



Jane's Estate (The Bennets' Fortune #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: After the unfortunate death of both her parents, beautiful Jane Bennet finds herself the owner of Longbourn. Though she is only eighteen, she spends the next year learning how to run the estate and the house. In the following years, Jane grows in maturity and wisdom, doing all she can to raise her younger sisters to be elegant yet strong young ladies.

A little less than four years later, Mr. Bingley and his party enter the neighborhood. The gentleman is easily smitten with the kind and gentle Miss Bennet, but the lady is less entranced with him. Instead of encouraging him, she conspires with his sister to convince him to leave her alone.

A few months later, Jane takes her sisters to London for a couple of months. While there, she meets one of her uncle's business associates, Mr. Carruthers, and immediately falls under his spell. Meanwhile, Elizabeth runs across Mr. Darcy in Hyde Park, not just once but several times.

This story is mostly about Jane and how her greater responsibility and greater maturity helps her sisters, though there is plenty of attention given to Elizabeth and Darcy as well as Mary. As with all my books, there is little angst. It is a sweet story to help the reader unwind from life's stresses.

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From her earliest memories, Jane Bennet had been taught one thing by her mother. Technically, she had been taught many things, such as reading, arithmetic, accounts, sewing, and embroidery, but it was all in service to the one thing that was of the utmost importance.

Jane must enhance her natural beauty as much as possible and marry a man who was well off enough that he could take care of her family should her father unexpectedly pass away at an early age.

Jane didn't really understand this until she was in her early teen years, but she was a kind person and a good daughter, and she truly tried to do as her mother asked.

She spent a great deal of time working on her clothing, embroidering ribbons, and adjusting the fit to enhance her figure as much as possible without making her gowns too revealing. She learned as many fashionable ways to style her hair as she could find.

Jane even went so far as to consult the local apothecary about a recipe for facial cream that would help maintain her complexion. He gave her the recipe, but at the same time told her firmly that she had no need for such a thing. Despite his warning, obedient Jane made the cream and applied it diligently every morning and night.

Jane's favorite person in the world was her next younger sister, Elizabeth, who was two years younger. Though she eventually had three additional sisters, Elizabeth was by far the easiest to talk to and the most fun to be around.

When they were children, Elizabeth was an instigator, always leading Jane into

adventures. As they entered adulthood, and Jane began to attend local social events, Elizabeth gave Jane courage to face the responsibility her mother had placed on her shoulders.

There were three additional sisters in the Bennet family, but they were so much younger than Jane that she thought of them as children who needed her help rather than playmates and friends. They were Mary, who was four years younger than Jane, Kitty who was a year behind Mary, and Lydia who was two further years behind.

When Jane was ten years old, something occurred that changed her life forever. Mrs. Bennet's brother, Mr. Edward Gardiner, had been in London for most of Jane's life as he owned a warehouse in Cheapside. By the time Jane turned ten years old, he had become successful enough that he could afford a wife.

In 1799, Uncle Gardiner married Madeleine Brooks who was also a tradesman's daughter. Although her family had originally come from Derbyshire, they had been established in London for five years or more.

Aunt Gardiner took an immediate liking for her new nieces, especially the older two. At the time of her marriage, she was only eighteen years old, making her a mere eight years older than Jane. As Jane approached the age of her coming out, Aunt Gardiner became a role model for the young lady, and she taught Jane many manners and standards of behavior that her mother had neglected to mention.

Thus, Jane's behavior in society was very different from her mother's. She was universally polite and kind. She knew when to hold her tongue and what subjects were not suitable for which company. Even though she did occasionally flirt, at the behest of her mother, she was very gentle and subtle with it.

At age sixteen, while visiting Aunt Gardiner in London, Jane managed to attract the attention of an older gentleman. He was in his mid-thirties. As he had recently

become rather successful in his business, he was looking for a wife so that he could have sons to carry on his legacy.

He called on her and brought her flowers and small gifts. He even wrote a poem for her. Yet, just as he was on the cusp of proposing, he stopped appearing at Uncle Gardiner's home. When she next heard of him, he was engaged to another lady who was seven years older than Jane.

A similar thing happened twice when she was seventeen, once in London and once in their hometown of Meryton. Each time, Jane had been certain she would finally be able to fulfill her mother's greatest desire, but before that happened, the man in question found a different lady to marry.

Early in the year 1807, just after she turned eighteen years of age, Jane had yet another suitor. He was a pleasant young man who leased a nearby manor house named Netherfield.

The young man who leased it was a businessman from London by the name of Mr. Thompson. He was reasonably well off, but he had decided to spend the winter in the country, because he was tired of the crowds in the city.

Mr. Thompson got along well with all his neighbors, and he made many friends, but much of his time and thought was taken up with courting Jane, who was quickly on her way to falling in love with him. For Jane, it was a delightful time, for despite her previous courtships, she had never experienced falling in love.

That winter, however, tragedy struck. A flu epidemic swept through the country. It was so virulent that death claimed almost a tenth of its victims. The young man at Netherfield was felled by this vicious enemy. As were Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.

At first, the Bennet sisters were simply overwhelmed by their grief at their parents'

death as well as the enormous amount of illness and suffering surrounding them. Much of the work of notifying relatives and taking care of legal and financial matters fell upon the shoulders of Aunt and Uncle Phillips.

Mrs. Phillips was Mrs. Bennet's sister, and Mr. Phillips was one of two solicitors in Meryton. He had handled all of Mr. Bennet's legal matters since before Mr. Bennet married and was very familiar with Mr. Bennet's will.

The estate of Longbourn where the Bennet family lived had an entail on it, established by Mr. Bennet's great-grandfather. According to the entail Longbourn could not be broken up and sold, nor could it be mortgaged. Additionally, it could only be inherited by male heirs of the family, though they did not have to be descended from the male line.

The only known male member of the Bennet family was a man named Mr. Collins, who Mr. Bennet had always claimed was an intemperate and illiterate man. His last known address was in Kent, though no one knew how he supported himself.

Mr. Phillips sent several letters to Mr. Collins, but the letters were returned citing that the recipient did not accept them. After three attempts, he sent an express, hoping that a letter delivered in person would be accepted. This time he got an answer.

Mr. Collins and Mr. Collins' son had died the previous year from smallpox.

Mr. Phillips hired an investigator from London to search for any unknown male descendants of the Bennet family, but after three months it was determined that none existed. Thus, the entail on Longbourn was ended.

When Mr. Bennet made his will, the entail hung heavy over his head, and he was reluctant to include any provisions for what would take place should it end before he died. Mr. Phillips, however, was an excellent solicitor who made a habit of legally

covering all eventualities, and he convinced Mr. Bennet to name an heir.

Bennet did name an heir, and at the behest of Mr. Phillips also named a guardian of said heir should they be underage. The guardian was originally intended to be Mr. Phillips, but he declined. Instead, the guardian named in the will was Mr. Gardiner. Mr. Phillips did accept the position of backup guardian should Mr. Gardiner not be available.

The heir of Longbourn was Jane Bennet.

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Eighteen-year-old Jane Bennet knew nothing about how to manage an estate, nor was she adept at dealing with the steward who treated her like a fine china doll instead of a living, breathing, person with a mind of her own.

Some of her concerns were alleviated by the fact that Uncle Gardiner and his family came to live at Longbourn shortly after Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's death. Uncle Gardiner didn't know any more than Jane how to manage an estate, but at least he was a man, and the steward treated him with respect. Because of this, he was able to learn a great deal, and he passed on all this new information to Jane.

Jane learned a great deal in that first year about how to manage an estate, but she also learned a few tricks to gaining more respect.

The first trick she learned was to adjust her appearance. Her fine clothes and delicately styled hair gave off the impression that she was someone who needed help with everything, and in a way that was accurate. The clothes Jane was used to wearing could not be put on without the help of a maid, because the buttons went all the way down the back, and her hairstyles also often needed assistance.

Once she realized this was an issue, Jane began making adjustments. The easiest change to make was to her hairstyle. She began wearing simple buns with no fringe and no decorations. They weren't quite the same as the braided buns worn by farmer's wives and shopkeepers, but they gave off a similar impression. She also began gradually changing her day dresses to be more severe and with less adornment.

Naturally, she only dressed so plainly during the day. When she changed for dinner, she had finer dresses and styled her hair much the same way as her sisters.

Another trick Jane learned in that first year was to speak loudly, firmly, and at a lower pitch when she wanted to be heard and understood. This was quite difficult for Jane, who was by nature rather mild and submissive. Her voice had always been soft and rather high pitched. Uncle Gardiner, who made his living by forcing people to respect him, taught her to lower her voice and speak with more authority.

Aunt Gardiner was particularly helpful to Jane in that first year. By that time, she had been married to Mr. Gardiner for eight years and, she had learned how to garner respect from almost any class or gender. She helped Jane learn to balance being feminine with being respected.

A year after Mr. and Mrs. Bennet passed away, Mr. Gardiner was required to move back to London. He had tried to manage his business remotely with only occasional trips to visit in person, but it had not worked out very well.

Before he left, Mr. Gardiner did two things to ensure the safety and well-being of his nieces. The first was that he fired the steward. Despite a year in her company, Longbourn's steward had not learned to respect Jane's ability to know her own mind. Mr. Gardiner did not trust the man with the safety or stability of Longbourn as long as he had that attitude.

The second thing he did was to hire an additional footman for the ladies' protection. One of his tasks was to accompany Jane when she went round to collect the rents or to interact in any way with the tenants. David, the new footman, was the son of a blacksmith and had been trained to that profession. He was over six feet tall with thick, muscular arms. Additionally, he was an effective boxer and fighter. Young David required fifty percent more pay than a typical footman because of the career he was giving up, but both Mr. Gardiner and Jane always felt it was worth it.

The last major change was made through a joint decision between Uncle Gardiner and Jane.

Uncle Gardiner was the guardian for all five of his nieces, however, Jane felt responsible for her sisters as well. Additionally, she knew the coffers of Longbourn were much more able to support her sisters than Mr. Gardiner's income, especially since it had declined in the last year while he was at Longbourn.

Thus, Jane suggested that she pay to send Lydia and Kitty off to school. She also requested that Elizabeth and Mary be allowed to stay at Longbourn. Uncle Gardiner agreed, but he had a few conditions to add. First, he agreed to split the cost of the younger girls' education with Jane. Second, Elizabeth and Mary could stay behind on the condition that a companion be hired for the older three Bennets.

The companion's purpose was two-fold. First, an older matron in the home would lend respectability to the young unmarried ladies. Second, the right companion could help Mary and Elizabeth polish their social skills.

When Aunt and Uncle Gardiner left Longbourn with their two children in tow, they also took with them Kitty and Lydia, ages 14 and 12 respectively, and dropped them off at a ladies' seminary in London.

Three weeks later, Mrs. Wilson arrived on the recommendation of Uncle Gardiner. Jane interviewed her as a final precaution, but since the middle-aged lady seemed completely respectable and kind, she was hired on the spot.

With so many fewer mouths to feed, Jane thought it might be time to begin to economize. She had already saved some money over the last year with the guidance of Uncle Gardiner, but Jane was determined to increase her sisters' dowries to an amount more appropriate to their station. So, she began to examine the budget in earnest

In early spring, 1808, shortly after Mrs. Wilson had joined the household, Jane and Elizabeth sat down in the study that used to be Mr. Bennet's bookroom but was now

Jane's office.

"Lizzy," said Jane, "I asked you in here to see if you could help me figure out where we can safely save money in the household budget. I feel like there should be quite a bit of room to economize without compromising comfort simply because there are fewer people in the house now."

Elizabeth seemed surprised. "I am certain you are correct, Jane, but I don't see why you need my help. You and Uncle Gardiner have managed quite well in the past year, and you know much more about budgeting than I."

"That may be so," responded Jane, "but another mind on this problem would be helpful if only to ensure that I don't cut out everyone's comforts in my zeal to save money."

"Why would you need to be so zealous?" asked Elizabeth. "I didn't think we were in debt. What would you be using the extra money for?"

"I would like to increase the dowries for you and my other sisters. Right now, you each have equal shares of Mama's five thousand pounds, but considering you were raised on an estate that brings in two thousand pounds, you should have dowries of between four and six thousand. I am certain I can't raise that much money in the short time I have, but I would like to increase them as much as I can. Even if I can only manage three thousand each, that is much more respectable than what you have."

Elizabeth said, "Jane, that is not your responsibility. That was our parents' responsibility, which they failed to uphold, but just because they failed does not mean you must attempt it. Longbourn is yours now, even if it's not official for another two years. You should just do what you like with it."

Jane smiled. "You may be right Elizabeth, but it just so happens that what I would

like to do is save up dowries for my sisters. I honestly can't think of anything I would like more than that. I am hoping that by making the attempt, I can provide a small independence for any of our sisters who do not marry, thereby removing the pressure to marry simply for the sake of security."

Jane remembered all the pressure Mrs. Bennet had put on her shoulders for that very reason, and she didn't want any of her sisters to feel that way.

"Well, if that is what you wish, I will be happy to help," said Elizabeth.

The two sisters dove right into the budget and immediately found some categories that were easy to economize. The food budget would naturally get somewhat smaller since there were fewer mouths to feed, and they could reduce it even further by being a bit more dependent on their own garden for vegetables and fruits.

The coal bill and cost of candles would also naturally decrease, because fewer rooms would be in use, though even empty rooms needed a fire lit occasionally to prevent it from getting damp.

They also realized they could let a few of the servants go. They really didn't need quite that many with only a third of the people left in the house as there had been. Jane didn't wish to make them suddenly unemployed, though, so she resolved to find them good positions in the neighborhood where possible.

There were economies they could make in their dress without sacrificing their status, but the biggest savings came from the simple fact that they would not be doing much entertaining. It would not be proper for a group of unmarried ladies to throw a dinner party that included gentlemen, so they would be limited to simply inviting their female neighbors for tea.

When the sisters were done, they had reduced Longbourn's annual budget by seven

hundred fifty pounds per year without sacrificing any real comfort or status. Elizabeth thought they could have done more, but Jane was reluctant to make anyone even the slightest bit uncomfortable, so Elizabeth didn't push. It was Jane's money, after all.

When they were done, Elizabeth asked, "You really don't mind spending so much money giving shelter, food, and clothing to your sisters even though we are legally Uncle Gardiner's responsibility?"

Jane replied, "Legality has nothing to do with it. Longbourn is your home, and it always will be for as long as you need it. It is only right that its income provides you with what you need." Jane gave her sister a big hug, and they headed back to the drawing room where Mrs. Wilson and Mary were sitting.

As the next three years passed, Mrs. Wilson turned out to be an excellent companion, offering friendly conversation and company. She was happy to offer advice when asked for it, but she was never pushy. She had the most influence on Mary, who had been far too prone to live her life solely by the principles she found in scripture and in religious texts.

Mrs. Wilson quickly realized that the reason Mary found comfort in such literature was that the young lady desperately wished that the world and everyone in it was easier to understand. She sought understanding through that literature which she believed to be the highest authority, and she came away with the belief that everything and everyone was either right or wrong, good or evil.

Mrs. Wilson countered such thinking by gradually introducing Mary to more vague ideas and principles that could not be universally applied, such as questions about how to deal with a starving child who stole a loaf of bread. She also gradually helped Mary to have more patience and forgiveness when it came to others' weaknesses and foibles.

Mary took these ideas and began to search for books that explored them further. She began to develop a love for philosophy, and in her search for greater understanding of history's greatest philosophers, she began to teach herself Latin and Greek. Since philosophy was not one of Mrs. Wilson's strong subjects, Mary studied on her own, and in the process developed a very unique way of looking at humanity and the world in which she lived.

By the time Mary had turned eighteen, she was, in appearance, much the same as her two older sisters, though her face and complexion were not quite as vibrant as Elizabeth's nor as perfect as Jane's. In behavior, she was still mostly quiet and serious, but she had become more comfortable around people and their imperfections, though she was still not entirely comfortable at large social gatherings.

As Mary was improving, so too were Kitty and Lydia. They had been sent to the same school, but since they were two years apart, they were not constantly together. Thus, they had each made many other friends. They learned manners, accomplishments, and decorum both from their teachers and their friends.

Kitty discovered she had a talent for the harp, though she was terrible at the pianoforte. Lydia discovered a surprising passion for painting. Most days, it was the only thing that could get the young lady to sit still, though she gradually learned to be a bit more sedate.

Kitty and Lydia came home to Longbourn each summer, and each time their sisters were surprised at how much they had grown and improved.

The summer of 1811, just after Kitty had turned seventeen and Mary had turned eighteen, Kitty was taken out of school, and she came out into her local society, the area around a town called Meryton which was only a mile from Longbourn. Lydia, at age fifteen, was deemed a bit too young for such a step, so despite complaints, she was sent back to school when the summer was over.

The most significant event in the three years following Uncle Gardiner's departure, however, came at the end of December, 1810. Jane turned twenty-one and came into full ownership of Longbourn. She was also made co-guardian of her sisters at that time as well, as a way of legitimizing her position as caretaker for them.

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In the middle of September 1811, rumor circulated Meryton that Netherfield had been let and the new occupant was to take possession by the end of the month. Netherfield was a large manor house with a large, attached park, including some hunting grounds, but the estate lands that used to belong to it had been sold off to surrounding estates and to individual farmers.

It was the largest house in the area and one of only two houses with a dedicated ballroom, so no matter who leased the place, it was always news. In this instance, however, the news was even better, for the leaseholder was young, single, and of large fortune.

Mrs. Phillips, who quite doted on her nieces, since she was unable to have children of her own, was the first to tell the sisters at Longbourn.

“To think, my dears, that he might fall in love with one of you and marry you,” said Mrs. Phillips. To Jane’s ear, she sounded much like Mama had once sounded. The thought was both nostalgic and painful, because while it reminded her of her lost mother, it also reminded her of all her failed attempts at attracting a husband.

Attempting to be diplomatic, Jane said, “He might, but it is just as likely, if not more, that he will join our society for a few months then scamper off back to London in the winter.”

Kitty piped up, “Jane, why do you have to be a spoilsport? I think it would be most romantic to fall in love with such a man.”

“Jane is right,” said Mary. “I think the most we should hope from the man is that he

will make a good neighbor. At the very least it will be nice to add a new face to the neighborhood.”

“There is no harm in hoping for the best,” said Elizabeth. “I think I am with Kitty on this one, although I expect he will fall in love with Jane at first sight since she is miles prettier than any other lady here.”

“I certainly hope not,” popped out of Jane’s mouth before she could prevent it. Attempting to correct her sudden statement to be more genteel, she said, “I mean I would hope he was not the kind of man prone to suddenly falling in love, since that kind of man is also prone to falling out of love.”

Mrs. Wilson nodded her head in agreement, but she said nothing.

By the time Mr. Bingley moved into Netherfield, Jane was quite tired of hearing about him. Every mother of an unmarried lady hoped he would fall in love with her daughter. Every man hoped he would be an avid sportsman. Every young lady hoped he loved to dance and secretly harbored a desire to attract his attention, even though no one yet knew his personality or even if he was tolerably handsome.

Sir William Lucas was one of the first gentlemen to call on their new neighbor. Sir William was a newly made knight who had made it his sole purpose in life to be civil to all the world. His frequent parties, though not lavish, were often the most pleasant of any in the neighborhood.

Sir William’s oldest daughter, Charlotte, was a good friend to both Jane and Elizabeth, and she arrived at Longbourn the day after Sir William’s visit to Netherfield to share what little information she had received from her father.

Charlotte was greeted with great anticipation by Kitty and Elizabeth and with kindness by Jane. Mary was practicing piano at the time, and since she had expressed

no interest in Mr. Bingley, Jane thought it unnecessary to disturb her.

Once the ladies were settled, Elizabeth asked, "So, what have you discovered about our newest neighbor?"

"According to my father, he is pleasant enough to look at, though I don't know Papa can be counted on to measure how handsome he really is. Papa also said that Mr. Bingley seemed quite pleasant, and he likes to hunt," said Charlotte.

Kitty asked, "Does he like to dance? I hope he does."

Charlotte smiled. "I am afraid Papa did not ask him if he likes to dance, but he did invite Mr. Bingley to the assembly which will be held in a few weeks. Mr. Bingley said he has some business in London, but he expects to be back in time to attend."

"Did he say what kind of business?" asked Elizabeth. "It is rather surprising that he would go back to London so soon after moving here."

"I assume he is going to London to bring a party of friends or relatives. It would be very odd, after all, for a single gentleman to spend an entire season in such a big, isolated house all by himself," replied Charlotte.

Jane said, "You assume, but you do not know?"

Charlotte shook her head. "I don't know for certain. I only assume so, because that is what makes the most sense."

"I hope he brings plenty of gentlemen back with him," said Kitty. "It would be pleasant if, for once, we had more gentlemen than ladies at one of our assemblies."

"It would be pleasant, indeed," said Elizabeth. "But that is precisely why I expect Mr.

Bingley to bring more ladies than gentlemen. Such would be consistent with our lot in life.” She laughed.

Jane did love to hear Elizabeth laugh, but she sometimes thought that Elizabeth’s constant search for humor in life led her to make snap judgments simply for the sake of having something to laugh at.

Jane was not surprised a few days later to hear a rumor that Mr. Bingley had gone to town to fetch a group of friends that consisted of twelve ladies and seven gentlemen. After all, she had seen and heard the birth of that rumor in person.

Upon seeing Netherfield for the first time, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy was pleased. The house seemed well-built and reasonably elegant, and it was surrounded by extensive grounds. There was even a small, forested area suitable for hunting birds and rabbits.

Darcy enjoyed hunting, but he enjoyed riding his horse even more. The grounds seemed to offer plenty of space for exercising his horse, and the roads in the area were smooth and straight enough to safely get a good gallop going.

For the first time, Darcy felt completely at peace with his decision to accompany Bingley to this area.

When Bingley had first invited him, Darcy had hesitated to accept. He wasn’t particularly fond of going to new places and interacting with people he didn’t know. Logically, he realized that never meeting new people or going to new places would be stultifying, but it didn’t change his natural dislike.

Darcy also wasn’t overly fond of Bingley’s younger sister, Caroline. She was pleasant enough most of the time, but lately she had taken it into her head that Darcy’s friendship with Bingley was merely there to disguise his courtship of her, a supposition that patently untrue since she was the last lady he would choose to court.

Darcy had taken great pains to avoid the lady, trying to dislodge such an assumption from her head, but so far, he had not been successful. She was bound to make a nuisance of herself while Darcy lived under the same roof as her.

When Darcy had hesitated at Bingley's invitation, however, Bingley had pointed out that it was the only way he could pay back all the generous invitations to Pemberley that he had received from Darcy. At this, Darcy caved in. He would not wish for his friend to feel indebted to him.

Now, standing in front of Netherfield, Darcy had a feeling of hope that the visit would not be as bad as he had feared.

It was as bad as Darcy had feared, perhaps even worse. The very day they all arrived at Netherfield, Bingley suddenly remembered he had been invited to the local assembly, which was to be held that very evening. With a combination of charm, wheedling, and pure willpower, Bingley insisted that they all attend. In the end, Bingley got his wish.

Thus, that evening, Darcy, Bingley, Miss Bingley, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Hurst, all piled back in the coach and made their way into the town of Meryton to join in the local celebration.

Darcy had been to so many balls and parties in London, always hosted by well-mannered, elegant people, that he had forgotten what a country assembly was like. Walking into the assembly room was like walking into a wall of sound and smell. After a few steps, he could go no further. His senses were overwhelmed.

It took maybe a minute or two to become accustomed enough to be able to make sense of what he was seeing. Dozens of ladies, each wearing their finest gowns, swarmed the room in little clusters. Instead of speaking in low, cultured tones, many of the ladies were loud and sometimes rather crude. There were about half as many

men as ladies, but they were easy to spot with their darker clothing.

Darcy assumed the ladies were wearing their finest simply based on the fact that they were at an assembly, but upon examining some of the dresses, he realized that many of them were so simple they would not even be appropriate gardening wear for most of the ladies of his acquaintance.

When Darcy turned his attention back to his party, an older gentleman was greeting and bowing to Bingley, and Bingley introduced him to the rest of the group as Sir William Lucas. Sir William led the group around, introducing them to various families in the area.

The first group Sir William introduced them to was his own family. Apparently as a gesture of gratitude, Bingley asked the gentleman's oldest daughter to dance the first dance with him. Miss Lucas was on the older side, just past the first blush of youth, likely in the second half of her third decade.

There were a few more groups to be introduced, mostly older married couples. After a couple of these, Darcy tired of the exercise and left Bingley and his sisters to the attention of Sir William. Darcy had no need to be further introduced, for he had no intention of dancing with anyone other than Bingley's sisters, not that he had a particular desire to dance with Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst, but it would be the polite thing to do.

Darcy followed through with his intentions. He did not dance the first dance. He danced the second with Mrs. Hurst and the third with Miss Bingley. Despite the fact that it should have been obvious that he was only dancing with Miss Bingley out of politeness, she kept batting her eyelashes and making coy remarks as if he had singled her out for both the first and supper dances.

When Miss Bingley's interminable dance was finally over, Darcy headed for the

edges of the room and proceeded to simply stand there, watching the proceedings and praying to God that they ended soon.

He kept a close eye on Miss Bingley as he stood there, however. Any time she appeared as if she was trying to make her way toward him, he sidled away and kept just out of reach. Fortunately, she was dancing with the local men most of the evening, so it wasn't a problem often.

At one point, about two thirds of the way through the evening, Bingley interrupted his dance to come speak to Darcy. Apparently, Bingley had been enjoying himself too much and could no longer stand to see Darcy not as happy as he was. Bingley insisted Darcy join the dance, but Darcy would have none of it.

He tried to shake his friend off by declaring there was no one suitable to dance with, but Bingley had the temerity to offer to introduce him to a young lady who was sitting down behind him. Darcy took one look at the lady, taking in the simplicity of her clothes, her less than perfect face, and the fact that she was sitting down instead of dancing.

He said, "I suppose she is tolerable, but I'd rather not dance with her. There must be a reason she has not been claimed as a partner by someone else. Look, Bingley. You are wasting your time here. Go back to your partner."

Bingley retreated, and Darcy was grateful.

When the evening was over and the group traveled back to Netherfield, Miss Bingley's complaints about the assembly, the neighborhood, and the people in it flowed loud and long. While Darcy did not approve of the lady complaining so much out loud, he could not disagree with her sentiments.

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The day after the assembly, Charlotte visited Longbourn once again to discuss the events of the previous evening with the Bennet sisters. There was a great deal of discussion about who danced with whom and who presented themselves well versus who made a fool of themselves.

At one point, Charlotte said, "Speaking of Mr. Bingley, I noticed he asked you to dance twice, Jane."

"He did," Jane answered placidly.

Kitty clapped her hands and said, "It is just as Lizzy said. Mr. Bingley has fallen in love with you at first sight."

"Asking for a second dance does not automatically mean he is in love, Kitty," said Jane.

"Very well," said Kitty. "I suppose you are correct. But I would still like to know what you thought of him."

"I imagine I thought the same as everyone else," said Jane. "He was friendly and talkative, and I suppose he is handsome. One could even say he is just what a young man ought to be."

"Which makes him rather unique," piped up Elizabeth. "Young men are so seldom what they ought to be."

"That is rather cynical, even for you Lizzy," said Jane. "What happened to make you

feel so negatively about men?”

Elizabeth grimaced but didn't answer.

Charlotte said, “I believe she is feeling rather put out with Mr. Bingley's friend, Mr. Darcy. He insulted her last night, though when she told me about it, she was laughing.”

Elizabeth looked away from the group and said in a forced lighthearted tone, “Well, you must admit that some stranger coming into our neighborhood and instantly denigrating everyone and everything he sees is rather ridiculous. He seems to think that unless someone is wealthy or has noble connections, they must be worthless. That attitude simply makes him appear foolish, so in the end he only hurt himself.”

Jane could tell that, despite her words and her lighthearted tone, Elizabeth was genuinely hurting. Either Mr. Darcy had said something truly hurtful, or Elizabeth had been attracted to the man making the sting of his words ten times worse.

“What did he say?” asked Jane.

Elizabeth shrugged. “I was sitting down, because there weren't enough partners to go round. Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy were standing nearby when Mr. Bingley offered to introduce me to Mr. Darcy in an effort to get Mr. Darcy to dance. He said I was tolerable, but he would rather not dance with me, because there must be a reason why no man had already claimed a dance with me.”

Jane, Charlotte, Kitty, and Mary all gasped. Mary was the first to recover, and she said, “Does the man not know how to count? Obviously, there were about twice as many women as men in that room. He even added to the problem himself by not dancing with anyone but the ladies of his own party.”

The room then exploded with ladies attempting to console Elizabeth or condemn Mr.

Darcy.

When the conversation was over and Charlotte departed, Kitty and Mary went to practice a piano harp duet they were working on. Jane turned to Elizabeth and pulled her into a hug. She said, "I am so sorry Mr. Darcy hurt you."

When Jane let her sister go, she was surprised to see tears in her brave sister's eyes. Elizabeth said, "Honestly, Jane, I don't know why his insult hurt so much.