" Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed. "So friendly and kind and considerate! Who could imagine?"

"I certainly could not," Mr. Gardiner replied.

"When I guessed his identity, I feared he would demand we leave his property, based on what Lizzy told us. And there he was — acting the opposite of what we expected. Was he serious when he asked us to go inside the house? Will he truly send men to repair the carriage?"

"Should I go to Lambton, sir?" the coachman asked.

"Yes, of course," Mr. Gardiner responded. "I am not sure whether you will find us at this very spot or at Pemberley House. I am not sure how to take Mr. Darcy's words."

"Sir, look, there are a few men coming," the coachman pointed out while he freed a horse from the carriage.

Indeed, two men were approaching hastily, while Mr. Darcy's silhouette could be seen entering through the gates and disappearing behind them.

"I believe we should take Mr. Darcy's words in earnest and with gratitude," Mrs. Gardiner uttered. "I cannot imagine the reason for such generosity, but he seemed willing to help us. Lizzy, what do you say? Can you explain his behaviour?"

She said nothing. As if in a dream, she heard her uncle and aunt talking about Mr. Darcy and wondering about his attentions.

Speechless, she only watched him until her eyes lost sight of him.

No, she could not explain what she had just witnessed.

She did not even dare assume the reason for his friendliness.

He looked different from how she remembered him, both in manners and in appearance.

He seemed to have lost weight, his face was less severe and paler, his hair longer, and a shadow of a beard covered his chin.

Although he was quite improperly attired for visitors, he looked more handsome than in her recollections; his voice was softer, his gaze darker but gentler.

Had he changed in essentials too? Was he the same man who had declared he loved her ardently?

The same man she had rejected and offended?

Was he angry at seeing her? He was surprised, that could not be doubted.

But what other feelings had her impromptu presence aroused in him?

More than the extraordinary change in his manners, her mind and her heart were full of questions and speculations about something more important, more distressing, more stunning: the portraits.

Her portraits. He had painted her? And quite faithfully, indeed.

Was it possible that he was still thinking of her?

The paintings could suggest that; but of what kind were his thoughts?

What feelings guided his fingers on the brush?

Her reflections could not last long, as the two men arrived and engaged in conversation with Mr. Gardiner, debating how to fix the wheel.

A little while later, a phaeton with two white horses stopped in front of them.

A coachman, together with Mr. Gardiner and the other two men, helped Mrs. Gardiner up, followed by her husband and Elizabeth.

“We’ll bring the luggage, sir,” one of the men said as the phaeton began to move. Elizabeth watched it all in a stunned silence, lost between dreams and reality.

Less than an hour ago she had dreaded seeing Mr. Darcy, fearing a violent — yet justified — response on his part. Now she was on her way to his home, with her uncle and aunt, in his carriage, at his special request. Surely that could not be real.

“Are we really going to Pemberley?” Mrs. Gardiner whispered.

“Apparently we are,” Mr. Gardiner replied. “I am not sure what is happening, but I shall not complain, considering it is to your benefit. It would not do to wait in this heat, sitting on the grass, until your cousins arrive.”

“Lizzy dear, you are awfully quiet. Are you upset? I could tell you were not happy to see Mr. Darcy.”

“I am not upset, Aunt. And I was happy, truly. I am just as amazed as you are by his kindness. As I said, we did not part on friendly terms, and I certainly did not expect such attentions.”

“Well, Mr. Darcy certainly did not act like you were not on friendly terms,” Mr. Gardiner replied. “If he is so kind, he cannot have any other reason but you, since he does not know us.”

“Or he might just be a kind and considerate landlord, who is worried that some people suffered an accident on his property,” Elizabeth said.

“True,” Mr. Gardiner admitted. “Generosity is expected of a gentleman of his class. You said his parents were admired and loved in Derbyshire, so he must wish to be worthy of their legacy.”

“That would be a reasonable explanation,” Mrs. Gardiner agreed.

“Regardless of his motives, we have nothing else to do but thank him. To be honest, I am curious and anxious to see more of Pemberley House. I glimpsed inside it only once, as a child, but it was from a servants’ door, and it lasted too briefly to remember much.”

From the conversation, Elizabeth realised that neither her uncle nor aunt had noticed the paintings.

They had probably been so occupied with the accident and so stunned by Mr. Darcy’s appearance that they had observed nothing else; and that was a true relief for her.

If they had, they would have surely recognised her image, and their enquiries would be difficult to answer.

With every moment that took her closer to the house, Elizabeth’s heart pounded harder, and breathing became more difficult. She felt chills along her spine when she noticed Mr. Darcy waiting near the gate, together with an older woman.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

The master's appearance was now flawless; he was wearing a dark green coat, and his neckcloth was covering his throat to the line of his jaw. And yet, in her mind, it was still his earlier image which made her shiver and grow warmer at the same time.

"Please allow me to introduce Mrs. Reynolds, our housekeeper, to you," Mr. Darcy said.

"I remember Mrs. Reynolds, even though I have not seen her in more than fifteen years," Mrs. Gardiner answered. "I am Margaret Turner, Mrs. Reynolds. My father, Tom Turner, owned a shop in Lambton."

Mrs. Reynolds's eyes widened, and she covered her mouth with her hand.

"My dear! Margaret Turner! How are you? You look so lovely, so beautiful!"

"Mrs. Reynolds, let us help Mrs. Gardiner into the house. You will have time to share memories later on," Mr. Darcy interjected with a little smile. His voice was determined but soft and gentle, and Mrs. Reynolds laughed and stepped away.

"Of course. How silly of me!"

With the help of the coachman and another servant, Mr. Gardiner aided his wife out of the carriage.

Mr. Darcy helped too, after a brief look exchanged with Elizabeth, which proved to her he was at least equally as uneasy as she was.

Then he said, “I believe it would be more comfortable for Mrs. Gardiner if she sat on this chair and was carried. There are several steps which might cause harm to a wounded leg.”

“Thank you, sir, that is an excellent idea,” Mr. Gardiner replied, while Mrs. Gardiner claimed — one more time — that they need not go to so much trouble.

“I am sorry if it was presumptuous, but I sent for Dr Hodge. I thought it would do no harm if he examined Mrs. Gardiner.”

“Mr. Darcy, please do not apologise for being kind and considerate,” Mrs. Gardiner responded, slightly flushed, “but please do not trouble yourself further. It is but a little accident, of no importance.”

“My dear Margaret, I beg to differ,” Mrs. Reynolds interjected. “Look, your leg is swollen, and it is bleeding! I think the doctor’s presence would be very useful. The master is never wrong, I assure you.”

“That is hardly true, Mrs. Reynolds, but I heartily thank you for such praise,” Mr. Darcy answered in a light tone, his cheeks slightly coloured as he glanced at Elizabeth again. She felt her cheeks heat too.

“Let us enter,” Mr. Darcy continued. “Mrs. Gardiner, Mrs. Reynolds will show you to a guest room. A maid will attend to anything you need.”

As he spoke, Mr. Darcy led the way; Mrs. Reynolds was following him, and Mr. Gardiner and the servant were carrying Mrs. Gardiner.

Elizabeth walked behind them, and the moment she actually entered the house, she held her breath, while her heart seemed to pause.

Her strength betrayed her, and her courage evaded her, and she could not take another step.

Her gaze met Mr. Darcy's and locked momentarily.

She thought he might be about to walk to her, but Mrs. Reynolds interjected, approaching her.

"Miss Bennet, is there something wrong?"

"No..." she mumbled, Mr. Darcy's insistent gaze making her even weaker.

"You look flushed. I am sure you would like to refresh yourself and have some tea. You must be hungry too since you have travelled such a long way."

Elizabeth looked at the kind woman, then her eyes met Mr. Darcy's again.

"I thank you for your concern, but I am well... I might be a little tired and hot...but it is mostly the emotions of being a guest at Pemberley, a place about which I have heard so many wonderful things. It was such an extraordinary surprise — I would never have dared to imagine finding myself here."

She spoke to the housekeeper, but Mr. Darcy's look and his frown showed that he understood her meaning.

"It was a surprise for me too, Miss Bennet," he suddenly said. "Extraordinary indeed but also delightful. Though I am very sorry for Mrs. Gardiner's accident — that was certainly not delightful," he quickly added, clearly realising what he had implied.

His apparent distress amused Elizabeth, and she responded with a little smile. Mrs. Gardiner, still sitting on the chair, uttered, "I have always hoped for an opportunity to

visit Pemberley House, Mr. Darcy. Hurting my leg is a small price to pay for that.”

“I would have preferred to invite you without any accident,” Mr. Darcy said, while the entire group slowly resumed walking.

The entrance hall opened into a large chamber — as impressive as a ballroom — and from there, a majestic staircase climbed towards the first floor.

“There is a guest apartment here on this floor — next to the library. My aunt Lady Matlock prefers to stay there when she visits, as she is not fond of stairs. Mrs. Gardiner may rest there while waiting for her cousin and the doctor.”

Mrs. Gardiner’s eyes and mouth opened wider, and Elizabeth was no less astonished. Had he just offered the apartment preferred by his aunt — to her aunt?

Mrs. Gardiner was taken into the chamber by all the servants, including Mrs. Reynolds.

For a brief moment, Elizabeth remained outside the door with Mr. Darcy. Facing each other, at a distance no greater than a few steps — large enough to be proper but small enough to be tormenting — they shared a moment of heavy silence.

Their glances met timidly, then locked.

“Mr. Darcy, I...I am so sorry... I deeply apologise for—”

“Miss Bennet, please do not apologise. If you do not feel comfortable being here, I shall prepare a carriage to take you to the Lambton Inn immediately. Your relatives may join you later. I can understand that my company might not be agreeable to you, and I do not wish to prolong any unpleasantness for you.”

“Oh...no, no...I mean...I am not comfortable at all...but it is not unpleasant...not your company. I should not be here, considering...”

“I am happy that you are here, Miss Bennet. However, your happiness is my only concern. So please let me know if you wish to leave...”

His tone was low, his countenance pale, his gaze misty.

“I do not wish to leave unless my presence bothers you,” she whispered.

“It does not. It never will,” he replied.

Several more minutes of silence followed. There were so many things she wished to ask, to say, but it was neither the place nor the time.

The door to the apartment opened, and Mr. Gardiner and Mrs. Reynolds came out.

“Margaret is resting comfortably. Would you like to go to her, Lizzy?”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“We shall bring Mrs. Gardiner some soup and tea. Would you join her, Miss Bennet? Mr. Gardiner?”

“Mr. Gardiner, if you wish, I would be happy to offer you a drink in the library. We may order something to eat there,” Mr. Darcy offered.

“I would like that very much, Mr. Darcy. I am sure my wife will not mind my absence and will be content with Lizzy’s company.”

“The doctor should arrive soon, unless he had an urgent appointment somewhere

else,” Mr. Darcy said.

“So should my wife’s cousins,” Mr. Gardiner agreed.

With that, the two gentlemen left together, while Elizabeth entered the apartment, marvelling at the beauty and elegance of the furniture and carpets.

There were two large rooms, separated by a door, and in the first one, Mrs. Gardiner was resting.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

“How are you, Aunt?”

“Oh dear, I feel quite foolish and undeservedly spoilt. Look at me — lying in the bed where a countess usually sleeps! I am not sure whether I should laugh or cry.”

“I am pleased to know you are comfortable. You do indeed deserve it.”

“I shall definitely laugh when my cousins arrive and find me here. I wonder if they have ever seen the inside of Pemberley.”

“Should they not have arrived by now?”

“It depends whether they were at home and if the carriage was available. Until then, we can only wait and enjoy being treated like royalty. After running around after children, I certainly know to appreciate it,” the lady joked.

Elizabeth smiled, walking around the room and stopping near the window, which offered a breathtaking view over the lake.

“The gardens cannot be seen from here,” she murmured.

“Lizzy, you are very thoughtful and quiet. And you argued about the notion of coming to Pemberley. Is there something that you wish to tell me?”

“No...I am only concerned over our predicament.”

“Mr. Darcy is nothing like you described him. Neither in appearance nor in manners,

and your relationship with him is nothing like you led us to believe.”

“I described Mr. Darcy and my relationship with him based on my judgment at that time. While I discovered more of his positive traits of character when I was in Kent, I certainly did not expect such a warm reception when we met.”

“I shall only say one thing, Lizzy. Your opinion of Mr. Darcy might have been poor, but somehow, his opinion of you must be high — otherwise he would not have shown such attention to your relatives, who are so much below him in every respect.”

“My opinion of Mr. Darcy is not poor at present, Aunt. And I would not say you and my uncle are below anyone.”

“You are sweet, Lizzy, but I am sure you know I am right. As for your opinion, I am glad it changed. I can see nothing to fault in Mr. Darcy. His features are exceedingly handsome too.”

A knock on the door interrupted them, and a maid announced Dr Hodge. He was a gentleman likely of her father’s age, Elizabeth mused. He was voluble, speaking loudly and asking for privacy to examine the patient.

“I was told you are the cousin of Turner and Clarke. Well, well, what a surprise. You came all the way to Derbyshire to break your leg,” the doctor said, while Elizabeth moved to sit on a chair in the corner.

There was silence for a few moments while the doctor examined his patient.

“Well, the good news is that there does not seem to be anything broken, but your leg is badly swollen, which is good and bad at the same time. You will have to rest for a few days. I shall give you a salve for the wound, and you must not put any weight on your leg until it is healed. Hopefully, you will not have to stay in bed too long.”

The doctor's examination was shorter than his conversation, and when he finally left, Mrs. Gardiner remained with a large smile on her face.

"Well, Lizzy, you must find a way to amuse yourself without me. Your uncle will be a good enough companion, and hopefully my cousins too."

"Do not worry for me, Aunt. Just be cautious and patient to ensure you get well."

"I shall. In truth, staying in bed and sleeping for a few days is not a horrible prospect. I am happy that at least I had the chance to see Pemberley."

Their conversation continued in the same light manner until the maid entered with a tray of refreshments.

"Do you know where my husband is?" Mrs. Gardiner enquired.

"Yes, ma'am. He is with the master, in the library. Tom took them some food there. And Mr. Turner and Mr. Clarke arrived — they are in the library too."

"Oh, how lovely! I am glad to hear that. Could you please tell Mr. Gardiner to come to speak to me, when possible?"

"Of course, ma'am."

Elizabeth found herself strangely torn between opposing feelings.

She was relieved that they would finally reach their final destination of Lambton but regretted leaving Pemberley — or better said leaving Mr. Darcy without having the chance to talk to him.

She wondered how it had happened that he was alone; where was his sister?

Did he know anything about Mr. Bingley and his sisters?

What about Colonel Fitzwilliam? And Lady Catherine de Bourgh — was she still insisting that he marry Miss de Bourgh? Would he?

She would certainly not dare ask Mr. Darcy any of those questions directly, but she hoped she might discover at least a few answers in one way or another. If she left Pemberley, she might waste such an opportunity.

It was a while before Mr. Gardiner finally joined them. He was wearing a large grin, and his crimson cheeks betrayed his enjoyment of Mr. Darcy's brandy.

"I can see you are having a wonderful time, Mr. Gardiner," his wife called out to him, her eyebrow arched.

"I confess I am, my dear! I have come to ask you something. The doctor said your injury is serious, and you must rest for a few days. And your cousin Tom said the inn is full, but he has kept us the best two rooms he has — on the top floor!"

"Oh dear..."

"Yes. And you will never guess what happened! Mr. Darcy invited us to stay at Pemberley for a few days until your leg is completely healed! He said we may stay for the entire week until we return to London! I shall be able to fish tomorrow! He will lend me all the necessary equipment. He invited your cousins to join me, but they declined. They did not seem fond of that particular entertainment—"

"Uncle, please stop a moment," Elizabeth interrupted him. "We cannot possibly stay at Pemberley for a week!" She was aware that her voice was trembling, and her hands were suddenly cold.

“Why not? Come, Lizzy dear, do not ruin my enjoyment simply because the man refused to dance with you once!”

“Uncle, that is not the reason for my hesitation. I just do not feel comfortable. We came here with no invitation, then our accident forced Mr. Darcy to offer us shelter. And when he heard there was no convenient room at the inn, of course he felt obliged to invite us to stay. I feel like we are abusing his generosity. Can you, Aunt, not stay with one of your cousins, in their house?”

“I cannot, my dear. They have only enough rooms to accommodate their families.”

“Lizzy, I understand your reluctance, but Mr. Darcy assured me it is no imposition. I truly believe he would enjoy some company since he is alone here. He only insisted I should ask your opinion. He said I should have Margaret’s approval and yours.”

“What did you tell Mr. Darcy?” Mrs. Gardiner enquired.

“That I should ask you. Your cousins are still in the library with him. By the by, your cousins barely dared to accept a glass of brandy and to take a seat.” He laughed.

“I am not surprised. You, however, look like you easily accepted more than one glass of brandy,” Mrs. Gardiner said with equal rebuke and amusement.

“I did. What do you say, my dear?”

“I am not sure. The situation is rather strange, and I cannot dismiss Lizzy’s worries.”

“It is not strange,” Mr. Gardiner insisted. “Mr. Darcy is just a kind gentleman who possesses a house with a hundred rooms he can spare. I would do exactly the same if a friend of a friend suffered an accident in my house. Would you not, my dear? And you must admit it is convenient for you.”

“In truth,” Mrs. Gardiner answered, “anyone would prefer the peace of Pemberley to a full inn and the notion of trying to climb so many stairs, under many curious gazes. What do you say, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth was far from being decided. She wished to speak to Mr. Darcy herself before accepting. But the presence of the other two men made it impossible.

“Uncle, are you certain, absolutely certain that Mr. Darcy really wished us to stay?”

“I have rarely been more certain of anything, my dear. I assure you I said nothing to force his invitation. Come, Lizzy. I find it rather ridiculous that such a man as Mr. Darcy invites us to spend a few days in his home and we hesitate to accept. I could not possibly refuse him without a sound reason. It would be a huge offence. I cannot be so ungrateful.”

Her uncle’s voice became more serious, and his enquiring gaze demanded an explanation she could not offer. Any further arguments would make things worse.

“You are right, of course, Uncle. My only concern was not to disturb Mr. Darcy. If he is in earnest, I am deeply grateful to him.”

“Excellent!” Mr. Gardiner exclaimed, and soon after, he left the room.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

When they were alone, Mrs. Gardiner asked Elizabeth to sit next to her.

“My dear, I am sure you do have something you wish to share. Since you admit your opinion of Mr. Darcy has improved, it would be helpful for me to understand what still induces you to behave strangely in regard to him.”

“Aunt, it is just that...” She carefully searched for the right words to convey something, without betraying too much.

“When we were in Kent, Mr. Darcy’s cousin was there too.

Colonel Fitzwilliam. He was a very pleasant, amiable man, with whom I quickly became friends.

I spoke rarely to Mr. Darcy, and we mostly disagreed and even argued.

Then one day, we happened to meet alone, and he began a conversation...

We disagreed again, and I directly accused him of separating Jane from Mr. Bingley — of being selfish, inconsiderate, and arrogant.

I also accused him of being cruel to Mr. Wickham and ruining his life, disregarding his father’s dying wish.

It was horrible, truly... You may imagine his response.

Then, the next day, he gave me a letter with some explanations.

He revealed a vicious part of Mr. Wickham's character, with enough details to leave no doubt of the truth.

I realised what a fool I had been to trust Mr. Wickham so readily, how prejudiced and thoughtless was my judgment of both men, but it was too late.

Mr. Darcy left Rosings, and we have not seen each other until we met here today. ”

“Oh dear! This is horrible indeed! What a terrible situation! It is no wonder that you feared meeting him. But now his kindness to us is even more astonishing, Lizzy!”

“It is... I was stunned and overwhelmed by his amicable manners.”

“And may I ask what he said about Mr. Bingley? Did he admit his intervention?”

“He did, quite readily. He said he noticed no sign of particular affection in Jane. He believed Jane was showing his friend only enough attention to satisfy his admiration and that she was prepared to accept him for his situation in life... That was his meaning, though not necessarily his words. So he advised Mr. Bingley not to pursue Jane further.”

“Oh... That was not very kind of Mr. Darcy, nor right! He might be a generous man, but he is surely not an astute and perceptive observer!”

“No. He misjudged Jane even more than I misjudged him.”

“I agree. Lizzy, it just crossed my mind... What if he regrets his intervention and is trying to compensate for it? What if he wishes to apologise? Or to attempt to find out more about Jane, to the benefit of his friend? Do we know where Mr. Bingley is now?”

Elizabeth felt her face burning; it was a reasonable explanation, and it would overcome any dangerous speculation that threatened to invade her mind. It did not explain the paintings though, but on that, she would reflect later.

“I know nothing about Mr. Bingley. I was wondering why Mr. Darcy was alone in the summer. Perhaps I shall ask...or perhaps Uncle may find out more.”

“It is even more convenient that we are staying here. Not just for my comfort but...who knows...maybe for Jane’s too.”

Revealing to her aunt at least a part of her burden eased the weight on Elizabeth’s shoulders.

As she spoke, the notion of spending a few days and nights at Pemberley was not so tormenting any longer.

It was already growing late when Mrs. Reynolds entered, inviting Elizabeth to follow her and choose a room for her stay.

Only then did Elizabeth feel anxious again.

It was logical that she would be given a separate room from her uncle and aunt, but somehow she had not even considered it.

She joined the housekeeper, and the kind lady seemed in a disposition for conversation.

“The master suggested two rooms, so you may choose from them. Here on the right are the master suites. On this side is Miss Georgiana’s apartment — and Mrs. Annesley’s room.

Mrs. Annesley is her companion — what a lovely and accomplished woman!

Not as accomplished as our dear Miss Darcy, of course.

She is only sixteen, but she is the most talented young woman with the sweetest disposition and the kindest heart.

Do you know her, Miss Bennet? I understand you were previously acquainted with the master. ”

“No, I have not had that pleasure. But I have heard many wonderful things about her. I know she is exceedingly talented on the pianoforte. Mr. Darcy speaks very fondly of her, as well as their friend Mr. Bingley and his sisters.”

“Oh...Mr. Bingley is such a kind young man! And very handsome too. We are always happy to have him here when he visits the master.”

Elizabeth smiled to herself. Mrs. Reynolds had said nothing about Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, and her silence on the subject was more eloquent than a speech.

“I have heard Mr. Darcy is an excellent master and landlord, while Miss Darcy must have inherited the artistic traits in the family,” Elizabeth said, broaching a rather indiscreet subject. But Mrs. Reynolds was only too happy to oblige.

“He is, miss. The best! You may ask any tenant or servant or anyone in Lambton. And he is a little bit of an artist too! They inherited that side from the late Lady Anne Darcy, God rest her soul. He is also very good at playing the pianoforte and even at drawing! But that is a secret — I mean, he does not like to brag about it. Of course, Miss Darcy is better at art — not just better than her brother but than anyone, I am sure.”

“I understand you have been in the family for a long time, Mrs. Reynolds.”

“Oh yes! Since the master was four years old. I watched him grow up, I might say. He was the most handsome and kind-hearted boy, and he is the same now. He is very handsome, is he not, miss?”

Elizabeth chuckled and felt her face burning over the unexpected question.

“He is. One cannot deny what is obvious to everybody. Does Miss Darcy not spend the summer at Pemberley?”

“Oh yes, she usually does, but she is at the Matlocks’ estate now. With Lord and Lady Matlock and the colonel and the viscount and his wife, who just welcomed their first daughter. Miss Darcy is spending a fortnight with them.”

“I see... I am surprised Mr. Darcy is not there too. I know he and the colonel are close friends.”

“He was there, but only for two days. Miss Darcy will be home soon too, and the master is also expecting Mr. Bingley and his family.”

“Oh...I see...”

“Forgive me for talking so much. I am not in the habit of speaking to strangers, but the master said he was well acquainted with you and your family. He said you were a friend of his and the colonel’s, and I am happy that he has guests to cheer him.”

“I am honoured to be called a friend of Mr. Darcy’s,” Elizabeth replied, fighting her emotions. She had learnt so many things from the good woman that she could hardly control her nervousness.

They walked down a long hall until they finally stopped in front of a door.

“Here is one of the rooms the master suggested.”

Mrs. Reynolds opened the door, and Elizabeth entered, her heart pounding.

The first thing she noticed was the stunning view.

The room was situated on a corner of the house, offering a perfect view of the gardens, the greenhouse, and the lake.

A door opened onto a rather large balcony, and she stepped out, inhaling deeply while her eyes were spoiled by the beauty in front of them.

“This is beautiful!” she whispered.

“I am glad you like it. As you may see, the room is rather large. There is a small additional room here, for your private needs, as well as a small desk. The other room is upstairs...”

“Mrs. Reynolds, if you do not mind, I would like this chamber. I do not need to see another one — the view and the balcony have won my heart,” she tried to joke.

The housekeeper smiled.

“Very well, miss. I shall request your luggage be brought here immediately. The bed sheets have all been changed today, and a maid just dusted. We rarely use this room — only the master and Miss Georgiana come from time to time to draw on the balcony. You are the first guest who has used it in quite a few years.”

“Oh... Thank you! It is beautiful,” Elizabeth repeated, her turmoil growing.

“You may ring for a maid for anything you want. If you wish for something to eat, or some tea...”

“No, thank you. I shall change and come downstairs soon. Until then, I shall simply admire the breathtaking view for a little longer.”

The housekeeper left, and Elizabeth remained alone, pressing her hands to her chest. Her heart was so loud that it sounded in her ears. She looked around and noticed the chamber was elegantly furnished, the windows large, and the bed twice as big as the one she shared with Jane at home.

But all those details did not matter. The only thought that spun in her head was that Mr. Darcy had given her the room with a perfect view, the room where he came to paint, the room he had given to no other guest. He must want her there — truly want her there, not just out of politeness for the accident.

She felt a blissful relief that made her slightly dizzy, while countless other speculations burst into her head.

She could not bear them but could not send them away either.

She stood on the balcony, leaning over its edge, without even noticing when a servant brought in her luggage.

The maid had to call her twice until Elizabeth finally heard.

In the next hour, she changed her clothes, re-pinned her hair, and slowly became accustomed to where she was.

She wished to write to Jane and planned to ask Mr. Darcy for paper and a pen.

That would be a good reason to approach him.

But perhaps she would do it tomorrow. For that day, everything that had happened already was too much.

She wished to see him again but was nervous at the thought; yet, she knew she would have to, especially since she had been invited to dine with him.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

The first thing Elizabeth did was to visit her aunt. Mrs. Gardiner was in bed, with a tray next to her, proving she had already eaten, and — surprisingly — a glass of port.

“You look lovely, Lizzy. Your uncle and Mr. Darcy are waiting for you in the dining room. I shall sleep now. I am quite tired, and I confess I have already drunk a glass of port — this will be my second one. It is delicious but quite strong.”

“Aunt!” Elizabeth laughed.

“No Aunt, Lizzy. Over the last ten years, I have occasionally indulged in a small glass of port to enable me to sleep. I shall take this opportunity. Enjoy your dinner, my dear. I shall see you again in the morning.”

Dismissed by her aunt, Elizabeth walked towards the dining room. She did not know where it was situated in that large house but hoped to find a servant to direct her.

As she walked down the hall, her attention was drawn towards the walls, furniture, and carpets. For a brief moment, it crossed her mind that of all this she could have been the mistress. Such a notion seemed extraordinary, and her imagination was not enough to consider the possibility.

The walls were filled with paintings, and she stopped in front of one, captivated. It was a large portrait of Mr. Darcy, wearing the same little smile which he had often directed at her.

“Miss Bennet?”

She startled, and her heart beat wildly when she saw the object of her musings waiting only a few steps away.

“I was hoping you would join us for dinner,” he said.

“Yes...thank you...” She did not know what else to say.

“Mr. Gardiner is in the library,” he continued. “Would you like to go there? Or to the dining room?”

“I...I would like to see the library,” she agreed. He seemed pleased with her answer and opened the door. She entered hesitantly and could not refrain from gasping.

The conversation at Netherfield about Mr. Darcy’s library being the work of many generations unfolded in front of her eyes, now given new meanings.

“This is beautiful...outstanding...” she whispered.

“Is it not, Lizzy?” Mr. Gardiner interjected. “I just told Mr. Darcy that if your father were here, he would not leave this room for weeks. He would eat here and sleep here.”

“I assume Miss Bennet inherited her love of books from her father,” Mr. Darcy said.

“I believe so. And her fondness for chess and fishing,” Mr. Gardiner continued, making Elizabeth’s cheeks fill with heat.

“I understand Mr. Darcy inherited an artistic side from his mother,” Elizabeth suddenly said, only to regret it a moment later. Her cheeks burned, and she averted her eyes, scolding herself for her imprudence. To her surprise, he replied rather lightly.

“I hope I did, though the real artist in the family is my sister, Georgiana. But I enjoy playing the pianoforte and drawing, especially when I am distressed. It is a way to regain peace and composure.”

“To me, the best way to regain some peace is fishing,” Mr. Gardiner said. “I look forward to tomorrow with pleasure.”

“Come, let us go to dinner and resume our conversation there,” Mr. Darcy suggested.

The dining room was equally spectacular, even impressive. There was a huge table in the middle, with only a few places arranged at one end. Mr. Darcy sat at the head of the table, with Elizabeth and Mr. Gardiner to either side of him.

“Lizzy, will you join us in fishing tomorrow?” Mr. Gardiner suddenly asked.

“Oh, no,” she replied, perturbed by the very notion. “I am certain you will enjoy your time much better with just gentlemen.”

“As you wish. Mr. Darcy has been so kind as to allow your aunt’s cousins to come and visit tomorrow. I shall return the visit the following day,” Mr. Gardiner continued. “We shall be forever in debt to Mr. Darcy for his generosity in allowing us to stay in his house.”

“Mr. Gardiner, any debt will be repaid if you cease talking about it,” Mr. Darcy replied. “I feel uncomfortable being praised for something anyone would do.”

“I am sorry to hear that, sir, and I shall try to comply with your wish. But no, not everybody would do such a thing for strangers. We were not friends, and we certainly do not belong to the same circles. Even your acquaintance with Elizabeth was trifling. From what I heard, you barely knew each other. You certainly could not be described as friends.”

Mr. Darcy looked at Elizabeth, and she needed a moment to compose herself enough to speak.

“Mr. Darcy and I became better acquainted during our stay in Kent, as I already told you, Uncle. It was an opportunity for me to better understand him and to realise my error in judgment. If we were not friends, the fault was entirely mine.”

Ending her speech, she finally dared to hold Mr. Darcy’s gaze for a longer moment.

“I must disagree with Miss Bennet once more,” Mr. Darcy said.

“My behaviour during our previous meetings was nothing but arrogant and disdainful, so Miss Bennet’s judgment was correct, based on that behaviour.

I hope we shall not argue for the biggest share of blame in the past and shall try to improve the present. ”

He spoke to Mr. Gardiner, only stealing several glances at her, but his meaning was transparent to Elizabeth. Her uncle’s presence made their agreement more difficult but no less clear.

“I would like that very much, Mr. Darcy,” she answered with all honesty.

The first course was served, and the conversation paused while they enjoyed it.

“Have you been at Pemberley long, Mr. Darcy?” Mr. Gardiner asked.

He hesitated a moment.

“For a few months. I came here almost immediately after I returned from Kent,” he said, his voice heavy as though it was a difficult confession. She understood what he

had not said explicitly, and breathing became difficult again.

“And will you stay at Pemberley for the rest of the summer?”

“Yes, that is what I planned. But I shall not be alone for much longer. My sister will come home soon — she is visiting my uncle and aunt at the moment. Lord and Lady Matlock.”

“The Matlock residence is not far from Pemberley?”

“A couple of hours by carriage. The colonel would have been delighted to see you again, Miss Bennet.”

“And I would have been pleased to see him, sir,” Elizabeth answered.

“In less than a fortnight, I shall have some other visitors who I believe would also be happy to see you. Mr. Bingley and his sisters.”

“Oh... How lovely! I am sorry I shall not have the opportunity to see Mr. Bingley. And his sisters, of course.”

“Mr. Gardiner, do you plan to stay long in Derbyshire?”

“Unfortunately, I must be back in London in ten days. My business requires my presence.”

“I see...”

“Does Mr. Bingley plan to keep the lease on Netherfield?” Elizabeth asked.

“I am not certain. I have not spoken to him since before Easter. I have only received

one letter — confirming his acceptance of my invitation to visit Pemberley.”

“Oh...I hope he will make his decision soon...in regard to Netherfield, I mean. It would be better for the entire neighbourhood if Netherfield Park is not abandoned,” she concluded.

“Miss Bennet, do you think... Would the neighbours rather Bingley returned to Netherfield or not?”

The question caught Elizabeth unprepared; even Mr. Gardiner — understanding its meaning — looked surprised.

“Mr. Bingley is well liked by everyone in Meryton,” Elizabeth responded cautiously.

“His departure was quite an unpleasant surprise, and he was missed for a long time. I am sure he would be welcomed if he returned with the intention of staying longer. If not, perhaps it would be fair for him to give up Netherfield for good.”

“Yes, that sounds fair,” Mr. Darcy uttered.

The subject was abandoned for a while, then Mr. Darcy enquired, “Mr. Gardiner told me your family is in good health. Your sisters are all at Longbourn now?”

“All but one. My youngest sister Lydia is in Brighton.”

“Alone?”

“She was invited by Colonel Forster’s wife and is staying in his home. The regiment is camped in Brighton for the summer,” she explained with some restraint. Mr. Darcy’s expression immediately changed.

“Colonel Forster is an excellent man, from what I heard. Unfortunately, not all his officers are equally honourable and trustworthy,” he finally said.

“I agree,” Elizabeth answered. “To be honest, I did not agree with Lydia going there, but my father trusted the colonel.”

“My niece Lydia is a sweet girl but very young, unwise, and reckless,” Mr. Gardiner interjected. “She will not rest until she gets what she wants, and my brother Bennet chose to let her leave so that everyone could enjoy a peaceful summer.”

Mr. Darcy looked at Elizabeth without any further comment, and even though he spoke no words, she felt his rebuke.

“Speaking of my sisters, I should like to write to Jane,” Elizabeth said. “May I be so bold as to beg you for some paper and a pen, Mr. Darcy? If it is not too much trouble.”

“Of course. No trouble at all, Miss Bennet.”

“Lizzy, tomorrow morning Mr. Darcy and I shall depart very early and be gone for most of the day. Please take care of your aunt.”

“Of course, Uncle.”

“Miss Bennet, Mrs. Reynolds told me you liked the room on the corner,” Mr. Darcy continued.

“Oh yes, sir. I absolutely love it,” she said enthusiastically, then felt embarrassed for using the word love so easily. She suddenly recalled his ardent confession of love, and it tormented her further.

“I am glad to hear that.”

“Thank you for offering it to me, Mr. Darcy. I could not dream of anything better.”

She was being honest and hoped he would not consider her statement inappropriate.

“It was truly my pleasure, Miss Bennet. Beauty is never so complete as when somebody knows how to appreciate it.”

For the rest of the evening, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy continued to talk, their words polite and proper but burdened with meaning that only the two of them comprehended.

After dinner, Elizabeth withdrew to her chamber, allowing Mr. Darcy and her uncle time to enjoy their brandy and cigars.

Her spirits had returned, and she felt almost comfortable, almost at peace. Almost.

She had spoken to him enough to find common ground. Even in her uncle’s presence, he had suggested they put the past aside and make the best of the present, which was all she wanted.

The only thing that she did not dare mention — and probably never would — were the paintings. He had admitted his artistic talents and knew she had seen the pictures. If he wished to, he might bring it up himself.

Surprising even herself, Elizabeth slept very well that night. After returning to her chamber, she spent quite a long while on the balcony. She was — again — pleased to receive further proof of Mr. Darcy’s consideration: a maid brought her paper and a

pen, and she began writing to Jane immediately.

Afterwards, she fell asleep with the windows wide open, allowing the scent and the sounds of the park to enter her room.

By the time she awoke, the sun had been up for several hours, so she dressed and hurried downstairs. Her uncle and Mr. Darcy had already left, so she joined her aunt, taking breakfast with her.

Annoyingly, Mrs. Gardiner's leg was even more swollen and painful; it had turned dark blue, and Mrs. Reynolds insisted on fetching the doctor again.

Around noon, Mrs. Gardiner's relatives arrived to see her, and another hour was spent in sharing memories and making plans for the coming days — if and when the injury would allow it.

Once the guests left, Mrs. Gardiner chose to sleep, and Elizabeth, with nothing else to do, went for a walk around the lake.

She hoped to catch a glimpse of the gentlemen returning, but she was disappointed.

It was very warm, so she walked back to the house and went directly to the library, intending to choose a book.

Once there, however, she allowed herself to rejoice in discovering all the little details that revealed Mr. Darcy's presence there.

She even sat in his chair, at his desk, touching the heavy wood.

She brushed her fingers over his pen — remembering Miss Bingley's offer to mend it for him.

Then she walked around the large room, admiring the books, wondering which were his favourites.

Eventually, she sat on the sofa; it was cool and silent, surrounded by the books and by the notion that everything belonged to him.

Feeling slightly tired, she lay back on the sofa for a moment, waking with a pounding heart when she heard Mr. Darcy's voice calling her name.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

“Miss Bennet?”

He was standing only steps away from the sofa, and she tried to jump to her feet and almost lost her balance.

“Forgive me for disturbing you. Are you well?”

“Yes, yes, very much so... I believe I fell asleep. Has my uncle returned too?”

“Yes. He has gone to refresh himself and rest before dinner. I am sorry I woke you up. I did not know you were here.”

“Do not apologise, sir. It is we who invaded your house, and I who invaded your library.”

“If that is the case, there has never been a more pleasant invasion, I assure you,” he said. His voice was hoarse, and a little smile twisted his lips and warmed his gaze.

“Thank you...”

“I hope you know I am being honest, Miss Bennet. I hope you will feel comfortable during your stay, and I promise I shall not impose on you with my presence...nor shall I say things you do not wish to hear.”

“Mr. Darcy, please do not assume that your presence would be an imposition. Quite the contrary. And please know that you may tell me anything. I hope our past disagreements at least gave us the chance of better understanding each other.”

“I hope that too, Miss Bennet. Very much.”

They were both standing, facing each other.

“Would you like to take a seat for a moment? Or would you rather leave?” he enquired, and she hesitated between what she should do and what she wished to do.

“I shall stay for a little longer,” she finally dared to say. “I hope you and Uncle had a pleasant time together.”

“Very much so. Mr. Gardiner is an excellent companion, and he caught a lot of fish. We shall have them for dinner,” he said with a smile.

“I am glad to hear that.”

“From what he related to me, I regret not getting to know your father better. I am sure I would have enjoyed his company too.”

“Very likely. He loves books and despises balls and parties too,” she jested. “In fact, I must take this opportunity to apologise for all my horrible and unfair accusations. I do not expect you to ever forgive me, but at least please know I am sorry.”

“Why would you apologise for something that was entirely my fault, Miss Bennet? What did you say that I did not deserve? I have been indeed arrogant, disdainful, and insensitive. And my intervention which separated my friend from your sister was equally unfair and unnecessary.”

“I shall not deny that, but the reason behind it was care for your friend. And certainly you did not deserve to be blamed for Mr. Wickham’s failures in life.”

“How could you have known? Wickham deceived many other people, including

myself and my cousins for a while. When I discovered the truth, I tried to tell my father, but he took Wickham's side, even in a situation of such extreme importance.

Wickham was the only reason my father and I ever quarrelled. It was quite a terrible fight."

"How very sad... I can see you are still pained talking about it..."

"I was pained, indeed. And slightly disappointed in my father — a man I always loved and admired. Till the end, his affection for Wickham remained unmoved, but his faith was shattered. That is why he only left a recommendation that I might offer Wickham a living."

"Considering your letter, you have been generous enough with Mr. Wickham."

"I tried to support him, despite my opinion. I wished to believe that I was wrong and that my father had judged him more accurately. Unfortunately, Wickham proved me right. I can only imagine how much my father would have suffered from his betrayal."

"He is the worst sort of man because he plays with people's trust and causes them suffering.

Your father had the excuse of his affection, which made him believe all the man's deceptions.

With me, not affection but vanity and prejudice were my weakness.

I believed him because he flattered me, unlike..."

"Unlike me," Mr. Darcy said. "Wickham always had the talent of speaking of

feelings he did not possess and showing more goodness than he ever had.”

“Unlike you... The opposite to you,” Elizabeth whispered.

They were at a proper distance — she on the sofa, he on a chair — but Elizabeth suddenly felt nervous of his closeness. His intense, dark gaze warmed her body and troubled her breathing.

“I should go and see my aunt,” she said, standing up. He did the same, looking slightly worried.

“I hope I have not said something to upset you, Miss Bennet.”

“Oh no, not at all...I am very happy that we had this conversation, Mr. Darcy. I just... I think I need to go now.”

“Yes... I shall see you at dinner.”

“Thank you... I look forward to it with pleasure,” she said, then she felt silly.

Why would she look forward to dinner? She meant she looked forward to seeing him again in the company of her uncle, to protect her from further distress.

But she could not possibly say that; she barely dared to think it.

Elizabeth left the library, and in the hall, she breathed deeply. She could still smell his scent, and it made her dizzy.

She went to see her aunt; her uncle was sleeping in the other chamber of the apartment, and the ladies spent some time discussing the events of the day.

The doctor had still insisted on Mrs. Gardiner resting her leg, so she could not join them for dinner.

The lady refused Elizabeth's offer to dine together, declaring she simply wished to eat and sleep.

It was obvious to Elizabeth that her aunt was trying to encourage her to be in Mr. Darcy's company. She could not imagine what her uncle and aunt believed about her relationship with Mr. Darcy; they were intrigued, but they did not insist further upon the subject.

Elizabeth went to her room to change her clothes. It was still early, but she wished to take a stroll before dinner. She planned to go down the stone steps near the greenhouse, then down to the lake. The weather was perfectly warm, but a soft breeze blew gently.

From the balcony of her room, she was amazed to see Mr. Darcy near the lake with a woman and two children, who were playing around him.

She could hear their joyful voices but could not make out what they were saying.

From that distance, she could barely see the woman except that she was wearing the uniform of a maid.

Curiosity drove Elizabeth to hurry out of the house, but decency advised her not to intrude. Several minutes of struggle passed; she kept glancing at the little group until she saw two other people join them, then she finally left the chamber.

Stepping into the long hall, Elizabeth fought all sorts of feelings. She was curious, but it was more than that.

In a household with so many servants, the presence of children was certainly not unusual. But those children were playing around Mr. Darcy, appearing to be very familiar with him.

When she arrived at the lake, Mr. Darcy was gone, but the two children were still there, chasing each other and laughing, watched over by the same woman — probably older than Mrs. Gardiner — and a younger maid.

Upon seeing Elizabeth, the children stopped for a moment, then ran to her. They must have been around six or seven years old, very much alike — probably twins, though the girl had a lighter hair than her brother.

“Good day, miss.” The boy bowed, while the girl curtsied rather clumsily but both ceremoniously.

“Good day,” Elizabeth replied in earnest, curtseying too.

“Jenny, Jacob! Come here! Don’t bother the lady!” the woman cried, hurrying to them.

“They are not bothering me at all,” Elizabeth replied, smiling warmly to calm the woman.

“I am sorry, miss. Come, children, let’s go back to the house.”

“Please do not leave because of me,” Elizabeth continued. “Jenny, Jacob, I am pleased to meet you. I am Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Good day, Miss Bennet,” the boy offered, bowing lower, and Elizabeth’s smile broadened. The children were lively, well-mannered, and not shy at all. They looked strangely familiar to Elizabeth, and she wondered whether she had seen them before.

“Miss Bennet?” Mrs. Reynolds’s appearance interrupted the exchange; the children returned to their play, and the woman followed them while the housekeeper addressed Elizabeth.

“I hope the children did not bother you?”

“Oh no, quite the contrary. I have four cousins — one of five, one of six, and two a little older. Jenny and Jacob must be six or seven?”

“Almost seven, miss.”

“So they are about the same age as my cousins. What a delightful age!”

“Yes. Do you need something particular, Miss Bennet? I saw you from the window. Dinner should be ready in an hour.”

“I just wished to take a short walk, nothing else. Everything is perfect, thank you.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

The children’s voices were loud and joyful, and Elizabeth smiled.

“They are such lovely children. So sweet and pretty too. They are twins, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“And...forgive me if I am intruding...they are here with their parents, I presume?”

The housekeeper’s face darkened.

“Their mother died when they were born. She was only sixteen...”

“Oh dear, I am so sorry to hear that. Did you know her? The mother?”

“Oh yes. She was a maid here. I hired her myself, sadly...”

The housekeeper’s voice was so low that Elizabeth barely heard her.

“What a pity...so young...did she have family?”

“Indeed, she was a sweet girl. No, she did not have much of a family either.”

“And the children? Poor dears. They seem to be happy and healthy — I did not suspect such tragedy.”

“Fortunately, the master took them under his protection, otherwise they would have died of cold and starvation. He took the responsibility of raising and educating them, and hopefully, they will live decent lives.”

“Oh...how generous of Mr. Darcy.”

“Very much so. Most men in his position would not care. There are so many young women in similar situations that nobody cares much about them. Excuse me, I must leave you now, Miss Bennet — I still have unfinished tasks for today.”

With that, Mrs. Reynolds left, and Elizabeth resumed her planned walk. However, she barely noticed the scenery around her. She found herself captivated by the children’s story, without any particular reason.

The little Mrs. Reynolds had told her was concerning, even disturbing, and she did not know what to do with it.

A young maid, one of Pemberley’s servants, had been left with child about seven

years ago.

Even the late Mr. Darcy had been alive then.

The mother had died, but what had happened to the father?

They were under Mr. Darcy's protection — which was understandable since the maid was in his employment and he probably felt responsible. But how? In what way?

The children's voices from the lawn reached her, prompting more and more questions and speculations to gather in her mind.

She could not concentrate enough to think properly, so her distress only increased.

The brief encounter with Mr. Darcy in the library had led her to believe there might be a new beginning to their relationship.

Perhaps a tentative friendship. Perhaps they could speak more of Mr. Bingley and Jane soon?

Perhaps they could speak more about each other in the future?

She did not dare assume too much, so she tried to keep her expectations — her hopes — under good regulation.

But that tragic story appeared from nowhere to stir her worries and turn into another obstacle to overcome.

Elizabeth returned to the house and joined Mr. Darcy and her uncle for dinner.

The two gentlemen were voluble and in obvious good spirits.

Her uncle spoke about his success in catching fish, but Elizabeth hardly listened to him.

From time to time, she exchanged glances with Mr. Darcy, though she spoke to him only briefly.

Eventually, she retired to her chamber rather early, but once there, she could not sleep.

She recollected the details of that day, her discussion with Mr. Darcy in the library, trying to guess the meaning of what he had said and what he had implied; then again, she turned the story of the children around in her head, wondering how she could find out more about it.

Perhaps her aunt could ask her cousins — surely such a story must be known in Lambton.

But did she have the right to enquire? Did she have the right to indulge her curiosity?

It was certainly not her business, nor her prerogative, to do so.

She should better know her place and enjoy Mr. Darcy's hospitality.

She knew that was what she should do, but she could not.

Her mind was too alert to allow her body to rest, and, despite the opened window, she felt hot.

The hour was very late, the house was silent, but she still could not find rest. On an impulse, she decided that she needed a book to read, so she took a candle and went down to the library.

Her heart secretly hoped that she might find Mr. Darcy there, so when she entered and saw him at his desk, lost in some papers, she was not even surprised. When he raised his gaze to her — shocked, puzzled, with a slight frown between his eyebrows — she struggled to whisper an apology.

“Miss Bennet, please come in,” he invited her, standing up and walking towards her.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

“Mr. Darcy...forgive me for disturbing you. I have come to search for a book... something to read. I cannot sleep.”

“I am sorry to hear that. Should I call for a maid to make you a herbal tea? I am sure Mrs. Reynolds has a special recipe for any problem.”

“Oh no, no! I could not possibly disturb the servants in the middle of the night to make me tea! A book will do...”

“What sort of book would you like? What author? I shall help you find one.”

“Oh, I am not sure... I believe Shakespeare would suffice.”

“Very well. Let me show you which shelf his works are on, so you may choose the one you like.”

He directed her, his presence making her disturbingly aware of their situation.

They were alone, in the middle of the night, and she was wearing her night clothes.

There could hardly be a more ruinous situation.

She knew she should be embarrassed, but all she felt was a tender warmth spread all over her body.

“Miss Bennet, I discussed something with Mr. Gardiner earlier, and I believe you should know. I feel uncomfortable knowing Wickham is in Brighton with so many

honourable yet naïve young women. We agreed that your uncle would write a warning to your father, suggesting bringing your sister Lydia home. I also intend to write to Colonel Forster. I should have spoken to him last autumn when I was in Meryton, but my judgment was altered at that moment.”

“It is better to be done a little late than never, sir. And I agree it would be useful. I have not divulged my knowledge of Mr. Wickham to anyone, except a little to my sister Jane. I told her about the money he received from you and wasted. But to everyone else in Meryton, Mr. Wickham is still an amiable man who was forced to fight through all sorts of unfair misfortunes.”

“I assumed as much. I am glad that at least you believed my letter.”

“As unreasonable as I was on the matter, I was not such a complete fool as to reject the evidence, Mr. Darcy. If I had used my wit instead of my vanity, I would have probably guessed the truth myself.”

“As you said, late is better than never.” He smiled. “As for your father, we shall send the express tomorrow morning. Together with your letter to your sister.”

“Thank you. I warned my father about allowing Lydia to go to Brighton, but he made a joke of it. He said Lydia is too poor to tempt anyone.”

“Unfortunately, that is not always true,” Mr. Darcy replied. “Wickham has no scruples in ruining poor young women for his own amusement. Some have paid with their lives for the naivety of believing him.”

Elizabeth gasped, and he immediately apologised.

“I am very sorry. I did not mean to frighten you. I am sure your sister, living in the colonel’s house, is in no danger of any sort. But others might be.”

“Yes...”

“May I help you with anything else? It is very late,” he said.

She felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment. She had no business being there alone with him, and he had politely reminded her of that fact.

“No, thank you, I shall leave now.”

“Good night. We shall meet tomorrow morning at breakfast. Tomorrow, I have some business in Lambton, and your uncle will visit your relatives. Please let me know if you wish to do anything particular.”

“Thank you... I shall stay with my aunt and perhaps take a walk around the lake. I only saw it briefly earlier.”

“Would you like to ride in the phaeton?”

“Oh no...I shall just walk. I did so a little today.”

She turned to leave, but her curiosity could not be repressed.

“When I walked today, I met Jenny and Jacob. Such lovely children.”

He frowned.

“They are lovely, indeed.”

“Mrs. Reynolds told me how fortunate they are to have your support.”

“They would have been more fortunate if they still had their mother. And they would

have done so if my actions had been more thoughtful and more determined.”

“Your actions, sir?” she enquired, stopping and looking at him directly.

He hesitated and averted his eyes momentarily.

“Yes, my actions. This unfortunate case is an example of what I spoke of earlier.”

“Earlier?”

“Concerning Wickham...”

She needed a moment to realise, then she caught her breath as the revelation freed her from her previous painful suspicions.

Mr. Wickham was the father! How could she have been so foolish, so unjust, as to suspect even for an instant that it could have been Mr. Darcy?

She felt both relieved and deeply ashamed.

“Mr. Wickham... The children were born before your father died, I assume? Please forgive me if my questions are intrusive. I would not mind if you did not answer me — I have no right to enquire.”

“Do not apologise, please. I have already trusted you with matters that I have confessed to no other soul. I have no reason to distrust you now. Yes, they were born almost two years before my father died. It was the event that caused my quarrel with my father and almost estranged us.”

“Did your father disapprove of you supporting the orphans?”

“No, but he also did not disapprove of Wickham’s crime of seducing a maid who was almost a child herself.

His crime was even worse — he sent the girl away from Pemberley and placed her in a small cottage, where she gave birth with only one woman to help her.

He did not fetch the doctor, did not inform us where the girl was, so she bled to death a few days later.

It was that woman who told a servant where the children were, and the servant informed Mrs. Reynolds. ”

“Dear Lord...”

“Wickham claimed he was not the father and that the young maid was involved with other men too, which we all knew was not true. And my father was dreadfully calm — he said every young man has some such issue, and many gentlemen of consequence have several children they do not even know about. I am sorry, this is not a subject I should discuss with a young lady.”

“No, please... I am glad you did. Poor girl. What a tragedy... But why did you say your actions were at fault? I believe you did everything you could.”

“The girl was a servant here. I was the only one who knew Wickham’s true nature. I should have been more decided. I should have thrown him out!”

“Yes but...even if you had done that, he would have caused similar tragedies in other places. You cannot protect everyone from Mr. Wickham’s vicious character.”

“Sadly, that is true. I shall still try to do my best, though, even if that means taking drastic measures against Wickham. Just as I shall do my best to explain to Bingley

my involvement in a situation where I should not have interfered—including your sister's presence in town."

She looked at him in disbelief, her eyes moist with gratitude.

"You are an excellent man, Mr. Darcy. I shall never forgive myself for failing to see it sooner," she said. They were standing inches apart, facing each other.

"I must be completely honest and admit that I do not regret rejecting your proposal in April," she whispered, and his expression became stern.

"My feelings at that time were not of a nature to allow me to accept your proposal for a good reason. If I had, I would have deceived you, and for that, I would have deserved your contempt. But I shall never forgive myself for not recognising your good nature and honourable character. And for believing nefarious reports without even asking for evidence."

"You are a brave woman, Miss Bennet. Being loyal to your beliefs and your feelings is proof of your worthiness. I never doubted that, not even when anger and resentment shadowed my judgment."

"You give me more credit and more consideration than I feel I deserve, Mr. Darcy."

"I feel you deserve much more, Miss Bennet."

"To that, I can only express thanks and gratitude, especially when it comes from such a man. And from such an excellent artist. I am no expert, but your portraits looked beautiful to me," she added, allowing a little smile to dissipate the heavy tension between them.

He looked surprised by her little joke, but a smile appeared on his lips too.

“I am not an excellent artist. Indeed, the portraits looked beautiful to me too because the model inspired me. Inspired me to paint but also to reconsider my behaviour and to admit my errors.”

For a moment, there was silence again, until she said, “I must leave now.”

“Of course... Good night, Miss Bennet,” he whispered with a bow, briefly taking her hand to his lips.

She hurried out, her heart beating wildly, her breathing irregular, and she only stopped when she entered her room.

There, she lay on the bed, closing her eyes.

Another brief meeting with Mr. Darcy had revealed, once again, the excellence of his character and the flaws in hers.

Now that the truth had been exposed, she dared admit to herself that she had experienced a slight, small, yet painful suspicion that Mr. Darcy could have been the one involved with the maid — the father of the two children.

She had suspected Mr. Wickham too, but the seeds of doubt had been there in her mind.

She felt guilty and furious with herself for still being unfair to Mr. Darcy.

For confessing to him that she did not regret her rejection, she felt relieved and content.

In April, he had declared he loved and admired her ardently.

Even without all the reasons that caused her resentment, she had not loved him, and accepting his marriage proposal would have been for prudence only.

A marriage in which one is ardently in love and the other only prudent might be more painful than one with no love at all.

However, what if one begins to love while the other's love is slowly fading? The storm of feelings inside her proved that her opinion and sentiments towards him were changing. But what of his sentiments?

She went to the balcony and looked out into the darkness.

The sky was clear, and the stars and moon were mirrored in the lake.

He had chosen that room for her, which meant her happiness was important to him.

He had painted her, which proved he was still thinking about her.

He was friendly to her uncle and aunt and concerned for her sister Lydia.

What else could all of that mean, other than that his feelings for her were still strong and tender? Whether he would ever take a step towards revealing those feelings again, after he had been so brutally rejected once, was entirely another matter.

She heard a slight noise from the door, and she moved towards it cautiously.

With disbelief, she observed a piece of paper had been slipped underneath.

She picked it up with trembling fingers and with utter astonishment and equal delight recognised the image of herself, drawn in that very room, on the balcony.

She caressed the paper, placed it on the bed so she could better admire it, and recognised that in the sketch she was dressed as she had been at the Netherfield ball.

She stared at the picture, tearful, for a long time, her soul invaded by feelings she could not define.

Finally, she placed the drawing on the table, wondering what she should do with it.

The only choice was to roll it carefully and put it in her luggage, as it was a secret not to be shared with anyone.

As she did so, she noticed something written on the back. She read it, and tears fell from her eyes.

This was drawn many weeks ago when I was certain that only in my imagination and in my dreams such an image could be possible. The reality is exquisite and cannot be compared. F Darcy.

It was the strongest proof that his ardent love was still lasting, and her heart and her mind opened to receive it with gratitude and happiness.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

To Elizabeth, the next two days were as beautiful as a dream. Her heart was more and more clear in regard to her feelings for Mr. Darcy, and his intentions towards her were more and more obvious. He did not say much, but his attention could not be misjudged.

He spent most of his time with Mr. Gardiner, and Elizabeth with her aunt.

Except for dinner and breakfast, she and Mr. Darcy met again twice in the library.

It was somehow a habit for her to read there in the afternoon, and he happened upon her there — seemingly by chance.

She remembered the day at Netherfield when she and Mr. Darcy had been a full half an hour together in the library and not exchanged a single word.

How was it possible that she had missed noticing his preference for her?

Mr. Darcy mentioned on various occasions that his sister would have liked to meet Elizabeth and the Gardiners, and he even asked Mr. Gardiner if they could prolong their stay in Derbyshire for another week.

But as much as everybody would enjoy such a prospect, it was impossible.

However, since they had already been at Pemberley for four days, and Mrs. Gardiner's leg was not yet completely healed, Mr. Darcy proposed, and the Gardiners agreed, that as there was no point in moving to the inn for another three or four days, they should remain at Pemberley until the end of their holiday.

Elizabeth received the news with joy and nervousness.

Although her wisdom demanded her to be prudent and dismiss any unreasonable expectations, her heart allowed her to dream of a renewed proposal before she left.

Whilst the first proposal had been shocking, enraging, dreadful, and offensive, a new one was the only thing she wished for in the world, from the only man who was perfectly suited to her. And she to him.

In less than a week at Pemberley, she had been offered the chance to see him in a new light, to admire his qualities reflected in all sorts of small actions, small gestures, barely noticeable but full of meaning.

She had been given the chance to see his generosity and care for others — and his love and consideration for her.

From the little she had learnt, she knew she was not prepared — and perhaps not worthy either — to be the mistress of Pemberley.

But she was certain she would do everything in her power to improve herself and to work hard to fulfil such a responsibility.

And she would do everything in her power to be sure that Mr. Darcy would be happy with her.

If he were to propose again, she would accept for nothing but the best of reasons, and his ardent love would not remain unrequited.

“Lizzy dear,” Mrs. Gardiner said, “even if this leg pains me until the end of our stay, I absolutely want to take a tour of Pemberley in the phaeton. Your uncle told me Mr. Darcy offered it to you, but you refused it.”

“I did not refuse it, Aunt, I merely declined the offer for the present. I could not enjoy such a ride without you.”

“How lovely of you! We shall enjoy it together, then. So, my dear, what do you think of Mr. Darcy now? I hope you do not have any misunderstandings remaining between you.”

“No, Aunt, not at all.”

“Your uncle is absolutely enchanted with him!”

“I imagined as much. Mr. Darcy seems to enjoy Uncle’s company too.”

“Would you say it is possible that they will meet again in the future? Will there be further occasions, Lizzy?”

“I hope so, Aunt. I imagine you wish to know more, but there is truly nothing more to know for now. I enjoy Mr. Darcy’s generosity, and we are rather friendly towards each other — just as you and Uncle could see. That is all.”

“Very well, my dear. I shall not insist.”

They continued to talk for a while, had some tea, then Mrs. Gardiner was ready to sleep. She laughed, claiming she was tired of so much rest.

They were startled when Mr. Gardiner burst into the room, clearly distressed, red-faced, breathless, his neckcloth loose. He held two letters, which he handed to Elizabeth.

“Here. Two letters from Jane. They just arrived today. I am afraid they do not contain good tidings, as I also received one from my brother Bennet. I have the most

disturbing news to share.”

“For heaven’s sake, my dear, what happened? The children?” Mrs. Gardiner cried.

“The children are perfectly well. Our children, at least. Lizzy dear, Lydia has eloped. She left Brighton with that scoundrel Wickham. They apparently departed for Gretna Green with the intention of marrying. My brother Bennet is with Colonel Forster in London, and he writes that they traced them to town but no farther. Bennet asked for my immediate assistance.”

Mr. Gardiner spoke in haste, hardly making any sense. Mrs. Gardiner stared at him, her eyes wide with horror.

Elizabeth’s mind tried to understand but somehow refused. Surely it could not be possible. Lydia had eloped? Countless questions spun in her mind as she tried to imagine scenarios, each worse than the other.

“Apparently, Lydia left the colonel’s wife a letter. She said she had been in love with Wickham for a long time, and she was happy to leave with him.” Mr. Gardiner rolled his eyes in apparent vexation.

Elizabeth heard her uncle and aunt talking, but she could not gather herself to speak.

“We must leave immediately,” Mr. Gardiner continued. “Let us pray that things are not as bad as they seem now.”

“Things will certainly be worse than they seem now,” Elizabeth finally said. “Mr. Wickham will never marry Lydia. We should be fortunate if we find her and save her from a tragic fate. For this, we may pray, but we must remember that our family is at fault!”

“Lizzy, I understand you are upset—” Mr. Gardiner interjected.

“You and Papa said she was too poor to tempt anyone,” Elizabeth uttered in a voice so cold that it scared herself. “Mama always let Lydia do what she pleased. Papa always makes sport of everything, and you do not take the trouble to censure them, even when you know they are wrong.”

Her uncle and aunt looked at her, incredulous at her scolding.

“Lizzy dear—”

“That is the truth, Uncle. Let us not pretend ignorance. Lydia was allowed to have her way simply to keep the peace at Longbourn. Now there will be peace, as our family will be ruined forever. Nobody will want to be associated with us from now on. Lydia will be miserable whether she marries Mr. Wickham or not, and we all shall be shunned forever. It will be peace indeed,” she said, unable to prevent her tears from falling.

“Let us not fear the worst, my dear. I shall ask Mr. Darcy to send a servant to inform your cousins that we must return to London immediately. We shall pack our luggage, and you, my dear, will have to bear the journey despite your injury.”

“Do not worry about me,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “We must leave today!”

“Uncle, please, do not tell Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth begged, tears falling down her cheeks.

“Mr. Darcy knows, Lizzy. I opened the letter in the carriage as we were returning from the inn. He said he had some urgent business to attend to — I wonder where he is now...”

Elizabeth suspected where he was. He was far away from them.

As kind and generous as he was, the notion that Lydia was now so closely and so shamefully connected to Mr. Wickham must be dreadful for Mr. Darcy — and understandably so.

He must distance himself from such a scandal; that was beyond doubt.

“I shall pack my luggage. I shall be ready in half an hour, then I shall come to help you, Aunt,” Elizabeth said, ready to leave the chamber.

However, just as she reached the door, she was almost knocked down by Mr. Darcy, who entered unceremoniously.

She actually stumbled, and he grabbed her, so for an instant, she was in his arms — in his embrace, where she would never be again.

“Forgive me, sir, I am going to my room. We shall leave immediately — we have not an instant to lose,” she whispered, trying to conceal her tears.

His hands were still holding her, and he gently pushed her back towards the bed.

“Miss Bennet, please sit for a moment. I have come to talk to Mr. Gardiner, and I am happy that you are all here, so we can agree together.”

She sat, and so did Mr. Gardiner, then Mr. Darcy.

“In such situations, urgency is of the utmost importance. I just sent one of my trusted men to Gretna Green, in case the runaways go there, but I doubt they will. Wickham has no money for travelling long distances, and I assume neither has Miss Lydia. So, I suspect they are hiding in London.”

He spoke with agitation, while Elizabeth watched him in shock.

“I know some of the places where Wickham used to go, so it should be easy to track them. But we must make haste. Mrs. Gardiner cannot travel at the speed we require, so we must find another solution.”

Elizabeth noticed that he said ‘we’, and she did not dare to ask why.

“I propose that Mr. Gardiner and I leave immediately — in half an hour. We may sleep only one night and travel the rest of the time. Mrs. Gardiner and Miss Bennet may leave Pemberley tomorrow morning, in my carriage. Two of my men, my valet, and a maid will join you, to keep you safe and assist you on the road. You cannot travel during the night, so you will spend two nights at inns. My valet will take care of the accommodations. I understand your children are at Longbourn, so you will go there and hopefully wait for news from Mr. Bennet or Mr. Gardiner.”

He ended the speech, waiting for their approval, but none of them said a word. Elizabeth felt her hands and lips trembling, and she gulped down the lump in her throat.

“You will go with my uncle?” she finally asked. “But why?”

“Why?” Mr. Darcy repeated, puzzled.

“There will be a scandal, regardless of the outcome. You must not be involved in it,” Elizabeth replied.

“I beg to differ, Miss Bennet. I must be involved in it, as it is my responsibility. I should have exposed Wickham long ago for who he was. If I had, Miss Lydia would not be in such peril today. The mistake was mine, and so must the remedy be.”

“Mr. Darcy, Lizzy is right — we do not want to—” Mr. Gardiner interjected.

“Mr. Gardiner, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Darcy interrupted rather harshly, “please understand that I shall go and look for Wickham under any circumstances. I am determined to leave for London immediately, no matter what. My decision is final. The only question is whether you find my plan appropriate and wish to join me, or whether you would rather do something else? I think we all agree that there is no time to waste.”

The three looked at each other, and Elizabeth ceased to fight her tears.

“Your plan is perfect, Mr. Darcy, and we are grateful for it,” Mrs. Gardiner said, expressing their acceptance, while Mr. Gardiner only nodded.

Elizabeth said nothing, only kept her eyes to the ground. She did not dare speculate what had induced his decision or what would happen next.

Following Mr. Darcy’s plan, the two gentlemen left half an hour later in Mr. Gardiner’s carriage.

With the help of the maids, Elizabeth and her aunt finished their packing and spent the rest of the day talking.

Mrs. Gardiner tried to comfort her, but Elizabeth’s tears knew no end.

She feared the worst for Lydia, who was still a child and equally unwise.

Whether Wickham married her or not, she would be ruined and unhappy.

Then she thought of Jane and Mr. Bingley; such a scandal would certainly influence his decision to return to Netherfield.

As for her and Mr. Darcy, she did not even dare consider what their future might be.

Elizabeth finally returned to her chamber. It would be her last night there, so she stood on the balcony for a while, to enjoy the view she might never see again.

When she was finally ready to climb into bed, she noticed a package on her pillow. She opened it and found another drawing — another likeness partially sketched — and a note.

This one is unfinished. I started it on your first day at Pemberley, and I hope to finish it when we meet again. Until then, please do not allow tears to shadow your sparkling eyes. F Darcy.

Elizabeth looked at the note as if she could not believe it, then read it again, then kissed the paper through tearful laughter — a mix of sadness and joy, sorrow and hopes.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner arrived at Longbourn after three days on the road.

Mr. Darcy's servants who had accompanied them showed perfect efficiency.

His valet was accustomed to the inns, likely from the frequent times he had travelled with his master, and he chose comfortable and clean places to stay overnight.

During the day, they stopped every few hours to allow Mrs. Gardiner to rest her leg.

The journey was torture for Elizabeth. Her fear for Lydia combined with a deep sense of sorrow and regret for what she barely dared to imagine could have been if she had remained a few more days at Pemberley.

Her feelings tormented and confused her.

In only a few days, her improved opinion of Mr. Darcy and remorse for how she had rejected him had turned into something so gripping and so deep that it completely devastated her.

Now that she wished — more than anything else — for a marriage proposal, she began to imagine how Mr. Darcy must have felt when he offered for her and she called him the last man in the world she could be prevailed upon to marry.

The painting he had given her and his involvement and determination in her delicate family matter should mean that her hopes of felicity were not completely ruined.

That his feelings for her were still tender could not be denied.

His behaviour since they had met again at Pemberley proved that.

Also, his regret and guilt for Mr. Wickham's actions were obvious, and all that combined had induced him to take the trouble of going in search of the runaways.

But was it realistic to hope that he would renew his addresses?

A man so proud, with such a situation in life, to ask again when he had been so fiercely rejected, especially when, to all the other flaws of the Bennets was added the stigma of Lydia's elopement with his worst enemy?

Would any man propose again under such circumstances?

Would anyone forget and forgive such offences and overcome all the other obstacles?

Was she even worthy of such devotion, considering all her errors in judgment?

She owned the greatest share of blame for Lydia's imprudence.

If she had been wiser and not trusted Mr. Wickham, if she had not spoken so highly of him and had not pitied him for his 'misfortunes' in front of her family, Lydia would likely not have been so charmed by that man and thrown away her entire life for him.

Lydia was still a child, and a rather silly one, but she, Elizabeth, had been a complete fool.

In such turmoil, the two portraits from Mr. Darcy were her only consolation, but she only thought of them and did not look at them again, as she could not reveal them to her aunt. That would have only incited more questions which she was unwilling to answer.

When they finally reached Longbourn, they found true chaos. Mrs. Bennet spent her time crying, whining, blaming the entire world, and sharing reports of Mr. Wickham's deceptions and depravations with her sister, Mrs. Phillips.

Mrs. Bennet was so distressed that the fact they had arrived in Mr. Darcy's carriage went almost unnoticed. The servants who had accompanied them unloaded the luggage, then left for London immediately. While Elizabeth tried to comfort Jane, Mrs. Gardiner stepped in to take charge of the household.

"Dear sister, thank God my brother went to London to help Mr. Bennet! I fear the worst! That horrible man! I never liked him — I told the girls to stay away from him, but they never listen to me! Nobody ever listens to me!"

"Sister, you must calm down. We must try to bear the situation and hope that things will not end up being as bad as we fear now. We are fortunate to have Mr. Darcy's support, which is invaluable. I am sure they will be found soon."

"Mr. Darcy? Who cares about him? We all know that he despises us — he did not even want to dance with Lizzy at the Meryton assembly! I am sure he does not care if we suffer the most dreadful fate! I blame him too! If he had not refused to give Mr. Wickham that living, he would be a clergyman in God knows where, and he would not have eloped with my daughter!"

"Sister, please do not say things that might cause more harm," Mrs. Gardiner said, trying and failing to temper her.

"I am telling the truth, Sister. And, speaking of clergymen, if Lizzy had married Mr. Collins, as she should have, we would not be suffering so much! We would at least not be homeless if Mr. Bennet dies! But I fear he will call Mr. Wickham out, and he will be killed in a duel!"

“I am sure there will be no duel, Sister,” Mrs. Gardiner responded. “Let us eat and then rest — we are all too tired to think properly.”

Later that evening, Elizabeth had the chance to talk to her sister in their chamber, and only then did Jane begin sobbing, relating the awful moment when they had received the dreadful news.

“Dear Lizzy, I felt terrible for insisting you not expose Mr. Wickham! But I comfort myself by hoping he loves her. He must love her — why else would he elope with her? She has no money, no connections, nothing to tempt him...”

“Dearest, I am glad you can find something to comfort you, but this cannot be true. Neither of us ever observed any partiality on his side — nor on hers! I believe he needed to leave in haste and took Lydia with him because she happened to be willing.”

“Lizzy!”

“Sadly, that is the horrible truth, Jane. I doubt Mr. Wickham will marry her unless he gains some advantages — which Papa certainly cannot offer him.”

“Dear Lord...”

“We must accept the truth, dearest, and prepare for the consequences of Lydia’s actions. Our entire family will be affected, and only a few honourable people will want to be connected with us from now on. We must learn to take care of ourselves.”

“But Lizzy, what about Mr. Darcy? Aunt said he is helping Mr. Gardiner?”

“Yes...we were at Pemberley when the letters arrived...”

“I know. I read your letter, and I confess I was shocked. Considering your past disagreements, I did not expect Mr. Darcy to show so much amiability and generosity.”

“I was equally shocked, Jane. I assumed he would never wish to speak to me again and would avoid me as his worst enemy. But he was so kind, so friendly, so considerate...”

Elizabeth became emotional, and Jane caressed her hand. “He must still love you, Lizzy...”

“He surely does not hate me...”

“And you? Do you still hate him?”

“I do not believe I ever hated him, Jane. But I disregarded him, and I held a grudge against him, first because he offended me at the assembly, then because I heard him chatting with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst about our family in a most unkind manner, and I blamed him for Mr. Bingley’s departure.

But mostly, I was ready to believe him to be cruel for how he treated Mr. Wickham.

Between a man who offended me and one who always flattered me, my vanity chose to trust the latter, of course.

So, when Mr. Darcy proposed, I was stunned and angry and resentful. ”

“That is easy to understand, Lizzy. I cannot blame you for refusing him.”

“I do not blame myself for refusing him either, but I do blame myself for the manner of my rejection and for all the unfair accusations I threw at him, which I regretted

almost immediately.”

“Your letter from Pemberley sounded very warm. You spoke very highly of him.”

“And deservedly so, Jane. If I only had time to tell you everything that proves his real character and his generous nature... I truly believe that he is the best man I have ever known.”

“And...do you believe he intended to renew his proposal?”

“I do not know what he intended to do. But I do know that Lydia’s elopement is an obstacle impossible to overcome.

Even if Mr. Darcy was ready to help Uncle find the fugitives, who would want to be connected in such a way to his enemy?

That would hurt not only his honour but his name, as well as his family.

I do not believe he will renew his proposal, Jane, and neither will—”

She stopped, looking at her sister, who had turned slightly pale.

“If you mean Mr. Bingley, I have long abandoned any expectation of seeing him again other than by mere coincidence. Mr. Bingley has become nothing but a lovely memory.”

Elizabeth wished to tell Jane about Mr. Darcy’s promise of providing Mr. Bingley with all the unknown details. But she chose not to and instead only embraced her sister.

What use could there be in troubling Jane’s heart and giving her reason for hopes that

were far from reality?

Even if Mr. Darcy kept his word, the reports about Lydia's elopement would soon be known to everyone.

Would Mr. Bingley wish to overlook them when he had not fought for Jane's love before such impediments existed?

The day after their return, Mr. Gardiner's carriage arrived from London with a letter for Mrs. Gardiner. It contained the news that the fugitives had been found. Lydia was at Gracechurch Street while they were negotiating with Mr. Wickham, who had several demands if he was to agree to marry Lydia.

We have tried the impossible to convince her to distance herself from the man, with the promise that we would find a reasonable solution to cover up this error.

But she declined quite angrily and would not listen to any other solution but marriage, whenever that may happen.

So now, we must deal with his claims. He has a long list of debts that must be urgently covered as well as the need for a new living.

We shall see how we reconcile what he wants with what we are willing and able to give him.

I would kindly ask for you to return to London; your presence would be of great help in dealing with Lydia.

Your loving Edward.

Mrs. Gardiner shared the contents of the letter with only Elizabeth and Jane, causing

one to be enraged and appalled and the other grieved and ashamed.

“Hateful, horrible man! Poor, silly Lydia — she is condemning herself to a life of misery! If only someone would beat that man senseless! How dare he assume Papa will pay his debts! Is he out of his senses? How can he imagine ever being accepted by our family?”

“Calm yourself, Lizzy. I shall tell your mother that the couple have been found and that Lydia is safe. Your uncle has sent me the carriage, so he must truly need me. I shall return to town today, and I promise to send any news that I have.”

In the following hour, while the eldest girls helped Mrs. Gardiner and her children pack, Mrs. Bennet and Kitty filled the house with cries of joy.

“Oh, my dear Lydia, she will be married! How wonderful! She is not even sixteen yet and will be the first of you all to marry! And what a handsome husband she will have! I cannot wait to tell my sister Phillips and Mrs. Long and Lady Lucas!”

“Mama, you cannot tell anyone yet!” Elizabeth interjected harshly.

“First, because we are not sure they will marry! Lydia’s future handsome husband has demanded more money than Papa could possibly afford!

And even if they do wed, surely you have not forgotten all those terrible reports about Mr. Wickham’s dishonourable actions and faulty character! ”

“Oh hush, Lizzy, do not be jealous! I know Mr. Wickham was your favourite once, but now he likes Lydia better! As for his actions, any young, handsome man — let alone an officer too — enjoys playing cards, drinking, and flirting with girls! You cannot hold that against him!”

“Mama, your memory is painfully inaccurate,” Elizabeth responded, enraged.

“Mr. Wickham ceased being my favourite once I discovered his true nature and horrible habits, and I know Lydia will be miserable if she marries him. And her unhappiness will be our fault for allowing her to go to Brighton alone. She was too young to even attend balls and parties, let alone be left unchaperoned.”

“It is nobody’s fault that she likes ball and parties! She is such a pretty, joyful girl! Everybody loves her! And that is why Mr. Wickham liked her more than you!”

Jane’s attempts to calm Elizabeth were more successful than those of Mrs. Gardiner trying to temper Mrs. Bennet, who insisted that indeed they must marry.

Mrs. Bennet was happy with the outcome and ready to share it with the world.

That afternoon, Mrs. Gardiner left Longbourn, and two more days of increasing chaos and griping turmoil followed whilst they waited for new reports.

When they least expected it, they received a most unwanted visit from Mr. Collins. Mrs. Bennet ran to her room, refusing to see him, and Kitty followed her.

The burden was left to Elizabeth, Jane, and Mary; the clergyman declared he had come to personally express his feelings — as well as Lady Catherine’s — about Lydia’s elopement, adding, “Dear cousin Elizabeth, I must warn you not to expect another invitation to visit Hunsford at any time soon. Her ladyship said she cannot be connected in any way with such scandalous circumstances, and she has requested the same from my dear Charlotte.”

“This is tragic news, Mr. Collins, but somehow I shall live with the disappointment.”

Mr. Collins clearly missed the irony and continued, “It is a tragedy indeed, caused by

your sister's reckless behaviour. By comparison, your sister's death would be a blessing. Even Lady Catherine agreed."

"Mr. Collins," Elizabeth replied angrily, "more than once I have disagreed with you and with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and this is just one of the many occasions. We are all happy that Lydia is safe and sound, and her happiness is our main concern. We thank you for the visit, but, considering the circumstances, we understand your willingness to leave immediately."

The clergyman looked puzzled and offended, and he attempted a reply, but in the end, he left with few further words.

After his departure, Elizabeth's fury turned into torment; she imagined Lady Catherine's response to the news of elopement.

The notion that her nephew would announce his intention to connect himself to the Bennet family seemed utterly impossible.

That evening, instead of the long-awaited letter from Mrs. Gardiner, Mr. Bennet unexpectedly returned home, causing an uproar among his family.

He barely spoke a few words, mentioned Lydia was well but as yet unmarried, promised he would provide more details later, and demanded privacy in his library.

"Lizzy, I wish to speak to you," he said. "Lizzy alone — no one else! Now, please!"

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

While Mrs. Bennet loudly opposed being dismissed, Elizabeth glanced at Jane, then followed her father into the library.

“Close the door and sit down,” he said, gesturing to a chair.

He filled a glass with brandy for himself, then sat too. “You look well, Lizzy. The journey to the North obviously suited you. It must have been quite special.”

“It was. I am sure Aunt and Uncle told you all the details. Unfortunately, it did not end well at all. Please tell me what news you have, Papa.”

“I shall. However, your uncle and aunt gave me some details, though not all. So I should ask, what news do you have, Lizzy?”

“Me? No news, Papa,” she replied, feeling her cheeks warming.

“Then I might be in a state of utter confusion, as I understand nothing. Until recently, I was certain that you and Mr. Wickham shared a mutual admiration, that you grieved over the tragedies in his life, and that both of you also shared a deep hatred and resentment for Mr. Darcy!”

Mr. Bennet was sitting in his favourite chair, sipping from his glass repeatedly, and Elizabeth knew he was making sport of her.

“Now, imagine your father’s shock, Lizzy, when I found out that Mr. Wickham suffered a sudden change of heart and his preference switched from my second daughter to my youngest, inducing him to elope with her.

Of course, there were also debts of over five thousand pounds and many creditors chasing him that added to his sudden desire to marry, but that is another discussion. ”

“Five thousand pounds, Papa?” Elizabeth cried.

“Now, now, let us not be hasty. Let me tell you how my sanity suffered another shock, even greater, when I found myself facing Mr. Darcy — of all men — joining me and my brother Gardiner and offering his assistance and his support in the quest for Wickham.”

“I understand your astonishment and confusion, Papa. But I must insist that I have no news to share, other than what you know.”

“Apparently, I know nothing. Your uncle told me you and Mr. Darcy are good friends, which would explain his generosity towards them — and towards me. When did your opinion change so dramatically? When did you move from hatred to friendship?”

“My opinion of both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham changed when I was in Kent, and I discovered pieces of evidence concerning their true characters. But at that time, Mr. Darcy and I had some horrible quarrels, and we separated more as enemies than friends. It was only when we met at Pemberley, by pure accident, that we resolved our past misunderstandings and improved our relationship.”

“Yes, Mr. Darcy told me something similar. And Colonel Fitzwilliam jested at his expense.”

“Papa, what are you saying? You met Colonel Fitzwilliam too? When? Was he not in Derbyshire?”

“Yes, I did. Apparently, he returned to London a few days ago, and we made his

acquaintance. A most excellent man and exceedingly pleasing company.”

“Papa, I do not understand! You sound like you spent your time in entertainment and amusement. Please be serious!”

“I am as serious as anyone. We had enough time between the day of the discovery to the day when Wickham agreed to marry Lydia and the settlement was signed. Which happened yesterday. What better entertainment than to laugh at my own folly?”

“You should have written to us more often! We were sick with worry, Papa.”

“So was I, my dear. But there was not much to write about. I am embarrassed to admit that my daughter is marrying such a scoundrel, with no honour and no shame. And I am beyond mortified to confess how little effort and trouble I put into resolving this dreadful situation.”

“Papa, what do you mean? Please speak in earnest. What happened? How did you find them? Will they marry?”

“Mr. Darcy discovered Wickham and Lydia the same evening he arrived in London. We were fortunate that he knew the scoundrel’s habits and a certain Mrs. Younge.

Regardless, he discovered them, we brought Lydia to your uncle’s house, and from that moment, we began to bargain with Wickham.

He came to Gracechurch Street and declared he had all those debts, creditors chasing him, and had to leave the regiment and was unemployed.

And he threatened that until those issues were resolved, he could not marry. ”

“What a despicable man!”

“Well, he was your favourite, you cannot deny it. For that, you may join me in my embarrassment for many years, Lizzy. We each have reason to be ashamed of ourselves.”

“I am ready to admit my foolishness, Papa. Please tell me more.”

“There is nothing else from me, Lizzy. Your uncle and I negotiated with Wickham for two days, then — for some strange reason which apparently you wish to keep secret from me — Mr. Darcy came to ask us if we were determined to allow Lydia to marry Wickham. We were rather determined to do the opposite, but Lydia would not have it, and the uproar she caused was beyond sense. So, we had to let her have her way — as always. And then, Mr. Darcy stepped in.”

“Stepped in? What do you mean?” Elizabeth asked, her heart beating irregularly while chills ran down her spine.

“Well, you know Lizzy, now I am in a dilemma. Mr. Darcy specifically asked me not to tell you, but I did not promise him, I did not give him my word, so I am not certain whether I should respect his request or share the entire story.”

“Papa! Please tell me! I have already misjudged and misunderstood Mr. Darcy so many times and have accused him of all sorts of horrible flaws that I need to know the whole truth! If he asked you not to tell me, it must be because he did not wish to influence my opinion of him. I am sure of that.”

“Of course that is the reason. It is not hard to guess.”

“So please tell me!”

“I shall fill another glass, so I can blame the brandy. My dear Lizzy, Mr. Darcy claimed it was his fault that Wickham’s character had not been known previously,

that he knew of Wickham's dishonourable habits and should have exposed him long ago.

He claimed it was his fault that Wickham deceived an innocent young lady, and he demanded the remedy should be his too.

Briefly, Mr. Darcy took care of everything.

He paid Wickham's debts, he purchased the licence — they should marry by the end of this week — and I believe he will purchase the scoundrel a commission in the North.

He mentioned that Colonel Fitzwilliam will assist him with that. ”

Elizabeth stared at her father in disbelief, listening but not daring to admit the meaning of his narration.

“This cannot be, Papa! You cannot accept that!” she said, breathless from distress.

“Well, my dear, there is little I can do since everything is settled. I was already talking to your uncle and discussing how we could put together a large enough sum to negotiate with Wickham. You may imagine how I felt paying a scoundrel to marry my daughter.”

“I cannot imagine something more dreadful, Papa...”

“Then Mr. Darcy — seemingly together with Colonel Fitzwilliam — talked to Wickham, and he informed us when everything was completed. He asked Wickham to sign some papers, so apparently now Wickham is indebted to him for probably his entire life and beyond. I argued with Mr. Darcy for quite a long time, and your uncle supported me. But in the end, since we were in his library and were drinking his fine

brandy, we were forced to surrender.”

Elizabeth’s astonishment was now complete, and a claw grasped her heart.

“Whose library, Papa?”

“Mr. Darcy’s, of course!”

“You were at Mr. Darcy’s house?”

“Of course. Did I not just mention that? A fine library that one could only dream of. My brother Gardiner told me that the Pemberley library is larger and richer, but I cannot imagine how that is possible.”

The mention of Pemberley’s library made Elizabeth quiver and her cheeks burn.

Recollections of her interlude with Mr. Darcy were painfully vivid, as well as her longing and grief.

Her father visiting Mr. Darcy’s townhouse was one more thing that she could never imagine and could hardly believe.

But any other feelings faded in comparison to her mortification over Mr. Darcy’s generosity.

Paying Mr. Wickham’s debts and purchasing a commission were certainly sums that could reach ten thousand pounds.

Her father and uncle together could hardly repay half such a sum.

And Mr. Wickham was not worth even a fraction of it, and yet, it would be given to

him.

“So, all is done? They will marry? Should we attend the wedding?” she mumbled.

“Dear Lord, no! Your uncle and aunt will be there, unfortunately for them. It is more consideration than Wickham deserves. As for Lydia, I hope she will be miserable enough with him that she will return home to be protected by her family. At least she will be married, which should mend her reputation — and ours. I was reflecting last night that we could save Mr. Darcy all the expense if we paid someone five hundred pounds to murder that low-life Wickham.”

“Papa, please be serious!”

“I am very serious! I hope you do not feel sorry for that man.”

“Not at all, I assure you. But I do not wish you to be exposed to any trouble because of him. Nor Mr. Darcy.”

“Wickham’s luck is that Mr. Darcy’s honour is greater than his anger. Otherwise, Wickham would have been long thrown in debtors’ prison with his legs broken, as he deserves.”

“Mr. Darcy is an excellent man. The best I know, Papa. I hope to have the chance to express my gratitude to him, though I would feel too ashamed to speak to him again.”

“Both of us have every reason to be ashamed, Lizzy. And our entire family. Not only because of the generosity he has shown to us but also because of all the horrible things we said about him.”

“Papa, do you know...did Mr. Darcy happen to mention his plans?” Elizabeth finally dared to ask.

“Not really,” Mr. Bennet answered, looking at her intently. “Of course, I asked for no details, only enquired when I should have the pleasure of meeting him again. He said he was required to travel, as he has much unfinished business to complete urgently.”

“Oh...” she whispered, her spirits quite low. She felt disappointed, though she knew she should feel grateful and content. But her longing to see him again was stronger than her reason.

Her heart told her that everything he had done was mostly for her.

Probably for his own conscience and sense of honour too, but also for her.

She knew there was no way for her or for her family to repay him.

No other way than to love him, even without seeing a glimpse of his return, it if ever happened.

Later that day, at dinner, Mr. Bennet finally told the family that Lydia would marry in a few days and that the couple was expected to move to the North, where Mr. Wickham had a new commission.

“Oh dear, what joy! What happiness!” Mrs. Bennet said with rapture. “My dear Lydia married at fifteen! What could be more wonderful? And poor Mr. Wickham will finally be happily married, despite being so cruelly treated by Mr. Darcy!”

After a brief silent exchange with Elizabeth, Mr. Bennet spoke to his wife in a severe tone.

“Mrs. Bennet, I shall only tell you once. The only reason why your daughter will be married soon is Mr. Darcy’s generosity and support.

Without him, your dear Wickham would never marry your dear Lydia.

He would abandon her, ruined forever, very likely with child and an eternal burden to our family.

So the next time you meet Mr. Darcy, please have the politeness to be silent and considerate and deeply grateful to him, since he saved all of us from misery!

As for Mr. Wickham, I honestly believe that Lydia's only chance of happiness is to become a widow at a very young age. ”

The statement was so powerful, so shocking, that Mrs. Bennet choked on her food and could not speak again for a while. Red-faced and struggling to breathe, she tried to respond to her husband but was silenced again.

For the next few days, the news of Lydia's marriage to Mr. Wickham was widely discussed around Meryton. Some pitied the Bennets, others envied them, but everybody had an opinion.

The newly married couple was expected to come to Longbourn, but at the last minute their plans changed, and they travelled directly to Newcastle, where Mr. Wickham's new regiment was stationed.

A week later, however, Lydia Bennet's wedding fell in people's interest, eclipsed by the news that Netherfield Park would be opened again, and Mr. Bingley would return to Hertfordshire soon.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

A month so full of events had never been known at Longbourn, nor in Meryton, and perhaps in the whole of Herefordshire.

Mr. Bennet called it a month of madness and protected his comfort by spending most of it in his library while his wife and daughters managed the entire affair.

After Lydia's wedding, news of Mr. Bingley's impending arrival threw the Bennets into another state of agitation.

Mrs. Bennet was constantly complaining of her nerves, and Jane was caught in a storm of emotions, as she confessed to Elizabeth, wondering about the reason for his return, who would join him, and how long he would stay.

Elizabeth was also deeply distressed—so torn between fears and hopes that she got almost no sleep.

There was no mention of Mr. Darcy's coming to stay with his friend, and she assumed that, if he did plan to do so, Mr. Gardiner or even her father would have been informed.

And yet, her heart raced at the thought of seeing him again soon.

Mr. Bingley finally arrived, and reports began to spread immediately. It was said he had come alone — news that thrilled some of the Bennets and grieved others. Mrs. Bennet pestered Mr. Bennet to call on him, but she achieved nothing but a dinner spoilt by quarrelling.

By fortune, the next day, Mr. Bingley called himself. He smiled less than on previous occasions and perhaps looked slightly paler and thinner. He spoke to Mrs. Bennet, but his gaze often travelled towards Jane, who was silent, flushed, and overwhelmed by emotions.

“We are happy to see you, Mr. Bingley,” Mrs. Bennet said.

“Everybody wondered what had happened when you did not return from London in November as you said you would. We thought we would never see you again! But now that you are here, you must remember that you promised you would come to dinner, and you still owe me that!”

“I would like that very much, Mrs. Bennet,” he replied with apparent unease.

“To come to dinner, I mean. Some...circumstances kept me in town...but I have only recently found out that Miss Bennet was in London for a few months last winter. If I had known, I would have certainly called on her.” Again, he looked at Jane, who seemed puzzled.

Elizabeth knew that Mr. Darcy had kept his promise and revealed the truth.

“I believed you knew of my presence, sir,” Jane whispered. “I visited Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst...”

“Yes, I know. That is something I also discovered only recently. I am deeply sorry for the misunderstandings...” Mr. Bingley replied.

“Well, it matters not, now that you are here! You should come to dinner soon!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bennet. Whenever you will have me, I would be happy to,” Mr. Bingley declared, giving much joy to at least two ladies in the room.

“Mr. Bingley, have you seen Mr. Darcy lately?” Elizabeth finally dared to enquire. “I know he expected you and your sisters to spend this month at Pemberley, but I assume your plans changed.”

“Yes, I saw Darcy about a week ago. And yes, our plans changed entirely, as I decided to return to Netherfield.”

“Did Mr. Darcy return to Pemberley? I hope he and his sister are in good health.”

“Miss Darcy is at Pemberley, with her companion, I was told. Darcy had some business in London as well as Kent. He has promised to visit me when it is complete.”

“Oh...” Elizabeth replied, feeling her cheeks burning and her heart racing.

“I hope Mr. Darcy will come to Netherfield. I look forward to seeing him again,” Mr. Bennet declared.

“Would you like to dine with us tonight, Mr. Bingley?” Mrs. Bennet insisted.

“I would like that very much, ma’am,” he said after a brief glance at Jane.

Mr. Bingley did come to dinner that evening, his eagerness causing him to arrive early, so he, Jane, and Elizabeth went for a walk in the garden. Less than half an hour was enough to prove to Elizabeth that the mutual admiration and affection between the two remained equally strong.

“Miss Bennet, I wish to tell you once again that I was kept in ignorance of your presence in town,” Mr. Bingley said.

“It was only a fortnight ago that I saw Darcy again, and he told me what happened.

Please know that I would have come to visit you...I cannot apologise enough for my sisters, who chose to be dishonest with you and with me.”

“There is no need to apologise, Mr. Bingley. As hurtful as it was, all is well now...”

“No, it is not. I am most upset with my sisters, and I shall not easily forgive their deception or my foolishness. And I would understand if you could not forgive me either.”

“Your presence now is more important than your past absence, Mr. Bingley. If there was anything to forgive, I have already forgotten it,” Jane answered.

The expression of heartfelt delight on Mr. Bingley’s face was enough for Elizabeth to understand that her sister’s happiness was a certainty — a hope which would turn into reality very soon.

During dinner, Mr. Bingley acted in the same pleasant manner and with the same apparent admiration for Jane as he had done several months ago.

He left Longbourn rather late, and the next day he called again, then two days later he accepted another dinner invitation. Less than a week after his return to Netherfield, Mr. Bingley proposed to Jane, who happily accepted him.

Their long-due engagement made Mrs. Bennet forget about Lydia and Mr. Wickham, who were barely mentioned. The people in Meryton who a month ago had gossiped about the Bennets’ misfortune, now envied them, giving Mrs. Bennet the greatest satisfaction.

Elizabeth was torn between joy and distress, as her thoughts were mostly occupied by Mr. Darcy.

She wondered where he was, what sort of business was keeping him so busy for such a long time, and she feared the result of his visit to Kent.

Now that the dreadful situation with Mr. Wickham was resolved with so much trouble on his part, he did not seem eager to meet her again.

She looked at the two drawings every day, wondering whether he would ever finish the second one, after all.

One evening, when the entire family was gathered for dinner at Longbourn, Mr. Bingley arrived with his large smile, and with his friend, Mr. Darcy. Without warning, without news, the master of Pemberley was finally — suddenly — there, in Longbourn's drawing room.

Elizabeth was so overwhelmed by the surprise, so overjoyed and so nervous, that she forgot to breathe, only pressed her hand over her heart to still its wild rhythm.

“Look who just arrived!” Mr. Bingley exclaimed. “He turned up an hour ago, and I cannot say how happy I am that he is finally here!”

“I apologise for my impromptu appearance,” Mr. Darcy said. “I told Bingley to inform you about my arrival tonight so I could call on you properly tomorrow, but he insisted on me joining him.”

“And we are so glad he did,” Mr. Bennet responded. “Mr. Darcy, you are most welcome, sir! I am very happy to see you.”

“Likewise, Mr. Bennet,” Mr. Darcy said, then he properly greeted the ladies. His eyes lingered upon Elizabeth a moment too long, and she barely found the strength to nod her head in acknowledgement.

Mrs. Bennet welcomed him with a tempered tone, different from her usual response, while Kitty and Mary seemed intimidated.

“We are very happy to have you here, Mr. Darcy,” Jane said with genuine warmth.

“Miss Bennet, allow me to congratulate you on your engagement. My friend is a fortunate man to be marrying the woman of his dreams.”

“Indeed, I am,” Mr. Bingley admitted as the party moved to the dinner table.

Each took their usual chairs, and Mr. Bennet invited Mr. Darcy to sit to his right — a place that usually belonged to Elizabeth. She moved down one chair, allowing the guest to sit between her and her father.

“I am sorry to take your place, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Darcy said in a low voice.

“I am not sorry at all, Mr. Darcy,” she responded. “Quite the opposite.”

She managed to speak and even smile a little, but she was far from comfortable.

He was there — finally — and she could not decide whether her happiness or anxiety was stronger.

He was close enough to her that she could feel the movements of his body, could inhale his scent, and could listen to his voice, even though he spoke mainly to her father.

Mr. Bennet was keen to engage Mr. Darcy in conversation, so most of the time, he was turned to his host. However, he kept glancing at Elizabeth.

He even filled her glass of water — a small, polite gesture, which increased

Elizabeth's nervousness, as she could sense the trace of his fingers on her glass.

She felt silly and embarrassed by her response, praying that the others would not notice her clumsiness.

As time passed, Elizabeth began to feel slightly more composed. She joined in the conversation and asked Mr. Darcy about his sister and the colonel. As he turned to her to respond, his arm touched hers. He smiled at her, and she quivered but smiled back.

After dinner, Mr. Bennet invited the gentlemen to the library for a drink and a cigar.

"I hope you will not be too disappointed with my library, Mr. Darcy. It is nothing to yours, and from what my brother Gardiner told me, I cannot even imagine how spectacular the library at Pemberley is."

"Utterly spectacular!" Mr. Bingley interjected. "The entire property is stunning — not even Matlock Park can compare to it."

"I shall not even deny that, as I am very proud of it," Mr. Darcy admitted. "But you should not worry about me being disappointed, Mr. Bennet. Your passion for books is enough for me to appreciate your library, regardless of its dimensions."

"I hope you will invite us to Pemberley after I am married. I am sure Jane would love it!" Mr. Bingley continued, and Elizabeth blushed.

"Of course I shall. It would be my pleasure to host you all," Mr. Darcy replied.

"Well, I rarely travel, but that is one invitation I would not refuse," Mr. Bennet said mostly in jest, leading the way while Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy followed him.

“Lizzy, do you believe Mr. Darcy was serious? Are we truly invited to Pemberley?” Mrs. Bennet asked in amazement when they were alone.

“We should not make any such plans, Mama,” Elizabeth said. “But I know Mr. Darcy is not a man to say things he does not mean. He might have been merely polite, though, as Papa and Mr. Bingley almost forced the invitation.”

“Wait until I tell my sister Phillips and Lady Lucas. I am sure Charlotte and Mr. Collins will never be invited to Pemberley!”

“Mama, we just discussed not making plans.”

“Yes, yes, do not worry. Well, Mr. Darcy is different from how I remember him, that is for certain. But he is still too scary to accept any invitation from him,” Mrs. Bennet said.

Elizabeth smiled. She wished to remind her mother that she had declared Mr. Darcy to be exceedingly handsome when they first saw him.

But it was not the time for such unpleasant memories from the past. That evening, he was just as she recollected—equally handsome and friendly.

And the touch of his arm on hers, though brief, had burnt her.

She needed to speak to him. To thank him.

If only they could find an opportunity for a private encounter, as had happened in the library at Pemberley.

The gentlemen soon returned, and Mr. Bingley hurried to sit next to Jane, striking up a conversation, which Mrs. Bennet soon interrupted.

Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bennet sat near each other, speaking more calmly and quietly. Elizabeth waited for a little while, then she breathed deeply and daringly moved to sit next to Mr. Darcy on the sofa. He seemed surprised, and her father looked at her, puzzled.

“Yes, Lizzy? May we help you with something?”

“No, Papa. Yes...I wish to thank Mr. Darcy for his help and to say how grateful—”

She kept her voice down, but Mr. Darcy’s countenance immediately changed.

“Miss Elizabeth, please know that no gratitude and no thanks are necessary,” he interrupted her.

“Besides, this is not a subject for after dinner, Lizzy. If you wish to discuss it, I am sure Mr. Darcy will indulge you on another day. For the moment, we were discussing hunting. Would you like to join us?”

“No, Papa. I have no interest in it.” She smiled. “I do wish to speak to Mr. Darcy whenever he has a little time to spare.”

She felt embarrassed to request a private meeting in front of her father, but she did not wish to lose the opportunity.

“I assume Bingley will call again tomorrow. If it is agreeable to you, I could keep him company.”

“Very agreeable,” Mr. Bennet responded on Elizabeth’s behalf.

“I shall ask him when he plans to call, so I shall be at home. Whenever the weather is good, I enjoy walking towards Oakham Mount before breakfast,” Elizabeth said.

She glanced at Mr. Darcy, and their eyes met, locking for an instant. She noticed his countenance had warmed again.

“Upon my word, Lizzy, surely you do not expect that Mr. Bingley might call before breakfast and find us in our nightgowns,” Mr. Bennet replied. Elizabeth smiled and so did Mr. Darcy, though for other reasons than Mr. Bennet assumed.

Elizabeth returned to sit near Jane, suddenly at peace. She knew he understood her meaning and would come to meet her on her walk. She had been bold, perhaps even improper, but she could not bear another day without talking to him in earnest.

It was almost midnight when the guests finally left, and the family retired for the night almost immediately. However, neither Jane nor Elizabeth could sleep. The former was too thrilled and had too much to say, while the latter was lost in her thoughts and did not dare say much.

Jane was eventually defeated by tiredness, but Elizabeth remained restless till dawn. Despite it being very early, she dressed and left the house at an hour that made Hill arch her eyebrow.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

As she walked at a fast pace, she tried to calm herself and be reasonable.

There was a chance that he had not understood her suggestion and might not come until, as he had told her father.

And if he did come, it would surely not be at that early hour.

She had enough time to compose herself and to prepare what she wished to say to him and to ask him.

At the edge of the Longbourn estate, she was about to turn when a voice calling to her made her feet still and her heart race.

“Miss Bennet!”

“Mr. Darcy...”

“I did not expect you to come so early,” he said.

“Likewise.”

“It seems we do not know each other well enough to have reasonable expectations,” he said.

“Sometimes surprises are pleasant, would you not agree?”

“I do agree, Miss Bennet. I cannot forget the most wonderful surprise when I saw you

at Pemberley.”

“My surprise was just the same when I saw you at Longbourn yesterday, sir.”

“But surely you must have known that I would come.”

“I did know...I hoped...but it had been a while, and I feared...”

“I had some business to complete before I came to speak to you again,” he said.

“Some business that was better resolved before rather than after.”

“I know what sort of business kept you busy, sir, and even if you refuse to listen, I must say it. I must thank you for your extraordinary generosity shown to my family and to my poor sister Lydia. The daunting and exhausting effort in finding them, the outrageous amount of money spent — it cannot ever be repaid.”

He looked at her intently, and she continued, “Please do not be upset. Papa told me, but I am the only one in the family who knows everything.”

“I did not expect Mr. Bennet would betray me so quickly,” Mr. Darcy said. “I might reconsider my invitation to Pemberley,” he added, and the trace of a smile in his voice softened his words.

“Papa felt guilty, blamed himself for everything, and he wished me to know the true extent of your involvement....and I believe he was curious. He could not understand why you would show such extraordinary generosity to someone who was almost a stranger to you. He asked me, but I could not tell him either. I have long waited to ask you, Mr. Darcy.”

The gentleman averted his eyes, while she looked at him, waiting anxiously. She witnessed his struggle until he finally found the words to voice it.

“Even if your father cannot understand, I hope you do, Miss Bennet. I hope you know that I did it mostly for you. As much as I was worried for your family and willing to punish Wickham, my strongest inducement was to relieve the sadness in your eyes. I did not want you to know, precisely because gratitude is not the feeling I hoped for and not the word I wished to hear from you.”

Now his gaze deepened into hers, and Elizabeth’s eyes moistened with tears.

She stepped closer as she replied, “Gratitude must be said and felt, Mr. Darcy. But it is only one of the many feelings and words I have for you. That is why I practically forced you to come here at this hour. I could wait no longer for this meeting, for this discussion.”

There was so much she could read on his handsome face that she was tempted to caress it. But she did not dare yet.

“And speaking of being forced, I am sorry that Mr. Bingley and Papa forced you to invite them to Pemberley. It was not fair to allow you no choice to refuse,” she tried to jest.

“Do not worry, it was quite fair, Miss Bennet. I am perfectly capable of refusing when I wish to. I gladly invited your father, but I could not be sure of what position he would have there.”

“Position?”

“Yes. Would he be a mere guest or something more? That depends entirely on you.”

“Oh! If the decision is entirely mine, it should be an easy one,” she answered. He was still hesitant, so she stretched out her hands and he took his. Her fingers rested in his strong and warm palms, trembling slightly.

“It is entirely yours, Miss Bennet. My decision was made long ago, and my feelings and desires are well known to you. I have just learnt to better repress them and be more cautious in the way I express them.”

“Please do not repress them, Mr. Darcy. There is no need to be cautious any longer.”

“Then...would you allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you, my dearest Elizabeth?”

“I have hoped for a long time that you would, Mr. Darcy. I never imagined I would use such words as ardent love, but now they sound so natural, so perfectly suited that I could easily repeat them.”

“Please do,” he whispered.

“Would you allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you, my beloved Fitzwilliam? Your name is another word that I love to say...”

Then she finally gathered the courage to free one of her hands from his tender grip and gently caress his face. He turned his head so he could place a kiss in her palm.

The kiss — though barely felt through her glove — stirred a warmth that spread through her. She shivered, although she felt hot, and lost herself in his arms when moments later his lips claimed hers, in the first kiss of her life, from the only man in the world she desired it from.

Although there was so much to talk about, so many questions to be asked and answered, neither spoke much after that. They were too intoxicated by their mutual happiness to be interested in anything else.

Mr. Darcy accompanied her for a while, then waited until she reached Longbourn's

garden and departed, with the promise of returning with Mr. Bingley.

Elizabeth entered the house, almost bouncing on her feet, earning her another puzzled glance from Hill. On impulse, she embraced the kind woman and hurried to her chamber, then changed her mind and went to seek out her father.

“Papa, do you remember when you asked me if I had any news?”

“Yes...what are you doing here so early, child?”

“I came to bring news, of course, Papa. About Mr. Darcy’s call later today — he will not come to speak to me, but to you.”

She paused, barely holding in her laughter in front her father’s puzzlement, which turned into astonishment as the revelation struck him.

“And regarding the invitation to Pemberley, you will need to ask permission from the future Mrs. Darcy too. So be careful when you are tempted to make sport of me, Papa, or you might not be allowed to see the library.”

Elizabeth finally laughed, while Mr. Bennet put down his book and glasses, standing up.

“Lizzy, my child, what are you saying?”

“I am saying that Mr. Darcy proposed to me, Papa! We met earlier, during my walk. He proposed to me — can you believe it?”

“I cannot, Lizzy. Truly not. And I cannot believe how happy you are. In fact, I am worried.”

“Worried? Why, Papa?”

“I am worried that you are too thrilled and that perhaps you are not accepting Mr. Darcy for the right reasons. Lizzy, let us speak calmly, child. I know you wish to be married like Jane, I know you enjoy being comfortable and safe, but Mr. Darcy is a man who expects the very best. His affection for you has been proved beyond doubt. If you do not feel as much affection as he does, you should take some time to think carefully. I do not want to see either you or him unhappy in a hasty and unwise marriage.”

Mr. Bennet spoke in all earnest, as Elizabeth had rarely heard him do. She embraced him and kissed his cheek.

“I have thought carefully, Papa, for a long time. You have no reason to worry. I have not said much about my love for him because we had no understanding, and I could not be certain of his intentions.”

“Is that so? Are you sure it was not because you were charmed by his impressive estate?”

“I was charmed, but I began to admire Mr. Darcy as soon as I learnt the truth about him and Mr. Wickham. It was long before we met at Pemberley. And when I saw his true nature, I fell in love so deeply that I almost lost my mind. If you do not believe me, know that I purposely went to look for Mr. Darcy in the middle of the night, in his library, more than once. And I hoped he would kiss me, which he did not, of course.”

At that, Mr. Bennet widened his eyes, opened his mouth, then finally said, “Get out of here, you shameless child! I shall pretend I did not hear that! Send Mr. Darcy to me as soon as he arrives. And please, for heaven’s sake, do not tell your mother — until at least the end of the day.”

Elizabeth embraced and kissed her father once again, then she ran out of the room and did not stop until she found Jane. She could tell her sister everything. Then she wrote a letter to Mrs. Gardiner — all before Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy finally called.

The month of madness continued at Longbourn throughout September, until the happy day of a double wedding.

From the moment she found out about Elizabeth's engagement to Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Bennet suffered an utter transformation in front of the gentleman.

Her words gained more sense, her manners more decorum, causing Mr. Bennet to reflect that Mr. Darcy had exerted more influence over the ladies in his family in one month than he had in a lifetime.

Mr. Darcy seemed to enjoy the Bennets' company very much, to the extent that even Kitty and Mary dared to speak when he was present. However, his preference was for Elizabeth's company, usually in long walks in the gardens.

That was the proper time to clear any misunderstandings left and to answer all remaining questions.

Elizabeth found that in the weeks he had spent in London, Mr. Darcy had settled matters with Mr. Wickham, who was now indebted to him to the sum of twelve thousand pounds.

"I told Wickham that I shall keep a close eye on him, and if I notice that he mistreats his wife, he will be immediately thrown into debtors' prison. The most difficult task was to tell Georgiana of the scoundrel's marriage to your sister."

“I imagine as much. How did she take the news of our engagement?”

“With surprise, like everyone else. But she — as well as my cousin Richard — were aware of my admiration for you. I informed them as soon as we met at Pemberley. They did not expect our betrothment to happen so soon, though. Lord and Lady Matlock were rather shocked, but they responded reasonably well in their second letter after the announcement.”

Elizabeth also found out that Mr. Darcy had travelled to Kent, making it clear to Lady Catherine — in person — that he might soon marry.

That had caused a terrible quarrel, which ended with Lady Catherine dismissing her nephew from any involvement in her affairs, which he had been managing for the last five years.

“I must confess I was not so angry with my aunt, as I expected her furious response,” Mr. Darcy said. “But your cousin Mr. Collins had the audacity to rebuke me for upsetting Lady Catherine! I almost lost my temper with him. Upon my word, I wish to see that man as rarely as I see Wickham.”

“In that, you have my entire family’s agreement.” Elizabeth smiled.

“And Lady Catherine is equally as undesirable to me unless she reconsiders her position. I shall always take care of Anne, though. I wish she had more determination to claim her rights. The estate belongs to her, and she should act as its mistress. When — if — she does, I shall be there to support her.”

“I am so proud of your kind and generous nature, my beloved Mr. Darcy! It warms my heart to see that you are always ready to support everyone. I can only hope that I shall be able to support you as you deserve.”

“I have never felt so strong as I have since your love became part of my life, my dearest future Mrs. Darcy.”

Such discussions and interludes always ended with brief kisses, which some of the Bennets noticed but wisely chose to overlook.

A week before the wedding, Netherfield was full again. Mr. Bingley’s sisters arrived, as well as Colonel Fitzwilliam, Miss Darcy, and Mrs. Annesley. The Gardiners also came to Longbourn, and Mrs. Gardiner claimed her leg was even better than before the accident.

A year after Mr. Bingley first leased Netherfield Park, Longbourn’s church hosted the long-awaited, much doubted — and still unbelieved for many — wedding of Mr. Darcy to Miss Elizabeth Bennet. By their side, were Mr. Bingley and Miss Jane Bennet.

In the front pew, Mrs. Bennet squeezed her husband’s arm, whispering, “God has been so good to us, Mr. Bennet.”

The gentleman briefly kissed his wife’s hand.

“Indeed, he has, Mrs. Bennet.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:06 am

Elizabeth smiled admiring the two drawings on the wall of her apartment. The second one had been finished in the first week of their marriage when they returned to Pemberley. Home.

Three years had passed since then, and her husband had drawn her many times, but none were as dear to Elizabeth as the those two.

It was almost noon, and she had come to her chamber to change and rest a little.

Pemberley was full, with her extended family as well as Colonel Fitzwilliam, his recent betrothed, and his brother the viscount with his wife and son.

Even Lydia — with her daughter Elinor — was in attendance.

Darcy had easily agreed to invite her, but Mr. Wickham was forever banned from Pemberley.

However, since Jane and Mr. Bingley had purchased an estate only thirty miles away, the scoundrel was often there, staying for weeks.

However, Mr. Wickham was not worthy of any distress. He was managing to carry out his duties to his regiment, and Lydia claimed she was exceedingly happy with him, which was as much as they could hope for.

Lady Catherine continued to hold her grudge; therefore Darcy rejected any suggestion of reconciliation. Mr. Bingley's sister finally benefited from Jane's forgiveness and was allowed into her brother's house, as well as Pemberley.

Mr. Bennet was visiting Pemberley for the fourth time, but it was only Mrs. Bennet's second visit. Eliaabeth's mother did not like to travel, but her father found the trouble of a long journey to Pemberley rather satisfying.

The Gardiners also visited Pemberley often, and Mrs. Gardiner had the pleasure of talking long rides in the phaeton around the park in every season.

On that specific occasion, there were so many guests at Pemberley that almost all the rooms were full.

The only room which was never occupied by anyone was the one on the corner, offered by Darcy to Elizabeth on her first visit to Pemberley.

That remained 'Elizabeth's room' and nobody else ever slept in it again.

Mr. and Mrs. Darcy often spent time there, and Mr. Darcy sometimes drew his wife's portrait in that room — sketches which nobody else ever saw.

Voices outside caught Elizabeth's attention. Jenny and Jacob — now ten years old — were playing with the Gardiners. Near them were several other younger children with their maids and governess, as well as some adults in the party.

A knock on the door made Elizabeth smile; she felt it was him.

Indeed, it was, but he was not alone. In his arms, laughing joyfully, was the young Master Alexander Bennet Darcy, who was almost two years old.

He was the image of his father — according to Mrs. Reynolds — with the witty, joyful disposition of his mother, as Darcy used to say with gratitude.

“My love, are you well?”

“I am — perfectly well,” she replied. “I just needed to change my gown after my ride.”

“Who would have believed you would be such an excellent rider, Mrs. Darcy?”

“How could I not be, with such an excellent teacher, Mr. Darcy? Of course, Georgiana is much better than me at riding, just as she is much better than you at art, as you said a long time ago. Come, let us go to our guests now.”

Elizabeth took her husband’s free arm, and the three of them left the room.

“I love you so much,” Darcy said.

“I know. I can feel your love every moment, as I hope you can feel mine,” she whispered, lifting her head so he could claim her lips.

“The colonel teased me that you must have fallen in love with me when you saw the beautiful grounds of Pemberley for the first time. I am not complaining about anything that made you love me, but I wonder if it is true,” Darcy asked in jest.

“It is not true,” she replied. “I fell in love with you the moment I saw you so improperly attired, holding the easel, and when the drawings fell from it. And speaking of that, I noticed you have not drawn so much lately.”

“I have no reason to draw so much, my love. My life is perfect, and my talent is not great enough to do it justice.”

She smiled adoringly, and his lips captured hers again, until their son opposed such closeness.

They were forced to separate, laughing together, and then both covered the child’s face with kisses.

It was obvious to both that, if they longed for privacy, they would have to use that perfect room on the corner more and more often.

The End