



Mr Darcy's Worth: Three Pride and Prejudice Variations

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Category: Historical

Description: If Mrs Bennet were asked about Mr Darcy's worth, she would no doubt declare it to be ten thousand pounds a year—and delight in imagining all the advantages such an income would bring her family.

But I believe Mr Darcy is worth far more than any figure written into a settlement or estate ledger. That belief inspired me to write these novellas, each exploring a different facet of the master of Pemberley: his sense of duty, his quiet strength, his vulnerability, and the deeper worth that Elizabeth Bennet learns to see.

Please note: this is not a new novel but a collection of three previously published novellas on Amazon Kindle, gathered here for readers who wish to enjoy them in a single volume.

Mr. Darcy's Quiet Strength – A sweet, romantic story set mostly in London after the Netherfield ball. Determined to flee from his feelings for Elizabeth, Darcy finds himself unable to escape the surprising meetings and coincidences that force him to choose between pride and the possibility of love.

Mr. Darcy's Devotion – A tale of steadfast love and duty set between Lady Catherine's visit to Longbourn and the Bingleys' wedding. Darcy must navigate scandal, family obligations, and his own fears of rejection whilst hoping for a second chance with Elizabeth.

Who Are You, Mr Darcy? – A gentle reimagining of their time in Kent, where Elizabeth's encounters with Darcy begin to challenge all her harsh judgments. Observing unexpected kindness and genuine affection, she is forced to ask herself who he truly is—and whether she has been wrong about him all along.

Each of these novellas was warmly received when first published on its own. I've brought them together here so readers can enjoy, in one collection, three stories that aim to reveal Mr Darcy's true worth.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Mr. Darcy's Quiet Strength

“There is nothing that makes me happier than talking to you, Mother.”

“It saddens me to hear that, my darling. Even though I treasure every moment I spend with you, I would like to see many other things make you happy, Fitzwilliam. You are so young, yet there is rarely a smile on your handsome face. I sometimes wonder whether there is something troubling you.”

“I shall smile more when I see you regaining your strength, Mother. When I see you healthy, nothing will trouble me.”

The woman took the boy's hand and caressed it, then kissed it.

“My dearest, you are a young man now. We both know I shall not recover. My only hope is to have a little more time to see Georgiana grow up. She is only three years old.”

“I pray you will see her grow up, Mother,” the boy said, his voice heavy with tears. “Papa said he will engage more doctors, and the medicine from India should arrive soon. We will find a way!”

“I shall do whatever the doctors advise me if it will give me a little more time with you, Fitzwilliam. But if things worsen, I wish you not to suffer too much for me, my son. I have been happier than most people are in much longer lives. Having you as my son has been the greatest blessing one can hope for.”

The young man lowered his head to conceal his tears, his hand still clasped in his mother's.

"Fitzwilliam, there is something of great importance I wish to ask you. I know it might be unfair, that it might be selfish of me, and that it might burden you even more..."

"You may ask me anything, Mother!"

"You have a sharp mind, a strong character, and a kind heart, Fitzwilliam. Your strength — though mostly quiet — is deeper and more significant than that of many gentlemen I know. I am begging you to use that strength to help your father and to support your sister when I am gone. There is no better man than your father, nor more loving husband...or better landlord."

"That is true, Mother."

"But he has changed in recent years, since my illness. His goodness and loyalty to me make him feel lost, and his strengths are slowly diminishing. It pains me to see him like this, as he is still a young man. He should live happily even when I am gone."

"None of us will live happily if you are gone, Mother."

"Oh, do not say that, silly boy! In fact, you must promise me you will make yourself a very happy life! You must find a woman worthy of you. A woman I could love because she loves you. A woman you admire and who makes your heart race. You have everything you need, Fitzwilliam, and there are so few things you lack. So find a woman who will complete what is missing in your life."

"Finding a woman is the last thing in the world that concerns me now, Mother. But I promise I shall not forget your words. I still pray you will have the chance to grant

her your approval when the time comes.”

“Then — do you promise that you will take care of your father and sister?”

“I promise! But Papa insists that I go to Cambridge, although I should better stay home and help him with his duties.”

“Your father is right, as always. You should complete your education before you take all those responsibilities on your shoulders. The burden will not be easy.”

“Nothing related to our family would be a burden, Mother. I am proud and grateful to follow in my father’s footsteps.”

“I know you are, my son. And speaking of pride,” she added, smiling at him, “there are already some people who call you proud, and there will be many in the future if your manners remain the same.”

“Do you disapprove of my manners, Mother?”

“Oh no, not at all! I would not change a single thing about you! I just wish you to be aware that your serious and reserved manners make you different from other young men your age, especially those like your cousin Geoffrey or George Wickham, whose nature is open and engaging. Some people might call you proud, even arrogant and haughty.”

“I cannot be concerned with the opinion of people who do not know me. But Father seems to enjoy George’s company, so I assume he favours his manners over mine.”

“Oh no, your father favours nobody over you. He does enjoy the boy’s company because George amuses him. He is such a joyful, friendly boy and most grateful to your father.”

The young man did not reply, and his mother continued.

“I know there are things you disapprove of in George Wickham, but please do not be so hard on him. He is younger than you and certainly less wise. He cannot compare to you in any way, so please do not judge him so harshly.”

“I try not to. But I am not blind to the fact that he always takes the easy way with his studies, with the work his father assigns him, with any request anyone gives him. He should be properly disciplined, but I know it is not my duty to do that.”

“It will be your duty — one day. Let us hope by then his character will have improved.”

“Yes, Mother. Let us not worry about George Wickham. He has a comfortable life that lacks nothing.”

“You are right, my handsome boy. One last thing. Will you promise me that you will be happy?”

“I promise I shall follow your advice, Mother.”

“Good,” the woman said, caressing his face again. “Do not mind Catherine’s insistence about your engagement to Anne. I mean — I would be so very happy and grateful if she did turn out to be the woman to make you happy. But that must be your choice alone.”

“Yes, Mother...”

“Now, please be so kind as to ask your father to come back in. He must be worried about our long conversation. But I am glad I had you to myself, even for a little while.”

The boy kissed his mother's hand, and she kissed his in return.

Soon, the room was filled with people — from the master, George Darcy, to Georgiana and her governess. Fitzwilliam Darcy moved into a corner, watching his mother surrounded by those who loved her and struggling with his tears.

The following year, when he was seventeen years old and his sister four, Lady Anne Darcy died peacefully, her body weakened by an illness that had no cure.

London, December 1811

“Fitzwilliam, will you not play with me?” Georgiana Darcy asked her brother, who sat absently in the music room, watching her practise.

“Play? Oh no, dearest. Forgive me, but I am in no disposition to play.”

“Do not apologise. I am just worried that you have not seemed to be in a disposition for anything lately. It pains me to see you so sad. I cannot forgive myself for hurting you.”

“What are you talking about, my dear? You never hurt me!”

“Of course I did. I know my attempted elopement hurt and disappointed you. I am nothing but a silly simpleton who does not deserve your forgiveness. But it is not fair that you suffer because of my reckless behaviour.”

He took a chair and moved it near the pianoforte, sitting close to her; she wiped her tears.

“My dear, I might call you a silly simpleton if you do not cease blaming yourself. You did not elope — you proved your strength and determination and confessed the truth to me, as only a few women would.”

“Because it was a fortunate coincidence that you arrived that day. What would I have done if you had not been there? If the decision had entirely been mine?”

“Why worry about what could have been? You were surrounded by evil people whom you trusted and held in regard — your companion and a friend you had known all your life. My only concern is that those two villains hurt and betrayed you. Nothing else.”

She remained silent, and he continued, “Will you please promise not to trouble yourself with this further?”

“I shall try. But you cannot deny you have not been yourself lately.”

“I shall not deny it, but it is certainly not your fault — not by far. Come, let us play together. A little bit of music might be beneficial to me after all.”

“Brother, may I ask — is there a reason why Mr. Bingley does not visit us as often as he used to? Even Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst have called on me only once since they returned from the country.”

“Do you miss them?”

“Oh no!” she answered hastily, causing him to smile. “I mean, they are always kind to me. And you said you are fond of Mr. Bingley’s friendship.”

“I am. He might not be so fond of me these days, due to some differences of opinion related to the time we spent in Hertfordshire. And just to be clear, I admit that is also

the reason for my poor disposition since I returned — nothing else.”

“Oh...I see. Forgive me if I have intruded — I shall not insist further. May I ask — we are attending Aunt Matlock’s New Year’s dinner, are we not? She has asked me many times.”

“Yes. Geoffrey made me promise we would. I am in no disposition for parties, but I cannot condemn you and Mrs. Annesley to bear only my dull company all the time.”

“Have you decided when you will visit Lady Catherine? Please do not make me come with you! I miss Anne, and I write to her often, but—”

“Do not worry, my dear. Geoffrey and I shall visit Rosings alone. I am not sure when — probably no earlier than March.”

“Oh, good. We have plenty of time to discuss it.”

“Yes, we do,” he agreed, then moved to sit beside his sister on the stool, and the two began to play together.

Gracechurch Street, London , December 1811

“My dears, I am so happy to have you here!” Mrs. Gardiner said, embracing her eldest nieces.

“I am sorry we could not come to Longbourn for Christmas as usual, but both Hannah and Elinor have such bad colds that the doctor insisted we should not travel in the winter. Their fevers have only just broken, and we did not want to take any risks.”

“We are happy to be here too,” Elizabeth replied. “I was rather surprised that Mama agreed to allow us to leave Longbourn at this time of year. I suspect she is still angry with me for refusing to marry Mr. Collins. If that is the case, she might send me away from home more often.”

“I am glad you can joke about this, Lizzy,” Mrs. Gardiner replied, smiling.

“It is not difficult to joke about Mr. Collins. I am still shocked that Charlotte agreed to marry him after he proposed to her only a day after I refused him. I am truly disappointed in her decision.”

“You should not judge her, my dear,” Mrs. Gardiner said.

“I am sure she pondered the situation carefully and chose what was best for her. Mr. Collins — despite his faults — is not a man to disregard, from what I have heard. He is a clergyman with a good living and will one day inherit Longbourn. I doubt Charlotte has many prospects to choose from.”

“I cannot disagree with you, Aunt. But I cannot help being disappointed either. To me, marriage means something entirely different.”

“Yes, I know — you only wish to marry for the deepest love,” Mrs. Gardiner answered, still smiling. “Perhaps Charlotte is not romantic and only hopes for a comfortable life — which she might find with Mr. Collins.”

“Even if you find the deepest love, there is no guarantee you will marry or be happy,” Jane interjected. “Some sentiments can only lead to pain, so Charlotte’s decision might be the wisest, for there is no suffering attached to it.”

Elizabeth and her aunt looked at Jane, who averted her eyes. “Forgive me — would you mind if I go to my room? I would like to rest a little,” Jane said, then left them.

“It breaks my heart to see Jane like this,” Elizabeth said. “I have tried to comfort her, but with no success. I fear Mr. Bingley’s betrayal hurt her too deeply.”

“But, may I ask in what way he betrayed her?”

“In what way? By letting her — and all of us — believe that he admired her and showing an affection he apparently did not truly feel. By promising that he would only stay in London for a few days but then never returning. And his sister wrote to Jane to say her brother was busy with Mr. Darcy and his perfectly accomplished sister. I do not blame Miss Darcy, of course, I only blame her proud and arrogant brother for convincing Mr. Bingley not to return to Hertfordshire — and Mr. Bingley for being so weak and tractable.”

“You sound very harsh, Lizzy. Let us discuss the situation later, over a cup of tea, while Jane is resting. That is — if you are not tired too.”

“Oh, not at all. I always love talking to you, Aunt.”

“Good. And perhaps you may tell me more about Mr. Wickham, the charming gentleman you seem to favour and who grew up at Pemberley — one of my favourite places in the world.”

“Mr. Wickham is charming indeed — you would like him very much, I am sure. He suffered some misfortune from the other man who grew up at your favourite place — the same man who hurt Jane,” Elizabeth answered, half in anger, half in jest.

“Ah, yes — we shall certainly talk about Mr. Darcy. I had the highest opinion of his parents, and I am so sad to hear such unfavourable reports about him.”

“The more you know about him, the sadder you will be, Aunt. I suppose he is probably well-educated and might carry out his duties well enough for some people

to appreciate him, but in truth, I have rarely met a more unpleasant sort of man.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“I am glad you insisted on me joining you, Aunt,” Jane said as the three walked together through Hyde Park.

“You have always been so kind to us, Aunt,” Elizabeth replied. “Not to mention that you spoil us with all sorts of gifts, just as you did today.”

“I celebrate my husband’s success by indulging myself occasionally in purchasing from the most fashionable shops in London,” Mrs. Gardiner jested. “And I enjoy spoiling you since you never ask for anything. And you know how much your uncle loves you too.”

“We know. For that, we are forever grateful to you both. And I am particularly grateful for this walk,” Elizabeth joked. “Although I am very rarely in town, I have always had a partiality for Hyde Park. It is ridiculous, I know. But I have always felt drawn to it.”

“It is not ridiculous, Lizzy. Hyde Park is the perfect place for a passionate walker like you. I personally prefer a ride in the carriage, but today I wanted to indulge you. However, I cannot walk very far.”

“I thank you for taking my preference into consideration,” Elizabeth said with laughter.

“I wonder whether Grosvenor Street is far from here,” Jane interjected shyly.

“It is not. Are you looking for a certain number?”

“Twelve, I believe. But I do not wish to enter — only to see where it is,” Jane answered.

Elizabeth’s heart ached for her sister’s distress; Jane was still deeply hurt but obviously could not expunge Mr. Bingley from her mind.

“We may take a stroll along Grosvenor Street if you wish,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “It is a lovely street, with many handsome houses.”

“If you and Lizzy do not mind...” Jane whispered.

“I would like to see it too,” Elizabeth said energetically to support her sister.

She had no interest in the street or handsome houses, and she cared little about Mr. Bingley since he chose to leave Jane and never return.

He was not enough of a man, and his affection must have been shallow.

But such words would have only pained Jane more, so they would never be said.

They walked on at a slow pace, watching riders and carriages passing by; in the depths of winter, even though the weather was mild, there were very few other walkers.

“It is getting colder, and there are a few clouds accumulating,” Mrs. Gardiner said as they made their way towards the gate. “May I suggest taking the carriage and driving along Grosvenor Street? We might not have time to stroll the full length of it.”

“As you wish, Aunt,” Jane replied with an apparent effort to conceal her disappointment.

They were crossing Park Lane when, out of nowhere, a carriage appeared, its horses moving at speed.

Mrs. Gardiner was still in the road, and Elizabeth — who had reached the other side — ran back to pull her aunt to safety.

The coachman pulled the reins, and the horses rose up onto their hind legs, neighing.

“Oh dear, are you all well? Is anyone hurt?” A lady’s voice came from inside the carriage, and Elizabeth turned away from her shaking aunt to look at it.

It was a large, elegant coach, and the lady inside, although only her head was visible, had an air about her that revealed she was of the highest echelons of society.

“We are not hurt,” Elizabeth answered, while Mrs. Gardiner and Jane brushed off their gowns and caught their breath.

She expected the carriage to move away, so Elizabeth was surprised when the lady opened the door and even stepped down.

Her elegance was now visible in all its splendour, yet the woman’s countenance seemed unexpectedly amiable.

Through the window, the face of a young lady appeared, also looking worried.

“I apologise. I do not know what came over our horseman to ride at such a speed. We are in a hurry, but that is no excuse for endangering people around us,” she said in a sharp voice addressed to the servant. “Are you sure all is well?” she then insisted, this time looking at Mrs. Gardiner.

“Thank you for your concern, Lady Matlock, but it is truly not needed. We are

perfectly well.”

“Oh! Are we acquainted? I apologise...I cannot recollect...”

“Not exactly,” Mrs. Gardiner answered. “I had the pleasure of first seeing your ladyship many years ago, in Derbyshire, when you visited Mr. and Mrs. Darcy.” The lady’s surprised glance matched Elizabeth’s astonishment and curiosity.

She tried to remember whether she had ever heard the name Matlock, but ‘Darcy’ was too well known to her.

“Then were you acquainted with the Darcy family? I still cannot remember you in any way.”

“Your ladyship is too kind to show such interest, but there is truly nothing to remember,” Mrs. Gardiner said with a polite smile. “I grew up in Lambton. My father owned a shop there. We moved away more than twelve years ago, but I admired your ladyship from afar as a girl.”

“Oh, I see. But this is quite astonishing. To know that — of all the people in London — I almost hurt a lovely woman who grew up in Lambton! What a coincidence!”

“Well, of all the people in London, there are very few who walk in Hyde Park on a winter’s day,” Mrs. Gardiner answered, and the lady laughed.

“True! Are you all on foot? May we take you somewhere? It is the least I can do.”

“Your ladyship is exceedingly kind and generous, we thank you. Our carriage is waiting close by. We have been strolling in the park because my niece here is very fond of walking. I and my other niece do not enjoy it so much, so we were hurrying to our carriage and missed seeing yours, which almost caused an accident.”

“Ah, I see. A young woman fond of walking. That is refreshing, indeed. I shall not detain you any longer. You must be tired after the exercise. May I have your name, if you do not mind?”

“Of course. I am Mrs. Madeleine Gardiner. My father’s name was Mr. Gilford Martin.”

All three bowed to the lady when a small voice sounded from inside the carriage.

“I know a Mr. Peter Martin, who owns the inn in Lambton.”

“Peter Martin is my cousin,” Mrs. Gardiner replied.

“I know Peter Martin too, quite well. This is another lovely coincidence,” Lady Matlock said. “Oh, this is my niece, Miss Georgiana Darcy.”

The young woman nodded her head in a silent greeting from the carriage, and Elizabeth felt Jane grasp her arm in a gesture of obvious distress.

“It is a true delight to make your acquaintance, Miss Darcy. Please allow me to tell you how much I admired your parents — along with everyone else in Lambton.”

“Thank you,” the girl replied in the same small voice.

“And these,” Mrs. Gardiner continued, “are my nieces, Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth. Their father owns an estate in Hertfordshire, and they are visiting us in London at present.”

Lady Matlock nodded with a friendly expression. Elizabeth curtsied, watching Miss Darcy with the deepest interest. Also, out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at Jane, who looked extremely pale and disturbed.

“Forgive me, did you say Hertfordshire?” Miss Darcy enquired. “Miss Bennet? Are you by any chance acquainted with a place called Netherfield...or Longbourn?”

Lady Matlock seemed puzzled, so the girl added, “I apologise for my boldness. My brother and his friend Mr. Bingley returned from Hertfordshire recently, and I heard them mention the name Bennet.”

“Longbourn is our home,” Elizabeth answered.

For some reason, she felt a strange and immediate friendliness towards the lady and the young woman.

“If your brother is Mr. Darcy and his friend is Mr. Bingley, I am quite certain we are the Bennets they spoke of. Mr. Bingley rented an estate three miles from ours.”

Lady Matlock’s eyes and lips opened in apparent bewilderment. She looked at Elizabeth in disbelief, then voiced her astonishment.

“Surely this cannot be? Truly? Not one but more coincidences! So, you grew up in Lambton, and your nieces are acquainted with my nephew Darcy? And I almost hit you with my carriage! Several occurrences in a row, wholly unconnected. This could be a play or a novel, really!”

“Indeed, it is exceedingly strange. Almost a little bit frightening,” Elizabeth responded, keeping her smile.

“I agree! Well, well, wait until I tell my husband and my nephew. So, young Bingley rented an estate, finally! I remember Darcy mentioned something, but I pay little attention to such dull men’s affairs.”

“It was an honour to meet you both and speak to you, Lady Matlock, Miss Darcy,”

Mrs. Gardiner said. "But I am afraid we must leave now. My children are at home with their governess, and they are waiting for me."

"Of course, of course," Lady Matlock said. "Mrs. Gardiner, I live on Park Street, at number thirteen. If you happen to be in the neighbourhood and are in no hurry, come and have a cup of tea with me. And bring your lovely nieces, of course."

The invitation left Mrs. Gardiner stunned and speechless, and she needed to breathe deeply and compose herself before replying.

"Lady Matlock, I am truly honoured by your invitation. I confess I am not sure whether I would ever dare to take advantage of it, but I thank you nevertheless."

"Nonsense. If I invited you, it is not a matter of daring or not, merely of having time for tea. And may I ask where you live, if you do not mind? I am just curious in case I should ever be in that part of town."

"Of course I do not mind. Your interest flatters me. But we live quite far from here — in Gracechurch Street. Number twenty-two. My husband is a lawyer, and he has other business interests."

"How lovely. Well then, we must leave too. I hope to meet you again, either by coincidence or by design," Lady Matlock concluded before she returned to her carriage.

While the lady and Miss Darcy departed, the other three remained still, gazing after the carriage in silence.

"Well girls, that was certainly the biggest surprise I remember having in my life."

"Quite shocking," Elizabeth admitted. "Mr. Darcy's aunt and sister happening upon

us in the street. I would never have imagined it, and certainly nobody would believe such a coincidence.”

“Let us hurry. We are already very late,” Mrs. Gardiner said.

As they walked the remaining distance to the Gardiners’ carriage, all three ladies were thoughtful and barely spoke at all.

When they finally reached the conveyance, Mrs. Gardiner was exhausted.

She asked the coachman to drive along Grosvenor Street, as planned, and only then did the conversation resume.

“Lady Matlock is quite an elegant lady,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “I have seen her a few times in town before, at the opera or theatre, but I never spoke to her before today. I did not remember her being so amiable.”

“It was kind of her to be so worried about hurting some strangers who were in the middle of the road,” Elizabeth said. “But she must have been surprised by your mentioning the Darcys and Lambton, and her curiosity induced her friendly manners.”

“Probably. But I am still puzzled. And Miss Darcy — it was the first time I ever saw her. She looks very much like her mother.”

“Miss Darcy was very beautiful,” Jane whispered. “And she seemed amiable too, which is unusual for someone so rich and so accomplished. Miss Bingley spoke often of her many talents.”

Elizabeth felt the pain in her sister’s voice and understood the meaning behind her words. Jane had just met her supposed rival, and she felt immediately defeated. Mrs.

Gardiner, however, continued, blissfully unaware of her niece's turmoil.

"Lady Anne Darcy was just like that. Very pretty, gentle, kind, and talented. She painted and played the pianoforte beautifully. Of course, I never saw or heard any of that for myself, only reports. Does Mr. Darcy resemble his sister?"

"Dear Lord, no! One could hardly meet two more different people. From appearance to voice and manners, they are utterly the opposite! I wonder whether they are truly brother and sister. Mr. Darcy is as proud, arrogant, and careless about the feelings of others as one can be. He would certainly not stop his carriage to see whom he had hurt."

"You are too severe on him, dear Lizzy," Jane interjected. "Mr. Bingley always spoke highly of Mr. Darcy and praised his generosity, kindness, and sense of honour."

"I am sure Mr. Darcy can be all that, if and when he chooses to be. Probably with his family and close friends. The rest of the world, however, and especially those who have lost his friendship, are not given the chance to witness those qualities."

"You are indeed very severe on him, Lizzy. What puzzles me is that Miss Darcy said she heard him and Mr. Bingley mention your name. I wonder under what circumstances. It must be something good — that is what her tone indicated."

"Of Mr. Bingley, I expect to say something nice about our family. But Mr. Darcy was always my severest critic," Elizabeth concluded.

"I do not know what to do about Lady Matlock's invitation. Should I take it in earnest and just knock on her door next time we are in the neighbourhood?"

"I was under the impression she expected that and insisted upon it," Elizabeth responded. "Why would she do that if not in goodwill?"

“That is Mr. Bingley’s house,” Jane suddenly interjected, gazing out of the window with curiosity and the same disturbed countenance.

“Since his sister wrote to you to visit her, we may come one day, Jane. We may take that opportunity to greet Lady Matlock briefly. What do you think? Would you like that?”

“I would like that very much, Aunt. Would you, Lizzy?” Jane answered.

“I would rather walk around Hyde Park while you visit Miss Bingley and only join you to call on Lady Matlock,” Elizabeth said in all honesty. “Mr. Bingley certainly took all the common sense and decency and left nothing for his sisters.”

“I would very much like to meet Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “I am curious about both of them.”

“Well, we can always hope for another accident!” Elizabeth laughed.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Darcy put down the papers that he had already neglected for too long.

He could hardly keep his mind on anything since he returned to London.

His plan to forget Elizabeth by creating distance between them had failed, and his mind was filled with thoughts about her, just as had happened during his stay at Netherfield.

His sleep was equally disturbed too, by dreams he refused to acknowledge, and the lack of rest made him anxious and annoyed all the time.

“Dear brother, you will not believe what happened!” Georgiana said joyfully as she entered the library. “Am I disturbing you?”

“You never disturb me. Surely you do not have to ask! Please come in and sit down. I am glad to see you in such an excellent disposition. I assume you enjoyed yourself with our aunt.”

“I did, but I must tell you something quite astonishing. A most entertaining coincidence.”

“Do tell,” Darcy said, pleased with his sister’s enthusiasm. He had rarely seen Georgiana so lively in recent years.

“Well, as our carriage drove down Park Lane, we almost hit some ladies, who were walking.”

“Oh...?”

“Yes! It gave us a fright, but fortunately, nothing bad happened. Our aunt stopped the carriage and went to speak to them. And, as it happened, one of the ladies had grown up in Lambton and she knew Aunt Matlock. She was also well acquainted with our parents!”

“How lovely, indeed.”

“Oh, but there is much more. As our aunt spoke to her, the lady introduced us to her two nieces. Can you guess who they were?”

“I certainly cannot! But I am glad you are amused.”

“Well, I should keep you intrigued a little longer, but I cannot. Her nieces were Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. From Longbourn, Hertfordshire! The same Bennets you wrote to me about in your letters!”

The girl paused, evidently eager to witness his response, but Darcy was stunned, struggling for air. He prayed it was a joke — as unreasonable as such an expectation was.

“My aunt said it is quite impossible that, of all the people in London, we should happen upon someone who grew up near Pemberley and who is related to someone you are acquainted with! And yet, the impossible occurred!”

“The impossible occurred, indeed,” Darcy replied absently, distracted by his thoughts.

“Aunt Matlock was pleased with Mrs. Gardiner, and she invited her for tea. I confess I am always happy to meet someone who has met our parents. I have so few

memories of Mama that I wish to hear as much about her as possible.”

“I know, my dear,” Darcy said affectionately.

“I wonder whether you have met Mrs. Gardiner? Probably not — she must be at least ten years older than you. Her name was Madeleine Martin. She is the cousin of Mr. Martin, who owns the inn.”

“Is she?”

Georgiana’s lively voice contrasted with his disposition, which lowered with every moment.

He did not remember anyone with that name, but that did not even matter.

Lady Matlock had invited Elizabeth’s aunt for tea.

That must have been the aunt who lived near Cheapside — Miss Bingley had said so a while ago.

What was she doing in Hyde Park? Surely Elizabeth had desired to take a walk — that was her pleasure.

Of all the carriages in London and all the people in London, the fact that they had met was extraordinary.

“Yes, she is. Mr. Martin and his family are good people. Mrs. Reynolds always says so.”

“They are. That I can agree upon.”

“Brother, so they are the Bennet family you mentioned to me, are they not?”

“If they told you they live at Longbourn, Hertfordshire, then yes, they must be.”

“But, Brother, are you upset about something? Aunt Matlock said you would be amused, but I feel you are not entertained.”

“I am entertained, dearest. Only a little bit surprised, as you said.”

“Geoffrey said he would come for dinner tonight,” Georgiana continued.

“Good. I shall finish my letters by then.”

Georgiana left and — as never before — Darcy felt relieved by her departure.

He still struggled to understand the bewildering news and to estimate the sort of consequences that fortuitous meeting would have.

How long would Elizabeth be in London? At least until after the New Year, certainly.

Why else would she come to London during Christmastime if not to spend it with her relatives?

There should not be much danger of him meeting her, since they lived a significant distance apart; but coincidences could happen. And what if Mrs. Gardiner accepted Lady Matlock’s invitation for tea? Would she take her nieces too? Would Georgiana meet them again?

And what about Miss Jane Bennet and Bingley? Bingley had been in a poor disposition lately, and he was still thinking of Hertfordshire — that was apparent. That simple encounter in the park could alter their lives dramatically.

Another thought that crossed his mind was related to Wickham. Elizabeth seemed to have been on friendly terms with the reprobate and trusted his claims. That was obvious from their harsh discussion at the Netherfield ball, the first and last time he had danced with her.

That scoundrel was in Meryton, at liberty to spread all sorts of falsehoods, and surely Elizabeth had trusted him even more as time passed.

He panicked imagining that Elizabeth might meet Georgiana again and — in ignorance — mention something about Wickham.

Georgiana's distress was still vivid and tormented her enough without any further news about that villain.

Darcy could not settle his mind enough to write his letters — to Mrs. Reynolds at Pemberley and to his solicitors. The Matlocks' youngest son — Colonel Geoffrey Fitzwilliam — arrived for dinner as promised, and they had a pleasant-enough evening, though Darcy's thoughts returned to Elizabeth often.

“My mother told me about her unexpected meeting,” the colonel suddenly said. “Was the Miss Bennet they encountered the one you told me that Bingley admired?”

Darcy choked on his drink, while Georgiana's expression revealed her curiosity.

“Yes, but this is not a subject for dinner conversation and certainly not in the presence of Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley.”

“I apologise, Darcy. I was not aware that there was an inappropriate story behind it.”

Georgiana looked puzzled now, and Darcy could not end the conversation abruptly, leaving his sister with the wrong impression.

“There is nothing inappropriate. Bingley did admire Miss Jane Bennet, but he came to realise she did not return his feelings. It happens all the time, even in the most honourable families.”

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that,” Georgiana replied. “Miss Bennet is the one with fair hair, is she not? She is very beautiful, and our aunt said she seemed to possess a sweet nature.”

“She is beautiful, and yes, she probably does possess a sweet nature. I saw nothing wanting in her manners. It was probably not meant to be. Some things happen — others do not.”

Even to himself, his voice sounded a little harsher than it should; the colonel did not enquire further, and Georgiana became more interested in her food. Then the conversation turned to the weather and Lady Matlock’s forthcoming party.

Georgiana retired after dinner, claiming both she and Mrs. Annesley were tired. The colonel did not seem in any hurry to leave, and Darcy offered him a drink and a cigar.

“So, now that we are alone, I hope you will trust me enough to tell me the truth about Miss Bennet.”

Darcy choked again, spilling some brandy on himself. “What do you mean?”

“The story of Bingley and Miss Bennet. When you returned, you told me that you saved Bingley from a disadvantageous marriage to a young woman about whom there were several objections. Now you claim Bingley realised that the lady — whom my mother and your sister just met — did not return his feelings. Which is true?”

“Both,” Darcy answered after a brief hesitation. “Bingley was so enchanted with Miss Bennet that he was blinded to the truth. She is exceedingly beautiful, and he is easily

charmed, as we both know. He has been in love at least five times in the last two years.”

“And?”

“And the lady seemed to receive his admiration with pleasure, but her countenance was always serene. She smiled at him in the same way she smiled at everyone else. And the mother is truly insupportable. She has no respect for decorum but does have an obsession with marrying off her daughters, who have no dowry and no connections. Mrs. Bennet presented a spectacle that was difficult to bear. And I am sure Miss Jane Bennet would have been somehow forced to accept Bingley, despite her lack of feelings for him.”

“Darcy, I must say you seem very much involved in this situation. May I ask why Bingley’s or Miss Bennet’s feelings are your concern?”

“Bingley is my friend, Geoffrey. He is a good man and deserves to be happy. It was my duty to warn him against a marriage that would not be equal in any way.”

“But she is a gentleman’s daughter, and he is the son of a tradesman. She might not have a dowry or any useful connections, but he has the money she lacks. As for happiness — its meaning is different for each of us.”

“Yes, she is a gentleman’s daughter. It is not only that she lacks money and connections...there is more that I cannot clearly explain.”

“Is there?”

Darcy felt his cousin’s intense stare, scrutinising him with obvious puzzlement.

“Darcy, there is something that worries me and must be said, even if it will anger

you.”

“Then say it and be done with this subject.”

“I have known you all your life, and as good as you are at concealing your feelings from people in general, you cannot hide much from me. You certainly have a peculiar interest in this story. I feel that you put great effort into convincing Bingley that this miss would not ensure his happiness in marriage. You seem as if you deliberately separated them, and that is strange. Could it be that you also admire this Miss Bennet and do not wish to allow Bingley to have her?”

The colonel ended with a voice filled with gravity, but Darcy breathed with relief at his cousin’s wrong guess.

“Oh, this is plain stupid, Geoffrey. I have not the slightest interest in Miss Jane Bennet. It makes me laugh that you assumed I did.”

He sipped from his glass. “However, I might have put too much effort into presenting Bingley with my opinion on this matter. But I did it only in his best interest and after a thorough examination of Miss Bennet’s behaviour towards him.

Especially at the Netherfield ball, when her mother spoke loudly about Bingley marrying her daughter and finding husbands for the other four sisters. ”

“There are five sisters with no dowry? Poor Mrs. Bennet! I am almost sympathetic to her.” The colonel laughed. “You are quite unfair on the lady. There are many mothers with fewer daughters and far more money who are still obsessed with finding them husbands.”

“I am glad you are entertained, Geoffrey.”

“I confess I am. And relieved that my guess was wrong. Let us hope Bingley will fall in love with another pretty face soon and will forget Miss Bennet. That would prove you were right, and I know how much you like to be.”

Although accustomed to his cousin’s teasing, this time Darcy felt uncomfortable.

He had told only half the truth, and if he was honest with himself, he had to admit he might have become too involved in the matter.

If he had been right, he had no cause to repent.

However, if he had misjudged Bingley’s feelings or Miss Jane Bennet’s, he would have to live with guilt and remorse.

“Oh, there is something you should know, Darcy. When my mother related her encounter with the Miss Bennets to me, I was surprised and amused, and I told her what I knew about Miss Bennet and Bingley. What you had previously told me, of course.”

“I wished you had not done that, Geoffrey,” Darcy replied with irritation. “It was a private conversation we shared, not public knowledge.”

“I am sorry if I overstepped. But you never told me the matter required secrecy, and when we first discussed it, it seemed of little importance. I would not have revealed it to a stranger, but I found it amusing to add to the coincidences mother kept speaking of.”

“I do not find the situation amusing in any way. I hope no reports reach Miss Bennet or Bingley and offend or hurt either of them.”

“I hope we can both trust in my mother’s privacy and wisdom.”

“I do not wish discussions of this kind in the presence of Georgiana. She is still rather sensitive when it comes to relationships.”

“I understand. I am sure my mother is capable of acting with the proper delicacy.”

“I am only worried about minor indiscretions on your mother’s part. What surprises me is that I have trusted you with many secrets throughout our lives and you have never betrayed my confidence. What came over you to gossip about Bingley and Miss Bennet with your mother? I cannot understand it.”

“I accept the blame, Darcy, and I shall remedy it.”

After the colonel left and he retired to his bed-chamber, things became even worse for Darcy. He recollected all the instances on which he had based his estimation of Miss Bennet’s feelings, including his conversations with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst.

A sense of panic ruined his rest; he began wondering whether it was possible that his own interest in Miss Bennet had been his main reason, after all.

The other Miss Bennet, from whom he had tried to run away.

Could he have insisted on taking Bingley away from Hertfordshire to avoid his marriage to Miss Jane Bennet because it would have placed Elizabeth Bennet in his close circle of friends?

Could he have been so selfish as to toy with his friend’s happiness because of his cowardice?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Two more days passed without mention of the Bennet name, though Elizabeth's image was always present in Darcy's mind.

Christmas was only a week away, and Georgiana was busy preparing the gifts for the servants for Boxing Day.

Those for Pemberley had been sent the week before.

It was a custom inherited from their parents: every year, on Boxing Day, the servants were given some monetary bonus together with a gift.

Presents were offered to the tenants' children too, and the tradition was carried on each year.

On the third day after the fortuitous meeting, Darcy received a note from Miss Bingley that made him roll his eyes.

Mr. Darcy,

We desperately need your help. It seems Jane Bennet is in London, and she has informed me she will come to visit today at noon.

I cannot allow Charles to meet her and ruin our hard work.

Therefore, I told my brother that you called yesterday asking for him and that you are expecting him today at twelve o'clock.

I beg you to keep him busy for at least two hours.

I intend to keep Miss Bennet's visit to under half an hour, but I need some additional time in any case.

I am counting on your support, as always.

C.B.

Those few words irritated Darcy exceedingly. Miss Bingley's audacity was outrageous, and he realised it was his previous actions that had induced that woman to believe they were partners in lies and deceptions.

His first response in anger was to reply and disagree with the scheme. However, that would probably only inspire the woman to conceive another lie.

Darcy was still convinced that marrying Miss Bennet would be a mistake for Bingley.

That the young woman's feelings did not match his friend's.

He would still strongly advise Bingley against such a step.

But to create a web of deception behind his back was appalling and dishonourable, and Darcy could not be part of it.

He put the note aside, reflecting on how he would act further.

Later on, Darcy was surprised by an unexpected visit from his aunt Lady Matlock asking for Georgiana.

"I cannot stay long — I am just returning from the dressmaker. She finally finished

my gowns for the New Year dinner party. Georgiana dearest, I received the pleasant news that Mrs. Gardiner and her nieces will come and call on me today. Apparently, they have other business in the neighbourhood. I intend to keep them for at least a cup of tea and find out more about them. I have reason to believe I might gather some interesting details. Would you like to come?"

"Of course, if Fitzwilliam does not mind."

"Fitzwilliam might join us too if he is desirous of seeing the ladies. However, I have reason to believe he is not eager about such an encounter. Am I wrong, Nephew?"

"I have another engagement, but of course, I do not mind Georgiana visiting you at any time or for any reason, Aunt," Darcy answered with no little emotion.

It was precisely what he feared. Furthermore, he understood his aunt's meaning and what sort of interesting details she hoped to discover.

If only the colonel did not have such a big mouth.

Lady Matlock rested for a little while, but just as she was ready to leave, the door opened and Bingley entered. He stopped, bowed to the lady, and apologised for almost bumping into her.

"Mr. Bingley — what a lovely surprise, sir! I have not seen you since the spring. How are you, young man? As handsome as ever!"

"Lady Matlock, I am honoured to see you! I am reasonably well."

"I heard that you rented an estate. You must tell me one of these days how you like being a landlord."

“Oh...I could not say...I only rented the place in September, and I am not sure whether I shall return there.”

“Really? Such a pity. I assume you were displeased with the property? Or with the neighbourhood?”

“No. Not at all...in fact, it was quite the opposite. But there were some circumstances that altered my plans.”

Bingley looked troubled, and Darcy wondered where his aunt would take the conversation. Surely she could not simply inform Bingley about the Bennets' presence in town!

“How intriguing. Unfortunately, I cannot stay as I have an appointment. But I might ask you to come and have a little chat with me sometime soon. That is, if you do not have anything better to do than visit an old lady.”

“Oh no. I shall come at any time you wish. I would be honoured to talk to your ladyship. I just never assumed you would have any interest in discussing anything with me.”

“I am always interested in you. You seem to be a worthy young man, and I know how much my nephew values your friendship, so your happiness is my concern. I hope you do not mind.”

“Oh no, not at all. Quite the opposite.”

“I am glad to hear that. Georgiana dear, I shall expect you in half an hour.”

The strange conversation left Bingley puzzled and speechless, and Darcy could not blame him. Lady Matlock had met him several times previously but had never spoken

more than a few polite words to him.

Lady Matlock's interest was upsetting for Darcy too; his aunt had the same tendency to intrude where it was not her business as Lady Catherine, only she usually did it with more consideration. But the intrusion remained, and the effects could be painful.

Georgiana stayed with them for a little while, talking to Bingley.

Then, together with Mrs. Annesley, she left for the Matlocks' house, and only then could Darcy open a private conversation with his friend.

However, he was still undecided about what could and what should be said in the delicate matter that affected them both.

Even if he disagreed with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst's machinations, Darcy did not feel comfortable revealing their plan either.

"Bingley, there is something important I must tell you."

"Yes, Caroline said as much. What is it?"

"Your sister is not aware of this particular situation."

"Should I be worried?"

"There is nothing to worry about, but it might be a little disquieting. A few days ago, my aunt and sister had a little accident in Hyde Park. Almost an accident. To cut a long story short, my aunt's carriage almost hit three young women."

"Oh? Really? I am very sorry to hear that. Was anyone hurt?"

“No...however, she discovered that the three ladies were Mrs. Gardiner and her two nieces. Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Darcy watched Bingley attentively, noticing the same response he had when he first heard the story.

“Miss Bennet is in London?” Bingley managed to ask.

“Yes. And there is something else you should know.”

“But, wait...where is she staying? Is this her aunt from Gracechurch Street? Have you spoken to her?”

Bingley’s apparent nervousness caused Darcy anxiety. If he expected that his friend had forgotten Miss Bennet, he was clearly wrong.

“No, I have not spoken to her. My aunt and my sister did and discovered some details, including her address.”

“If she is in town, I must call on her, of course. It is only polite. Could you ask Lady Matlock for the address? The name was Gardiner?”

“My sister knows the address too. But Bingley, try to calm down a moment and speak reasonably.”

“Yes, yes, I assume you disapprove of my intention to call on her.”

“My opinion matters little. I admit politeness alone requires you to call on her.”

“I shall! Tomorrow! In the meantime, please ask Miss Darcy about the address.”

“I shall...and...”

“Yes?”

Darcy hesitated to speak further, but regardless of how much he revealed, Bingley would find out the whole truth as soon as he visited the Gardiners. He had already abused his friend's confidence enough, and he owed him more honesty.

“Bingley, before you came, my aunt told me that Mrs. Gardiner and the Miss Bennets were expected to call on her imminently. Georgiana has also gone there to see them. Apparently, my aunt and my sister had a favourable first impression of them.”

“Miss Bennet is at Lady Matlock's now?”

“I believe so.”

“I must go and greet her. I have not a moment to lose!”

“Bingley, wait! You cannot simply appear at the Matlocks' residence, uninvited and in such a state of agitation! Calm down and try to be reasonable! You may ask Georgiana about her if you want, then you can call tomorrow at a reasonable time.”

“I shall not appear uninvited. But I can wait outside, can I not? I shall watch until Miss Bennet comes out, then greet her and ask permission to call tomorrow. Surely that is reasonable.”

Darcy's nervousness increased at the same time as his friend's. He was not sure what was reasonable or not, considering the circumstances.

“Not entirely reasonable, Bingley. You will certainly surprise Miss Bennet with your sudden appearance. You may do so only if you are certain of her reception.”

Bingley's countenance changed from agitation to worry.

"You believe she might not be pleased to see me? You are right, of course. What a fool I am! She might not wish to see me either today or tomorrow. She will surely be embarrassed if I disturb her visit to Lady Matlock. And her ladyship would never forgive me for making a scene in front of her house!"

"Bingley, you are very troubled, and you need to calm down before deciding how to proceed. You do not know whether Miss Bennet will be pleased or embarrassed to see you. I doubt she would make a scene, regardless, and my aunt would probably be more amused than upset to see you waiting in the street."

"Then I shall go! I can claim I was there by accident. A mere coincidence, just as happened with Lady Matlock. Yes, that should work! I shall wait a little distance away, and when I see someone leave the house, I shall step closer!"

Bingley was already grabbing his coat and hat and was ready to go. Darcy found no arguments to calm him.

"I shall come with you, Bingley. Lady Matlock invited me to join them before you arrived, but I declined."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“You declined? Why? So you could see me? I am truly grateful to you, Darcy. I know you never approved of Miss Bennet and her family, but I appreciate that you are supporting me.”

“You are too generous with your praise, Bingley. I should have supported you more and expressed my disapproval less. Come, let us go. I feel I owe it to you to make a fool of myself along with you.”

As they walked the short distance, Bingley chatted, but Darcy heard nothing.

His heart was racing at the thought that he would see Elizabeth too.

He had suspected that she was aware of his admiration and welcomed it.

Furthermore, he had reasons to believe that her feelings for him were not indifferent.

The way she used to smile at him, to tease him, to argue with him — it was quite revealing. How would she respond to seeing him?

He had to act with the utmost precaution in order not to arouse hopes that would never be fulfilled. As much as he denied that pleasure to himself, he felt happy to be able to see her again.

Bingley stopped at the house next door to the Matlocks' before Darcy realised they had arrived. Once there, they looked quite laughable, two men waiting in the cold without even knowing whether the subject of their interest had really visited Lady Matlock and whether they were still there.

They waited for a little while, and suddenly, the Matlocks' door opened, and a servant came out, descended the steps, and called, "Mr. Darcy? I thought it was you, sir! Are you waiting for Miss Darcy? Will you not come in, sir? It is very cold."

"No...I am just waiting..." he replied, feeling foolish in front of the servant's puzzlement.

"Shall I inform the master or the mistress that you are here?"

"No...I mean..." He hesitated, looking at Bingley and then at the servant. They were already acting like fools; he could at least avoid being the subject of servants' gossip and laughter.

"My sister is still here? I know Lady Matlock had guests. Are they still here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then we shall enter," Darcy decided, breathing deeply and moving towards the door, while his common sense and wisdom advised him against such an action.

Once inside, Bingley became hesitant and timid, following Darcy in silence.

They should have left. When they entered the drawing room, the sound of voices suddenly ceased, and bewildered gazes turned towards them.

Darcy dared to look at each lady in turn.

Lady Matlock frowned, Georgiana smiled with delight, Elizabeth looked at him with apparent surprise, while Jane Bennet was pale, her eyes and lips wide in astonishment.

On another chair was an unknown lady at whom Darcy barely glanced.

“Forgive me, Aunt, for disturbing you. I was talking to Bingley, and knowing Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth were here, we took the liberty of coming to greet them briefly. We shall only stay for a moment.”

“Darcy, this is quite a surprise,” Lady Matlock replied. “And Mr. Bingley! I certainly did not expect either of you. We are only ladies here. Your cousin and your uncle are at the club.”

“And there we shall go too. As I said, we only called in for a moment. Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, I am delighted to see you.”

“We are pleased to see you too, sir,” Elizabeth answered, smiling. “And you, of course, Mr. Bingley.”

“May I detain you a moment longer, to ask to be introduced to your aunt?”

“Of course,” Elizabeth responded.

The introduction was made and greetings and pleasantries exchanged. Bingley barely said a few words, and Jane Bennet none, so Darcy assumed the task of carrying on the conversation.

“Mrs. Gardiner, before we leave, my friend Bingley would like to ask your permission to call on you tomorrow or on another day that is acceptable.”

“Yes, yes.” Bingley finally found his voice. “Darcy just told me you were here...I mean in London...and I would like to call on you if you do not mind...”

“We should be delighted, Mr. Bingley,” Mrs. Gardiner answered graciously. “And of

course, it would be a great honour if you were to come too, Mr. Darcy.”

It was Darcy’s turn to be wordless. He had not considered calling on the Gardiners, and now he tried to find a reason to refuse.

“I am sure Mr. Darcy is a very busy man, and he certainly has no business in that part of town,” Elizabeth interjected.

He looked at her, and their eyes met briefly.

“I thank you, Mrs. Gardiner. I am indeed very busy. I shall discuss it with Bingley and see whether I can join him. Regardless, it was a pleasure to make your acquaintance and to see Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth again. Now please excuse us. It is time for me and Bingley to leave and allow you ladies the pleasure of each other’s company. ”

None of the ladies tried to persuade them otherwise, so minutes later they were back out in the cold.

“Darcy, I shall be forever grateful for what you have done,” Bingley said with regained liveliness.

“Miss Bennet looked so beautiful, though a little pale. And silent. Do you think she was displeased to see me? Her aunt did not seem to oppose me calling on them. How wonderful that we entered to speak to them! Now I can call tomorrow, and I know they will be expecting me!”

“Bingley, there were signs that you will have a pleasant call tomorrow. You just have to calm down a little. And to be less generous with your praise and gratitude, as I deserve none. Now let us go to the club — we both could use a drink.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

After two hours spent at their club, in the company of the earl and his two sons, Colonel Fitzwilliam and the viscount, Darcy and Bingley each returned home.

Bingley's enthusiasm remained high, and every time he had the chance to speak, he mentioned something in regard to Hertfordshire.

Darcy felt the colonel's gaze upon him, and he knew the meaning of it.

No, Bingley was certainly not likely to fall in love with another woman and to forget Miss Bennet soon.

When Darcy arrived home, Georgiana had not yet returned. Instead, the butler informed him that Lady Matlock had sent word that he was expected there, so he had little choice but to obey.

At the Matlock residence, his aunt, his sister, his uncle, and his cousins were all talking animatedly about the subject that brought him so much discomfort.

"Darcy! Come here, son!" Lady Matlock invited him. His aunt was in a dangerously high disposition, which could threaten the delicate threads of peace of mind he still had remaining.

"My dear boy, I called you here because there is something I must tell you immediately."

"Please do so, Aunt," he said, defeated, causing the lady to laugh.

“I have always admired your qualities, and I admit — and your uncle agrees — that there are many areas where you surpass gentlemen twice your age.”

“Thank you...”

“However, when it comes to matters of the heart, you have extremely poor judgment! It shows that you do not have much experience and that you have practised very little — something that Catherine always insists on people doing.”

Everybody else laughed, and even Georgiana smiled shyly.

“I have only spent an hour with Miss Bennet,” Lady Matlock continued, “and five minutes with Mr. Bingley, and it was enough to observe those two are in love with each other. It was so obvious that it is laughable that anyone would assume otherwise.”

“Your aunt is determined to see those two reunited,” the earl jested. “She has taken this on as a personal project, and there is nothing you can do to stop her.”

“I have no intention of stopping her,” Darcy answered in earnest. “And yes, I admit I was convinced that Miss Bennet did not return Bingley’s affection.

It was an honest judgment made for his benefit.

But we should not even speak of this. If I had not had the imprudence to tell Geoffrey, who was eager to share it further—”

“So you blame Geoffrey for telling me?” Lady Matlock enquired.

“I do, Aunt. Furthermore, I blame myself for talking about it in the first place. It is a personal matter of Bingley’s, and I do not like it that you all seem to be amused by it.

I strongly believe we should not speak of it any longer, nor interfere in any way.

Since Bingley and Miss Bennet have now met again, it should be entirely their decision and their affair. ”

His serious statement caused Lady Matlock to frown, but Lord Matlock replied, “I fully agree with Darcy. We should leave them be to do as they please.”

“Mrs. Gardiner is such a pleasant lady,” Georgiana interjected, changing the subject. “I enjoyed talking to her exceedingly.”

“So did I,” Lady Matlock agreed. “She is surprisingly well educated, very fashionable, and speaks easily about various subjects, from the theatre and the opera to politics. And her nieces are pleasant girls too. I have to say, even though the eldest Miss Bennet is one of the most beautiful young women I have met, I quite favour Miss Elizabeth. She is clever, witty, spirited, and not afraid to express her opinion on any matter.”

“So do I,” Darcy replied absently, then his heart stopped at the stupidity of his own words. He quickly added, “I spent a few days at Netherfield in Miss Elizabeth’s company, and I agree with my aunt’s description of her.”

“Miss Elizabeth sounds like just my kind of lady!” Colonel Fitzwilliam said. “I prefer spirited young women. I must find a way to meet her.”

“Very few ladies are not your kind of lady, Geoffrey.” Lady Matlock rolled her eyes. “You should decide on one and finally marry, as you are not so young any longer. Your father already had two children at your age. But Miss Elizabeth lacks something that is very important for you — money.”

“How unfortunate,” the colonel replied. Both he and Lady Matlock spoke in jest,

which irritated Darcy.

“Darcy, there is something that intrigued me,” Lady Matlock continued. “I received the impression that Miss Elizabeth is not very fond of you. At some point, she mentioned that you were more enemies than friends and that you are her severest critic.”

“Yes, well...as you said, Miss Elizabeth has a tendency to tease and sometimes say things she does not truly believe.”

“So you are calling her a liar?”

“Not at all. Only a tease. You should not take her words in earnest.”

“I am not sure about that. She seemed very serious. She also mentioned your dislike of dancing, which is not a surprise to anyone in London and apparently in Derbyshire either.”

“Just to prove you wrong, I shall mention that I did dance with Miss Elizabeth at a ball Bingley hosted.”

“Did you? How lovely. I might have been wrong, then. However, even when she said it was unlikely that you would call on the Gardiners, there was a trace of irony in her voice. I only tell you all this because I was intrigued and amused. This is the first time I have seen a young woman who is not struggling to gain your attention and to flatter you.”

“Dear aunt, we both know that statement is an exaggeration,” Darcy replied, and the Matlocks laughed again.

“So, will you go with Bingley tomorrow?” the colonel asked. “If you do, I should like

to go too. For no other reason than mere curiosity.”

“I probably will. Bingley needs some support,” Darcy replied.

His answer surprised even himself; it was as if his mind had made a decision against his will.

“However, please do not take offence, Cousin, but I believe it would be better if we are not too many at this particular call. I noticed Miss Bennet was quite distressed when she saw Bingley. Perhaps we should allow her a little time to compose herself. And you may call with Bingley the next time.”

“That is a sensible suggestion that I utterly support,” Lady Matlock agreed.

Once he returned home, Darcy had another agitated evening.

The certainty that he would see Elizabeth again the next day was disquieting.

Lady Matlock’s claims about Elizabeth not liking him, even though he had dismissed them at first, troubled him.

Not for a moment had he imagined Elizabeth’s opinion of him could be anything other than good.

What could have prompted her to say they were enemies?

It was amusing how Elizabeth had made a favourable impression on Lady Matlock too.

Her character, her wit, and her mind were worthy of admiration by anyone honest enough to recognise worthiness.

Of course his aunt liked Elizabeth, but she would surely disapprove if she knew of Darcy's admiration for her.

And she would surely oppose a possible connection with Elizabeth and her family.

It was a matter that Darcy had reflected upon countless times.

Elizabeth herself was everything he had ever wanted in a woman.

She would certainly suit him as his wife.

But her situation in life was an obstacle against her becoming Mrs. Darcy.

It was a position that required more than his admiration and affection; he had to consider his duty and his family's expectations.

The lady he did marry, eventually, would certainly not bring him the joy that he felt at the thought of seeing Elizabeth again the next morning.

"Darcy, I am grateful to you for coming with me," Bingley said in the carriage. "I am nervous, and I know I shall behave like a fool. I cannot believe I shall see Miss Bennet again."

I cannot either, Darcy thought to himself. "Bingley, may I ask — did you tell your sisters about Miss Bennet?"

"I did not. Caroline really brings me to the edge of my patience whenever she hears about the Bennets. But what I find even stranger is that she disapproves of my affection for Miss Bennet but seems to dislike Miss Elizabeth even more, and I do not

know why!”

I do, Darcy thought, recollecting the evening when he had told Miss Bingley about Miss Elizabeth’s fine eyes. That had been another careless imprudence, just as it had been to tell the colonel about Bingley and Miss Bennet.

“There is something you should know, and I believe it is better you find out now, as I expect it will be mentioned during your visit and might anger you.”

“What is it?”

“Well...I have reason to believe that Miss Bennet and her aunt also visited your sisters yesterday, not just Lady Matlock.”

Bingley stared at him in disbelief, then frowned, blinking repeatedly.

“What do you mean? She was in my house? When?”

“As I said, I am not sure whether she was or not. But she might have been. I just wanted to warn you in case you hear about it. It is better to be shocked here in the carriage than in front of Miss Bennet and her relatives.”

“But...how is it possible that you know and I do not? Who told you? Caroline? Do you have a relationship with her?”

“Come now, Bingley, do not be ridiculous. The only reason I speak to your sister is you and our friendship. Were it not for that, I should never be in her company. I apologise for being so bluntly rude, but that is the truth.”

“Then how...?”

“She did inform me that Miss Bennet might call. I confess that, for a while, I was in agreement with your sisters — though for different reasons. I believed that Miss Bennet was not a good match for you. As you already know, I presumed that her feelings did not equal yours.”

“I do know that. And I know you agreed with Caroline and Louisa to keep me away from Netherfield!”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“I cannot deny that. However, I have realised my involvement was unnecessary and, although well meant, more harmful than useful. It was not for me to judge anyone’s feelings.”

“And now? What do you think?”

“I have no reason to change my previous estimation. But I shall refrain from expressing it. I am willing to support you in making your own decision, based on your judgment alone.”

“Thank you. I shall ask Miss Bennet whether she visited Caroline yesterday. If she did, my sister will hear from me. How dare she deceive me in my own house! She has treated me like a fool long enough. That will end today!”

“Bingley, try to compose yourself before we arrive in Gracechurch Street. I dare say it is in your best interest to make a good impression.”

“You are right, of course,” Bingley agreed, while Darcy admitted to himself that he too was concerned with making a good impression.

They reached their destination around noon; the house was a handsome building, placed on an elegant street with a small park across from it. It showed that, whatever business Mr. Gardiner had, it was successful.

They were invited into a lovely drawing room, tastefully furnished.

Mrs. Gardiner waited with her husband and her two nieces.

Darcy's first glance was directed towards Elizabeth, and he could see her surprise.

She certainly had not expected to see him there.

Was she pleased with his presence, or the opposite?

Pleasantries were exchanged and an introduction to Mr. Gardiner performed, then their host invited them to sit.

Unlike the previous day, Bingley returned to his usual self, amiable and voluble, talking all the time.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner proved to be excellent companions, with a great openness for conversation and knowledge in many areas, just as Lady Matlock had claimed.

Elizabeth was mostly as he remembered her from Hertfordshire, and, although he did not speak to her directly, her nearness warmed Darcy until the heat inside him became disturbing.

They talked about Pemberley and Lambton, about Mr. Gardiner's business, and they debated the extraordinary coincidence that had caused their paths to cross with Lady Matlock's.

Despite the fact that Elizabeth's company was delightfully tormenting, Darcy enjoyed his time more than he had expected.

"Mrs. Gardiner, did you happen to visit my sisters yesterday?" Bingley suddenly enquired.

"Yes, we did. Jane wrote to your sister and informed her that we would come."

“Unfortunately, I was not aware of it, as I was not aware of your presence in town until yesterday, when Darcy told me,” Bingley confessed, causing general astonishment.

“Your sisters told us you were busy with Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy, which caused your absence during our call,” Elizabeth answered.

Darcy did not miss her sharp tone, nor Mrs. Gardiner’s reproachful glance.

Elizabeth’s statement irritated Darcy exceedingly.

What did Miss Bingley mean by claiming Bingley was busy with his sister?

Did she suggest there was some sort of arrangement between Bingley and Georgiana?

Surely she would not dare to intimate something so outrageous.

“Despite my close friendship with Bingley, we have only seen each other a few times since we returned from Hertfordshire,” Darcy answered. “As for my sister, she and Bingley have always been friends, but they rarely meet, as they share only a few interests.”

Bingley seemed to have missed the meaning of his sister’s words, but Jane Bennet’s expression of relief was obvious. From her, Darcy looked to Elizabeth, whose eyes wore a glimpse of something he had never seen before.

“I am sure it was some sort of misunderstanding,” Mrs. Gardiner offered. “We are happy and honoured to have you both here, gentlemen.”

“And it is good that you have such an honest and loyal friend as Mr. Darcy, who tells you the truth, Mr. Bingley,” Elizabeth said. There was a smile in her eyes and on her

lips, which confused Darcy. Was she was being serious or teasing him again?

Boldly, and perhaps even improperly, he replied, “I am glad I have your approval, Miss Elizabeth, although you consider us to be more enemies than friends. This makes your opinion even more valuable.”

The answer evidently disconcerted Elizabeth, and she looked at him, puzzled. Then, Bingley asked a question, and the conversation took another turn. An hour later, the guests took their leave with mutual hopes to meet again but without any fixed plans.

Bingley chatted all the way back to Mayfair, expressing his delight in seeing Jane Bennet, his anger towards his sisters, and the confrontation he planned to have with them.

Again, Darcy took his share of the blame; he admitted the short visit had given him enough reason to assume his estimation of Miss Bennet’s feelings had been hasty and inaccurate.

Bingley, however, seemed determined to quarrel with his sisters, and no argument seemed to calm him.

“I am considering hosting a dinner and inviting the Gardiners. And Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth. I shall send both Caroline and Louisa away if they do not behave. Would you come, Darcy? And perhaps Miss Darcy too?”

No, I should not be close to Elizabeth again so soon, Darcy’s reason screamed in his mind.

“If you wish it, I shall, Bingley. I would only ask that you take slower steps and consider the effect of your actions on yourself and Miss Bennet.”

“I am considering everything very carefully, Darcy. So, I shall count on you to come to dinner,” Bingley said hastily, proving he had hardly listened to Darcy’s advice.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley calling in Gracechurch Street was an event hard to believe even for Mr. Gardiner, who was a pragmatic man and not easily impressed.

“My dear Jane, I am so glad to see you happy,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “What a joy it has been to have Mr. Bingley here. He seemed to be everything we expected, and his admiration for you cannot be denied!”

“Oh...I am not sure about that, Aunt. But I was happy to see him. At least I know he was not aware of my being in London and was not avoiding me on purpose.”

“I never trusted Miss Bingley’s words, and her claim about Mr. Bingley being busy with Miss Darcy is as evil as it is ridiculous! Mr. Darcy seemed quite angry when I mentioned it.”

“It is no wonder. Miss Darcy is still very young and certainly not in search of a suitor,” Mrs. Gardiner added. “And Mr. Bingley’s interest seems to lie in one direction only!”

Jane blushed, smiled, and said nothing else.

“I hope Mr. Bingley will confront his sisters and rebuke them as they deserve. Which makes me admit that I was pleasantly surprised by Mr. Darcy’s willingness to reveal the truth to his friend.”

“Mr. Darcy has always been a loyal friend. Mr. Bingley has said that often,” Jane whispered.

“Speaking of that, I am still bewildered. To take tea with Lady Matlock and have Mr. Darcy calling at my house all in one week is something I would have never imagined,” Mrs. Gardiner said.

“I cannot even argue with you, my dear,” Mr. Gardiner said. “Even if Mr. Bingley informed you he would call, I did not expect Mr. Darcy.”

“Neither did I, my dear. What surprised me even more is that, while we all expected Mr. Bingley to be amiable, Mr. Darcy was the same, although Lizzy made us believe the opposite.”

“There is something distant and perhaps haughty in Mr. Darcy, especially compared to Mr. Bingley,” Mr. Gardiner added. “However, I agree that his behaviour was beyond reproach, even though he had no reason to be friendly with us.”

“Lizzy dear, I cannot imagine why Mr. Darcy made such a poor impression on you. Except that he refused to dance with you and that he disadvantaged your favourite, Mr. Wickham.”

Mrs. Gardiner’s irony touched Elizabeth, especially since she was equally puzzled by Mr. Darcy’s improved manners.

His behaviour was indeed beyond reproach; furthermore, he had apparently informed Mr. Bingley about Jane’s presence in town and had come to support him on his call, which could have only one purpose: a reconnection with Jane.

“I am as surprised as you, Aunt. I have never seen Mr. Darcy act as friendly as he did today.”

“You told Lady Matlock yesterday that you were more enemies than friends, Lizzy. And today, Mr. Darcy repeated your words — with apparent displeasure.”

“I said nothing but the truth, based on what I saw every time I was in Mr. Darcy’s company. He always looked at me to find fault. It made me most uncomfortable.”

“Well, something changed his mind.”

“Possibly, Aunt. However, as much as I appreciate his friendliness, it does not compensate for the cruelty he showed to his childhood friend Mr. Wickham, and it certainly does not justify his disregard of his father’s dying wish.”

“And may I ask how you know all this, Lizzy?” Mr. Gardiner enquired.

“Mr. Wickham related it to me. I told my aunt the entire story.”

“Do you have any other details, besides Mr. Wickham’s narration?”

“I do not, but it is enough for me. Mr. Darcy may defend himself if he wishes to!”

“Have you asked Mr. Darcy?” Mr. Gardiner continued, puzzling Elizabeth.

“Asked him? How could I do that? Mr. Darcy hardly spoke to me at all in Hertfordshire. There was no opportunity for me to discuss something so delicate with him.”

“How interesting. Then how did it happen that Mr. Wickham found the opportunity to reveal something so delicate and so personal to a stranger he had only just met? He knew nothing about your true character. Why would he confide such an intimate matter to you? Both I and your father find this story highly unlikely.”

Mr. Gardiner’s voice was light and his countenance relaxed, but his enquiries vexed Elizabeth. She had never taken the trouble to ask herself such questions, and being forced to answer them now made her feel uncomfortable.

“To me, the only important thing is Mr. Darcy’s behaviour towards me and my family,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “The Darcys are among the most illustrious families in Derbyshire, and I have never heard anything to question their honour.”

“And yet, Mr. Darcy left Mr. Wickham a living, which his son refused to give.”

“If there was a clear will, Mr. Darcy would have been obliged to follow it. So there must be something more behind this refusal,” Mr. Gardiner interjected.

“Besides,” Mrs. Gardner concluded, “if there was some misunderstanding between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham, it is entirely their business and wholly unconnected to us. Unless you, Lizzy, have some particular interest in Mr. Wickham.”

“I have no other interest except compassion for a friend’s misfortunes.”

“I understand your reluctance in asking Mr. Darcy, Lizzy. I would not do it either. But there is something else I can do,” Mrs. Gardiner said.

“I may write to my cousin in Lambton and ask whether he knows anything about Mr. Wickham. He might know something of interest. In fact, I shall do that immediately.”

Elizabeth had no reason to oppose it. Her uncle and aunt’s arguments were common sense.

Indeed, she had trusted Mr. Wickham implicitly, from the first time they had spoken.

And he had treated her with a confidence that was not justified since he knew nothing of her.

She could well be a slanderer and betray the secret with no remorse.

As she reflected on this, Elizabeth realised that Mr. Wickham himself had ceased to keep the secret of his past dealings as soon as Mr. Darcy left Hertfordshire.

He had come to Longbourn and told his story, and half of Meryton as well as most of the officers were aware of it.

In the end, Elizabeth felt grateful for Mrs. Gardiner's idea. Finding out some information from Lambton might be the missing link to proving whether she had misplaced her trust or not.

The day of Mr. Bingley's visit seemed to bring Jane back to life, melting Elizabeth's heart. It was not clear yet what had happened that had kept Mr. Bingley away from Jane for almost a month; however, during their reunion, his feelings were quite apparent.

Jane refused to admit more than a friendship with Mr. Bingley, but Elizabeth knew it was due to her fear that she might hope too much — as had happened before.

However, that changed the next day when they received an invitation for dinner from the gentleman.

Mrs. Gardiner read it out, and Jane seemed to forget to breathe as she listened.

“It says Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy will attend, as well as Colonel Fitzwilliam. He did not mention anything about his sisters. He asked whether tomorrow would be convenient for us.”

“I believe so,” Mr. Gardiner responded. “Do you think the girls are feeling well enough to do without you for an entire evening?”

“I am sure they are. Neither has a fever any longer, and besides their governess, Janey and Thomas will be here all night. The children are as accustomed to them as they are to us. And they might enjoy it more because they are less likely to be disciplined.”

“Then it is settled. I shall write to Mr. Bingley and accept. I must say — since Lizzy and Jane arrived, there have been a succession of quite remarkable events,” Mr. Gardiner said.

“True, my dear. A few days ago, we were travelling down Grosvenor Street to catch a glimpse of Mr. Bingley’s house, and now we are invited to dine there. And with Mr. and Miss Darcy!”

“Your anticipation is so amusing,” Elizabeth interjected. “I have never seen any of you so impressed by an invitation.”

“You may tease us as much as you want, Lizzy. We are not just impressed,” Mrs. Gardiner responded, “we are also delighted and pleased with how things seem to have progressed.”

Elizabeth could not argue with that. They had arrived in town with a heartbroken Jane, suffering from the loss and betrayal of the man to whom she had given her heart.

Just a few days later, there she was, blooming with happiness.

Whatever had led to such an outcome, she was grateful for it.

And apparently, if Mr. Darcy had played a part in Mr. Bingley’s separation from Jane, he had contributed to their reunion too.

After some intense preparation, the party from Gracechurch Street arrived at the

Bingleys' residence in the late afternoon and were warmly welcomed by their host.

Mr. Bingley came to the door to greet them, proving he expected them. In the drawing room were Mr. and Miss Darcy with another gentleman, as well as Miss Bingley and the Hursts. The introductions were performed, and Colonel Fitzwilliam immediately became a favourite due to his amiable manners.

His was a little older than Mr. Darcy and perhaps not so handsome, Elizabeth thought, but from his smile to his tone of voice, everything about him was likable.

"My mother has spoken so much about you since you met that I have looked forward to meeting you," the colonel said. "This dinner is the perfect opportunity."

The conversation developed easily, with the Bingley sisters contributing little to it. Mr. Darcy was not particularly vocal either — as usual — but he seemed to enjoy the company and interjected from time to time.

The meal was served; the table was large enough to accommodate the whole party but not so large as to limit conversation, so anyone could easily speak to everyone.

"So, Miss Elizabeth, I understand you were the one who suggested the walk that took you in front of my mother's coach," the colonel said. "I am not sure I know many young ladies who favour walking over the comfort of a carriage."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“Miss Eliza has some peculiar tastes,” Miss Bingley said. “She favours reading over playing cards even at parties, and her favourite activity is walking, regardless of the weather or the distance — even if it is over three miles! It can easily be said that she is a great reader and a great walker.”

“I am not sure whether your remark was meant as praise or criticism, Miss Bingley, so I shall accept both. I see no reason to apologise for my preferences,” Elizabeth replied.

“As for the particular instance you refer to, I did walk three miles on a muddy road to see my sister who was ill at Netherfield.” Elizabeth felt annoyed already; and she still held a grudge against the two dishonest sisters.

“You certainly have no reason to apologise, Miss Bennet,” she heard Darcy interjecting.

Surprised, she looked at him, and he continued, “I have always considered the improvement of one’s mind through extensive reading to be a quality in a man or a woman.

And concern and loyalty towards a sister is certainly something admirable. ”

His serious tone bewildered Elizabeth as much as his favourable words.

She remembered his statement about improving one’s mind from one evening at Netherfield.

And the mention of loyalty for a family member could have been a clear hint at Miss Bingley's dishonesty, so she felt induced to support him.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy. We have not always been in agreement, but I daresay, in essentials we value similar things. With some exceptions, perhaps, regarding certain circumstances or certain people. But each of us have our moments of prejudice and misjudgement."

Mr. Darcy stared at her, a frown between his eyes, in an apparent effort to understand her meaning. She was referring both to his involvement in Mr. Bingley's departure as well to Mr. Wickham's situation, but surely he could not guess that.

"I cannot either agree or disagree with your statement, Miss Elizabeth, as I am not sure how well I comprehend it. I hope my statement was as clear as I intended it to be."

"My brother and I walk often when we are at Pemberley," Miss Darcy said.

"I have said it many times — Pemberley is probably the most beautiful place I have ever seen. However, one would probably need weeks to see it on foot," Mrs. Gardiner said.

"That is true." Miss Darcy smiled.

"I remember your father often riding from Pemberley to Lambton. We, as children, always recognised him from afar. His posture was unmistakable. He always rode large, frightening horses. I remember Lady Anne also riding, but that was long ago."

"My mother was an excellent rider, but she was too weak for exercise in her last years," Mr. Darcy answered. "My sister is an excellent rider too," he added with apparent pride.

“That is because I learnt from you when I was not even four,” the girl answered with an affectionate look at her brother.

“The truth is Georgiana is excellent at anything she attempts,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said, causing Miss Darcy to blush. “So is Darcy, except that he is not as kind as she is,” he jested. Mr. Darcy smiled, but it looked a little forced.

“My sister Jane is a good rider too,” Elizabeth said. “I also learnt to ride, but for some reason, horses always intimidated me. I find that walking suits me best.”

“I am sure you would enjoy riding too, Miss Elizabeth, if you gave it a try,” Mr. Darcy said with another smile that puzzled Elizabeth.

“I might, but my father has only two horses, and they are usually needed on the farm. So I have few chances to practise for my own amusement.”

“Having only two horses might be a great inconvenience,” Mrs. Hurst uttered.

“It depends,” Elizabeth replied calmly, even though she noticed the hidden offence. “It seems walking is a good choice for me. Of all my walks — which have been quite numerous — the one in Hyde Park was certainly the most fortunate.”

“My mother said so too,” the colonel responded in the same light tone.

“I agree!” Mr. Bingley interjected. “Without that meeting, I wonder when I would have discovered that Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth were in town!” he added with a meaningful glare at his sisters.

“You have a lovely house here,” Mrs. Gardiner declared in an obvious attempt to change the subject. “We were delighted to receive your invitation.”

“I am exceedingly happy to have you here, Mrs. Gardiner. I am only sorry that I was not at home to greet you properly on your previous visit,” he said, and another glare at his sisters followed.

Elizabeth enjoyed her time exceedingly. She could not help being satisfied by Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst’s obvious discomfort, in opposition to Jane and Mr. Bingley’s joy.

She spoke extensively with the colonel and Miss Darcy, but Mr. Darcy puzzled her.

He looked at her intently — as he had done many times in the past — but there was something different in his countenance and in his eyes.

His manners towards her relatives were friendly and unassuming, as she had never seen from him before.

She also observed his tender concern for his sister, which revealed the affectionate bond between the two — and his amusing exchanges with his cousin, who did not hesitate to tease him at times.

With the disdain and grudge she held against him assuming he had separated Mr. Bingley and Jane, Elizabeth found herself unsure of what to think of Mr. Darcy’s true character.

Everyone else seemed to have a favourable opinion of him, but she could not so easily forgive his selfish and cruel actions that had condemned Mr. Wickham to poverty, even if Mr. Darcy might have some reason of his own for his behaviour.

She felt more and more tempted to ask him about that story — an impulse she tried to dismiss.

The pleasant dinner party ended quite late, and it would have probably lasted longer if the guests had not had a long ride home.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

The movement of the carriage increased both Darcy's headache and his anxiety. Christmas was only two days away, and it was the last opportunity for visits to those who were not family.

"Darcy, I am so glad you agreed to come with me again! You are truly a good friend," Bingley said.

"Again, you praise me too generously. I hope my presence will not be an intrusion. We both know that you are expected with pleasure in Gracechurch Street, but I am just your companion."

"I disagree. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner seemed thrilled each time they saw you. And even Miss Elizabeth did not look displeased. I am relieved your disagreements seem to be over."

"Do you think Miss Elizabeth was displeased to see me before?"

"When we were in Hertfordshire, you were not friends. You disapproved of the entire Bennet family."

"My manners were not appropriate most of the time. Now, I have a personal reason to visit the Gardiners again. I wish to speak to Miss Elizabeth about a delicate matter that I believe needs to be clarified. I hope she will agree to talk to me."

"She probably will, if not out of curiosity then due to politeness. But I never imagined you would have a delicate matter to discuss with Miss Elizabeth."

“This particular matter has become urgent lately, after thorough reflection. She is in possession of some incorrect information that might lead her to make a wrong impression.”

“I see... I honestly cannot imagine what you are talking about, but I doubt you will tell me even if I enquire.”

“It is not a secret. The Bennets seem to appreciate George Wickham, who is welcomed by their family. He is a dishonourable man with an inclination towards deception, lies, and nefarious schemes, all for the purpose of gaining money. Even worse, he is not a man to be trusted near young women.”

Bingley looked at him, bewildered. “I would never have guessed Wickham would be the subject. I remember Miss Bennet asking me about him when he first came to Meryton, but I only told her that he had treated you with ingratitude. It is all I knew.”

“Wickham is not worth the breath used in talking about him. But he is very skilful at insinuating himself among honourable people and causing all sorts of problems.”

“The youngest Miss Bennets seemed charmed by the man, and their mother seemed to encourage them.”

“Yes, that is precisely my concern.”

Darcy had taken the bold — and perhaps improper — decision of talking to Elizabeth and her relatives about Wickham after the dinner at Bingley’s.

The party had been pleasant, but there had been some small hints that had proved that Elizabeth still held Wickham in esteem.

If Wickham caused her family problems, Elizabeth would never forgive him for not

warning her.

That realisation had come late in the night, together with another one, much more important and consequential to his present and future.

Watching Elizabeth chatting so easily with his sister and his cousin, as she had done with his aunt, made him wonder why he had considered she was not suited to be the future Mrs. Darcy.

It was not only his admiration and overwhelming passion for her that caused him to question his previous opinion, but the fact that her worthiness was noticed by everyone with reasonable judgment.

And her ability to fight anyone willing to attack her, as Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst did.

He had spent hours imagining Elizabeth at his side at Pemberley, bringing laughter and joy to a house that entirely lacked it.

The more he thought about it, the more the image became clearer, less impossible.

He knew such a decision would not be easily accepted though.

Even Lady Matlock would oppose it and would surely consider Elizabeth's family and connections to be of lesser importance than her charm in such circumstances.

And to Lady Matlock, Mrs. Gardiner, the cousin of the innkeeper in Lambton, would not be as charming a connection of Mrs. Darcy's as she was of Miss Elizabeth Bennet's.

And Lady Catherine de Bourgh would certainly cause a scandal if he chose the

daughter of a small country gentleman over Anne.

All those points Darcy considered, then dismissed.

He only hoped that Georgiana would not be disappointed and that his mother would approve of Elizabeth.

He felt — with all his heart — that she was the woman who could complete him, the woman who would make him happy.

Just as his mother had made him promise a long time ago.

He was also convinced that Elizabeth might help Georgiana grow her confidence and find her own happiness later in life.

As his mind stopped fighting his heart, a strength grew inside him, ready to defeat the weakness of his previous doubts and overcome any obstacles.

Any obstacles but one. Elizabeth's feelings for him, he now had his proof, were quite dissimilar to his, and her opinion of him was far from as high as he had assumed in those two months he had spent at Netherfield.

For many weeks, he had fought against his feelings, his desire to have Elizabeth. Now, when he had decided such a fight was unnecessary, he must fight for Elizabeth's feelings. He must fight for what he had assumed he already had but had been utterly mistaken.

The first step was to talk to Elizabeth about Wickham and to trust her judgment in deciding where the truth lay.

“Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, you are most welcome,” Mrs. Gardiner said. The drawing room was empty, but soon, Elizabeth, Miss Bennet, and Mr. Gardiner joined them.

The conversation began easily, as it did among friends.

Darcy was anxious, thinking of how to broach the subject, watching the others in agitated silence.

He noticed Elizabeth look at him a few times, probably noticing his restlessness.

He understood that he could not simply ask for a private discussion with her, or even one with her uncle present. It would simply be impolite.

“Mr. Darcy, may I offer you a drink,” Mr. Gardiner asked.

“Yes, thank you. No...I mean...forgive me, I do not wish to interrupt you. But when it is possible, I would like to talk about a particular matter...a very delicate one.”

“Oh?”

Four pairs of eyes turned to look at him, puzzled.

“I would not have mentioned it if it were not absolutely necessary. It involves a common acquaintance. Mr. George Wickham.”

At that, Elizabeth’s countenance changed, and a frown appeared between her eyebrows. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner looked at each other with confusion, then at him.

“Strangely, we were talking about the same subject the other day,” Mrs. Gardiner replied.

“Were you? Are there any questions you have that I might answer? I am well aware that Wickham spread rumours about me in Hertfordshire, and I am quite certain they are based on a core truth surrounded by falsehoods. He has done the same many times in the last five years, everywhere he goes and to anyone willing to listen to him.”

“In the five years since your father died, I assume? When he expected to receive a living that was refused him?” Elizabeth enquired in an accusing voice.

He expected her reply, and it did not even vex him.

“Yes, after my father died, Mr. Wickham was given one thousand pounds, and on that occasion, he informed me that the church was not his calling after all, and he preferred to study the law. For that, he requested and received another three thousand pounds.”

He paused, looking at Elizabeth, whose astonishment seemed complete.

“I assume Wickham did not mention that part,” he continued.

“When the living became vacant, he came to claim it. I would have perhaps given it to him if he had shown any honour or morality in his actions before that moment. However, he in fact wasted the entire sum in activities I shall not mention, disregarding any sort of study or effort for his future.”

He paused again, sipping from his glass. There was much more to add to the story, but it was too painful to be discussed.

“That was not the end of his claims, though, as he continued to apply to me for other financial support. Some pleas were granted, many refused. So he usually employs his time seeking revenge for those refusals through false claims that hurt my reputation.”

“Oh dear! This is horrible!” Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed.

“Of course, I am well aware that none of you have any reason to trust my words over Wickham’s, so I have brought some papers with me, signed by him, which prove some of our past dealings. You may study them.”

“That is not necessary, Mr. Darcy. We do not doubt your words,” Mr. Gardiner replied.

“I have wondered about a man so willing to relate his misfortunes to strangers. Mr. Wickham’s story was unconvincing to me, as well as to my brother Bennet.

We assumed that the part about the living was true, but also that you had a reason for your actions.

After all, it was nothing to you who acquired the living, and it could well be him as not, unless something serious prevented it. ”

Elizabeth had become pale and silent and averted her eyes from Darcy.

“I shall leave the papers here in case Miss Elizabeth wishes to look at them,” he repeated.

“That will not be necessary, sir,” she answered. “I was certainly not clever enough to wonder about Mr. Wickham’s story, as my uncle and my father were. If my uncle does not need proof, neither do I.”

Her voice was as altered as her expression. She was uncomfortable, pale, and restless. Eventually, she stood up and said, “Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, please excuse me, I do not feel well. I might have a fever. Perhaps I have caught my cousins’ cold. I beg your forgiveness. I must leave you now.”

She left, and Darcy watched her walk away with a tightness in his chest. She seemed disappointed, and hurt, causing him distress and jealousy.

Was she upset to learn the truth? Did she have romantic feelings for that scoundrel?

Was she angry with Darcy for revealing the truth in front of her family?

“Mr. Gardiner, since you mentioned Mr. Bennet was reluctant to believe Wickham, I shall take the liberty of kindly suggesting you warn him not to consider that man a friend of the family’s, especially of your young nieces’.

He is simply not to be trusted. I apologise if my suggestion is presumptuous, but I sadly know the man better than I would like to. ”

“Your advice is greatly appreciated and will be considered, Mr. Darcy, I assure you.”

For the rest of the visit, Bingley and Miss Bennet, together with the Gardiners, continued the conversation, but Darcy could not gather himself enough to even feign a good disposition. He barely spoke at all, thinking of Elizabeth, fearing he had done more harm than good.

They finally left, and the entire drive back to Mayfair, Darcy’s state only became worse and remained the same the entire evening and through the agitated night that followed.

After much reflection, at dawn, Darcy reached a moment when he ceased the struggle. He had done what he believed to be honest and needed. If Elizabeth felt harmed or offended by his gesture, there was nothing he could do. He could apologise for harming her, but not for speaking the truth.

With his mind and his body still exhausted, Darcy woke up and was preparing for

breakfast when a servant entered with a letter.

He looked at it and did not recognise the handwriting, so he opened it, intrigued. When he glanced at the signature, he began to read with his heart pounding.

Mr. Darcy,

I am writing this letter with my uncle and aunt's permission. I could not wait any longer before I apologised for my response and sudden departure yesterday.

As you may have guessed, your confession affected me; I was equally astonished, upset, and especially mortified by my own foolishness and credulity.

My common sense should have warned me against someone who speaks openly about his past to a complete stranger. But either I do not have common sense, or something induced me not to use it.

I thank you for taking the trouble of telling us the truth.

I appreciate your effort, and I am sorry for my ill judgment and for everything unfair I have said to you on this matter.

This includes our discussion at the Netherfield ball, which probably gave you the chance to laugh at my silliness — and deservedly so.

I shall apologise in person, too, as soon as the opportunity arises.

Please know that my uncle wrote to my father last evening, as you advised him.

Best regards

E. Bennet

Darcy read the letter first with curiosity, then with emotion, and in the end with a large smile on his face. A young lady writing to a single man was breaking the rules of decorum, yet she had deliberately done it for him.

Perhaps there was hope, after all.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“Brother, Aunt asked me why we are not dining with them on Christmas Day,” Georgiana said.

“Would you like to go? I know I am poor company,” Darcy replied.

“You are teasing me now, Brother. I prefer your company to any other. And we have always had Christmas dinner at home.”

“Please think on it, my dear, and we shall do as you please. Do you have plans for today?”

“No...we shall decorate the house for Christmas — I believe the servants anticipate it as much as I.”

“Has Mrs. Annesley left yet?”

“Yes. She will spend the next few days with her sister’s family and will return on the twenty-seventh. Did you have a pleasant time at the Gardiners’ yesterday? You looked tired last night.”

“I was a little tired, but I am well now. Yes, it was pleasant, as always. My dear, there is something of great importance that I wish to discuss with you. Something that a man of my age should not discuss with his young sister, but I trust you and value your opinion. In truth, your opinion is the only one that matters to me.”

“Oh...thank you for your trust, Brother! You are always so kind to me. What is it?”

“My dear, you might be surprised to hear this but...I admire Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Oh? Truly? I believed that might be the case since you wrote to me of her in your letters from Netherfield. But you mentioned nothing more once you returned.”

“You did not expect that, I am sure.”

“I did not, because I kept hearing that you two had so many disagreements...”

“We did, and most were my fault. When we first met, my behaviour towards her and her family was arrogant, even offensive.”

“I am sure it was not so bad...”

“It was. Our introduction was at an assembly in Meryton. Bingley insisted on me dancing with her, and I said she was tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me.”

Georgiana stared at him in such astonishment that Darcy laughed.

“Yes, and the worst part is that I believe she heard me...”

“Oh dear!”

“There were more other instances that induced her to have a very poor opinion of me, and deservedly so.”

“I am sorry to hear that. Is that why she said you were more enemies than friends?”

“Very likely...”

“But Brother, may I ask...you admire her in what way?”

He hesitated a moment, looking at his young sister who was still a child yet.

“I admire her in every way. She has a bright mind, is well educated, determined, spirited, has a strong character and a great sense of loyalty to those she loves. She is everything a woman should be.”

“Oh...I see...”

“What do you think?”

“Think?”

“Yes. What I mean is that I would like to pursue her. I would like to show her my admiration and try to gain her good opinion.”

“This is what I fear...do you know what her opinion of you is? Forgive me for asking that, but I have seen no sign of affection on her part...”

“You are very perceptive. Her opinion of me is rather low, though I was so arrogant that for a while I assumed the opposite. I shall try to improve that, and if I succeed, I might take a further step.”

“You mean...”

“My dear, I strongly believe that Miss Elizabeth could be perfectly suited to be my wife. I am sure she could be a loving sister to you and an excellent Mrs. Darcy.”

“Oh...but...what if...?”

“What is it? Please speak your mind. I truly wish to have your honest opinion. Do you disagree that she has all these qualities?”

“I do not doubt that. In truth, I hardly know her, but I trust your judgment. My only concern is — what if she accepts your pursuit, even if her feelings are not the same as yours? You are an excellent man, and your situation in life is impressive to everyone, even those with fortune and connections... What if...? Even you said that Mrs. Bennet is desperate to find good husbands for her daughters.”

“I understand your concern. It is fair and wise. I do not suspect either of the eldest Miss Bennets of being a fortune hunter. I was wrong when I judged Miss Jane Bennet, but Miss Elizabeth seems too obstinate to be convinced to do anything against her will. Besides, I promise I shall not make any hasty decisions. I shall take my time to get to know her and to allow her time to know me. I hope we shall form a friendship that will develop into something more.”

“That is very wise indeed.”

“My dear, I have shared my intentions with nobody else yet, not even Geoffrey. I would like to keep the secret for a while.”

“I thank you for confiding in me, Brother. I pray that you will be very happy — as happy as you deserve. There is no better man than you, and I hope Miss Bennet will see that.”

Georgiana left, and for a while, Darcy was alone. He felt relieved after the conversation with his sister. At least she was warned and would know that her opinion mattered. Her concerns were also valid and proved that wisdom was not a matter of age.

During breakfast, he could see his sister was distracted and assumed he knew the

reason. After a while, she finally spoke.

“Brother, I was thinking...we both wish to know Miss Bennet as well as possible. What if we invite them all to dine with us on Christmas Day? We shall be alone, and I wonder if they have any other engagements.”

“Christmas Day? The day after tomorrow? My dear, the occasion is too important to send an invitation at such short notice. They must have plans, but if they do not, it must be quite an effort to travel from their home to ours. They cannot leave the children at home on such a day, and they have been ill recently, so they need to rest. As much as I would enjoy such a party, I am afraid it is not possible.”

“You are right, of course. How silly of me. I shall think of something else.”

The girl’s disappointment was similar to Darcy’s. Such an evening would have been wonderful if it were not impossible.

An hour later, Darcy was alone in his library when Bingley burst in. He looked agitated, with a large smile on his face.

“Darcy, look what I just received!”

“I see a letter. It must be something special to have put you in such an excellent mood.”

“It is from Mr. Gardiner! Do you remember when he asked what plans I had for Christmas?”

“I do not. I was slightly distracted yesterday.”

“Yes, I noticed. So I said I had no particular plans. And he has just written to me to

invite me to join them for dinner the day after tomorrow! On Christmas Day! Surely there can be only one meaning behind this: that they consider me part of the family! And surely Miss Bennet cannot be a stranger to the invitation! They wish me to dine with them on a special evening! Can you believe it?"

"I can, and I agree with your assumption about the meaning behind it. Will you go? Your response will also indicate to them whether you wish to be part of the family."

"Of course I shall go! On my own. Without my sisters! And after that, I must find a moment alone with Miss Bennet. I am ready to make a decision since I have thought about it countless times. I see no reason to delay proposing! It is what I have wished and prayed for since the 26th of November, at the ball."

He paused, looking at Darcy, then continued.

"Do I have your blessing?"

"Do you need my blessing?"

"I do not, but I would like to have it."

"If you are certain of your decision, I heartily support you."

"I am glad to hear that! Oh, here is the letter. Mr. Gardiner included you and Miss Darcy in the invitation, but he assumed you already have plans."

"Did he? May I see the letter?" Darcy asked, surprised, reading with curiosity.

"Indeed, the invitation is clear. Allow me a moment to speak to Georgiana. We do not have any particular plans, so we might attend after all," he said with a strange sense of joy.

He overlooked the fact that he had already refused the invitation from the Matlocks.

It felt more exhilarating to dine in Gracechurch Street than in Park Lane.

The house was beautifully decorated, with holly, hawthorn, rosemary, a few Christmas roses, and even a few sprigs of mistletoe. The dinner table was rich and a little crowded, filled with so much joy and talking and laughter as Darcy did not remember experiencing in many years.

The Gardiners' children had been shy and intimidated at first, but they needed only a few minutes to become easy and outspoken. They seemed attached to their cousins, especially to Elizabeth. The boys tried to act in a manly way, copying their father.

Darcy was enchanted to see his sister very much at ease and trying to make conversation with Elizabeth. He was also delighted that — as she had promised in her letter — Elizabeth whispered an apology to him, then welcomed him with a smile he had not seen before.

As much as he feared to assume too much, he could not overlook the obvious change in Elizabeth's manners towards him. She was friendly, without doubt.

"I am truly grateful, and I thank the Lord for this lovely reunion," Mrs. Gardiner said sometime later. "Who would believe that an almost accident in Hyde Park would lead to such a wonderful outcome?"

"I must say I am grateful to Darcy for telling me about your presence in town," Bingley added. "If not for him, I might have discovered the truth much later. I might have even left town, as I had several invitations to spend Christmas in the country."

“We are also grateful to Mr. Darcy and must thank him,” Elizabeth replied. Her voice was teasing, but the little smile on her lips and in her eyes was alluring.

“If we are to follow the same logical line, we should be grateful to Miss Elizabeth’s passion for walking, which led you to the near accident,” Darcy added, causing cheers of approval. Elizabeth was still looking at him, and he smiled at her.

“Mama always claimed nothing good would come from my wild habit of taking long walks. I am pleased that she was wrong,” Elizabeth joked.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

After dinner, there was no separation, and — to Darcy's astonishment — Georgiana mentioned she had seen a pianoforte in the corner and suggested some music.

He could not remember another instance when his sister had offered to play, not even with their family.

She always accepted any requests shyly but was reluctant to perform.

Bingley supported the request, and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner thanked him.

"I wonder whether Miss Elizabeth or Miss Bennet could accompany me?" the girl suggested.

"Oh, my playing is quite poor," Miss Bennet said. "But Lizzy performs beautifully. I am sure she would be delighted to play with you, Miss Darcy."

"I would indeed be delighted to play with Miss Darcy — and ashamed," Elizabeth said. "Your playing might be poor, Jane, but mine is not much better. And considering all the praise I have heard about Miss Darcy, I am sure she will be appalled to hear me."

"That is certainly not the case," Darcy interjected. "I have had the pleasure of hearing Miss Elizabeth play, and I was far from appalled. I shall not deny my sister's proficiency, but it will certainly not reduce the charm of your playing, Miss Elizabeth."

"Mr. Darcy, your choice of words is truly commendable," Elizabeth responded,

laughing. “You somehow managed to admit I play rather ill without offending me. I see a clear improvement in your wording, sir.”

He knew what she meant and answered, “I am trying to improve, Miss Elizabeth. I am counting on you for an honest critical opinion.”

“Then you will have it, sir. Be warned.”

There was more laughter, and they exchanged a few glances, ignorant of the fact that Georgiana as well as the Gardiners were watching them with either interest or puzzlement.

Georgiana and Elizabeth played and sang together, and just as Elizabeth had estimated, one performance was exquisite and perfect, the other one pleasant and charming.

Both received warm applause and congratulations.

“Mr. Gardiner, Mrs. Gardiner, Georgiana and I were talking earlier today. We would be delighted if you would have dinner with us one day. You may bring the children too, but in such a case, we must make plans for you to stay overnight. We have plenty of rooms to accommodate you all.”

“Dinner would be wonderful, Mr. Darcy. But to stay overnight — we would not dare. Besides, we do not wish to take the children out of the house at the moment, apart from some short walks in the nearest park,” Mrs. Gardiner said.

“You may decide an evening, and we shall gladly attend,” Mr. Gardiner added.

“Then, would December the 28th be convenient for you?” Darcy asked.

“Perfectly.”

The party ended late, close to midnight. The farewells were friendly, even affectionate, and Bingley promised to call again after Boxing Day.

“Upon my word,” Bingley said in the carriage that took them home, “I cannot remember when I last had a more enjoyable Christmas dinner. Perhaps in my childhood.”

Georgiana nodded enthusiastically. “I agree. It was lovely, especially with the children’s company. So much laughter and joy! Did you have a pleasant time, Brother?”

“Exceedingly pleasant,” Darcy answered, and he knew he was smiling.

Boxing Day passed with much agitation in Darcy’s house.

Georgiana loved the joy of giving, and Darcy was happy to see her completing that important and satisfying duty.

He could not help thinking that perhaps next year, Elizabeth might help Georgiana with that particular responsibility.

The more he thought of it, the more that image became clearer and less impossible.

His hopes had grown more as, during the dinner at the Gardiners’, he had noticed Georgiana’s small exchanges with Elizabeth, and afterwards, he had heard his sister favourably talking about her.

On the 27th of December, Colonel Fitzwilliam visited; he was surprised that they had dined at the Gardiners' on Christmas Day.

"My mother will be disappointed when she hears it."

"I hope she will understand. I shall explain it to her."

"You will have to explain it to me, too, as I am confused why you would prefer some new acquaintances over us," the colonel said mostly in jest.

"I believe Bingley is ready to propose to Miss Bennet. And our acquaintance is not so very new. Georgiana loves you all, and she has had countless opportunities to be with your family. She enjoys the company of the Gardiners and the Miss Bennets, and she has had limited chances to spend time with them thus far."

"That, I understand."

"We shall have a dinner party at our house tomorrow. You are welcome to join us, but it will be nothing formal. That is why I did not invite your parents. The dinner will be far below what they are accustomed to."

"That makes sense. I shall gladly come."

While talking to the colonel, Darcy felt guilty and distracted.

He had trusted his cousin with everything, including Georgiana's attempted elopement.

He would like to share his admiration for Elizabeth with him too, but it was all so uncertain yet that he could not decide how much he might say.

That same day, Darcy went to speak to the Matlocks about the dinner in Gracechurch Street and the dinner he was to host. His uncle and aunt deserved as much consideration.

“So Mr. Bingley is ready to find his felicity with Miss Bennet. Against your unwise advice and his sisters’ opposition.”

“Indeed. I have already admitted that my advice to Bingley was unwise and wrong.”

“Good. You know, I have thought about inviting Mr. Bingley, the Gardiners, and their nieces to my New Year party. But they are five people, and places at the table are limited. Besides, I am not sure they would feel comfortable among strange people outside their circle.”

“I have no opinion on the matter, Aunt. The decision is yours. I shall have a small dinner party, which you and Uncle are more than welcome to attend if you wish.”

“We might come. Save two seats for us.”

“I shall,” Darcy answered, slightly surprised by the acceptance.

That evening, Darcy received the visit of a thrilled, smiling, red-faced Bingley, bursting into his library.

“Darcy, you will never guess what I did. I went to Gracechurch Street and asked for a private moment with Jane — Miss Bennet! — and I proposed! I did it! And she accepted me! Can you imagine?”

“I can easily, but I did not expect it to happen so suddenly. You have my heartfelt congratulations, Bingley.”

“Thank you! I just came from there. All is done. Mr. Gardiner and I wrote to Mr. Bennet, asking for his consent. We should have his reply tomorrow. But Mrs. Gardiner said I have no reason for concern. If you only knew how happy Jane was! And she looked beautiful! She cried with joy! I am the happiest man in the world!”

“I am very happy for you, Bingley. Have a seat, and I shall pour you a drink. So by tomorrow night, at dinner, you will likely be a betrothed man.”

“I shall! By the way, did you invite my sisters for dinner?”

“I did not. And if you do not mind, I intend not to. The Matlocks might attend, though.”

“I do not mind. It is your decision. Besides, they will be most displeased to hear about my engagement, so I expect them to be in a poor disposition tomorrow.”

“Then it would be better for them to be allowed some time alone,” Darcy concluded.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

The ride back to Netherfield, which he had left in a hurry two months ago, was difficult and disquieting.

He was to marry Miss Jane Bennet in a fortnight, and since Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were not with him, Darcy agreed to keep him company. Besides Bingley's plea, the reason that induced him to abandon his plans in town was his longing for Elizabeth.

The news that she had left in haste, two days after the dinner party, had affected him deeply.

The hope he had nurtured of being with her had made her departure painful; he had missed her when he had left Netherfield, but her loss had been unbearable this time, now he had accepted his feelings and desires and seen them suddenly shattered.

The dinner party had been a turning point in his life from many points of view.

It was Elizabeth's first visit to his house, which he had hoped was only the first step in her becoming a regular presence there.

It was also an occasion that aroused Colonel Fitzwilliam, Lady Matlock, and Lord Matlock's curiosity.

If his cousin's questions were posed privately, over a drink, his aunt and uncle had openly requested explanations for his apparent sudden partiality towards the Gardiners and their nieces.

It was understandable, as they had all been under the impression that he disapproved of the Bennets and their relatives from Gracechurch Street.

His arrogant behaviour had turned against him and required amends.

“I have already admitted several times that I was wrong in judging Bingley and Miss Bennet, as well as Miss Elizabeth and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner,” Darcy had told his relatives. “I now recognise their worthiness and enjoy their company very much. There is nothing more to say.”

They were dissatisfied with his answer, but indeed there was nothing else to say.

He would have willingly admitted his admiration for Elizabeth, but until he was certain of her feelings, there was no use in exposing her to the judgment and enquiries of his family.

In Hertfordshire, it might be easier for him to find opportunities to speak to her in private.

He was well aware of her pleasure in taking long walks, and he certainly could meet her on such an occasion.

Georgiana, Mrs. Annesley, and the colonel were due to arrive at Netherfield a week later — a week prior to Bingley’s wedding.

At the same time, Miss Bingley and the Hursts were expected, as well as the Gardiners.

Georgiana had wished to visit Hertfordshire too, and he had agreed since the danger of a meeting with Wickham had now passed.

Wickham had left his regiment as suddenly as he had joined it after more news of his character became public.

Apparently, Mrs. Gardiner — being a clever lady — had gained her own information about the man from her relatives in Lambton.

She had found out about Wickham's seductions of young girls, his debts, and his creditors who were still chasing him — and Mrs. Gardiner had immediately passed the information on to the Bennets.

Mr. Bennet had been so angry that, besides forbidding Wickham's presence near his family — he had shared the knowledge with others in Meryton, including Colonel Forster.

A confrontation had followed, which proved that Wickham had already run up many debts with his fellow officers and some with shops in Meryton.

Consequently, Wickham had left, intending to leave the country.

Of course, Wickham's claimed intentions were rarely true; Darcy was well aware that, if Wickham truly wished to travel abroad, he would approach him and ask for money.

Darcy would gladly purchase him a ticket on a ship bound for a far-off land, though he doubted Wickham could live honourably in a foreign country without support, since he was not capable of doing that in a place where he had all the support he needed.

Darcy arrived in Meryton on a cold, cloudy afternoon; there were few people on the streets, so he saw no acquaintances and continued his journey.

He reached Netherfield before dinner and was welcomed by an exuberant Bingley.

Strangely enough, Netherfield gave Darcy a warm feeling of family — of home.

The first thing he recollected was the time he had spent there with Elizabeth, both during her stay and at the ball.

His interpretation of those recollections was now different — a more humble and more realistic one but still warm and thrilling.

The following day, after breakfast, Darcy visited Longbourn for the first time, calling on the family he had criticised and avoided so many times in the past.

He was received politely yet coldly, as he knew he deserved, by everyone except Miss Jane Bennet, who greeted him warmly.

And except for Elizabeth, who looked at him with an expression of heartfelt delight, which was impossible to miss and which brought a glimmer of joy to her pretty eyes and a smile to her lips.

“Mr. Darcy! What a pleasure to have you here, sir!”

“I am delighted to be here, Miss Elizabeth. Exceedingly delighted,” he admitted and noticed a trace of red on her cheeks.

“Miss Darcy is in good health, I hope? And the colonel? Lord and Lady Matlock?”

“Everyone is well, thank you. My sister and cousin will arrive next week. They look forward to being here too.”

“Oh! The colonel is the son of the earl? And your sister? Will they come here? I just

realised you have never been here before, Mr. Darcy!” Mrs. Bennet interjected. Near her, Mr. Bennet looked at him attentively.

“Yes, they will both come. And I may say they are eager to make your acquaintance.”

“Our acquaintance? How wonderful! We look forward to meeting them too. I knew Jane’s marriage would bring all sorts of illustrious people to our home.

Lady Lucas will die of envy, I am sure. She was proud that her daughter Charlotte had married Mr. Collins, but now my daughter is marrying Mr. Bingley, and Mr. Darcy’s sister and cousin will come to visit us!

Nobody in Meryton can compete with that! ”

Darcy was amused but noticed Elizabeth’s embarrassment. Behind his wife, Mr. Bennet rolled his eyes.”

“Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, may I tempt you with a drink in the library?” the gentleman offered.

In the six days that followed, Darcy met Elizabeth daily, on various occasions.

He and Bingley called at Longbourn, and he suggested Bingley propose a stroll in the garden, which only Miss Bennet and Elizabeth accepted.

It was the first time he had the chance to talk to Elizabeth privately.

He had intended to apologise for his past errors, but she spoke first.

“Mr. Darcy, I have long desired to apologise for my unfair assumptions about you and Mr. Wickham. I did so in my letter, but it needed to be done in person. I have no excuse for my foolishness. I believe I was blinded by prejudice and trusted a man who flattered me and my family and who made accusations against you, without asking for proof.”

“You, Miss Bennet, trusted a man who behaved kindly to you and your family, rather than one who was rude, arrogant, haughty, and ready to assume the worst. Nobody could blame you for such a choice. At least I do not. How could you suspect anything since I failed to reveal the truth for a long time?”

“Your former behaviour, whilst not amicable, was no excuse for me being a simpleton.”

“Not amicable is too kind a description of a man who offended you at an assembly and played an ungenerous role in separating his friend from your sister. It was not my duty to judge or to advise. I did it out of arrogance, and I was wrong — again.”

“We seem to have many things to apologise to each other for, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said.

“I do. You, not so much. It might take many more strolls to make amends for my errors.”

“Your actions since we met in London and your present visit are enough amends for any presumed wrong, Mr. Darcy. I dare say there is no need to debate this subject further.” She paused a little, then she looked at him, and their eyes met.

“However, I do agree that we need many more such strolls, just to talk. On any other subjects.”

His heart raced and melted. “There is nothing I would like more, Miss Bennet.”

That was their first agreement. Afterwards, every time Darcy and Bingley called, the four of them would take a stroll, and he walked with Elizabeth a few steps behind Miss Bennet and Bingley.

They were in full view of the house, but still, they had the desired privacy, allowing them the opportunity to really talk — openly and honestly — and to come to know each other.

Every single day, every single conversation strengthened Darcy’s conviction that Elizabeth was the one his mother spoke of.

The one to complete him and make him happy.

She was always present in his mind, and his heart was full of her.

Her pleasure in his company was also obvious — she even declared it several times. Every day they seemed more comfortable with each other.

After the Gardiners, Georgiana, Mrs. Annesley, and the colonel arrived, the opportunities for private encounters came at Netherfield, where they all met often.

There were two official dinners, with the extended families attending, in the Netherfield dining room.

The meeting between Bingley’s sisters and the Gardiners was amusing for both Darcy and Elizabeth, who shared it through meaningful glances.

As the wedding was approaching, Elizabeth and Miss Bennet would come to Netherfield and stay a few hours.

Miss Bennet was busy with the housekeeper and the servants, while Elizabeth spent time with Georgiana and with Darcy, and he was happy to see the growing bond between the two women he so dearly loved.

One afternoon, while Miss Bennet and the Gardiners were engaged in conversation and Georgiana was resting, Darcy gathered the courage to ask Elizabeth to take a stroll in the gardens.

Her changed countenance proved that she suspected the reason for his invitation, and the little shy smile that twisted her lips and the sparkle in her eyes were enough encouragement for him to proceed.

Once out of doors, a few minutes passed in silence, with stolen glances and only the sound of their steps breaking the silence; until he finally found the words to express the feelings that had thrilled and tortured him for months.

“Miss Bennet, I might be too hasty, or too arrogant in assuming you will accept what I have to say. I hope you will allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

He lost his voice and had to gulp a few times. Enough for her to stop and gaze at him.

“You are not too hasty and certainly not arrogant, Mr. Darcy. I have hoped to hear such words for quite a long while now. Except for the word ardently. I confess I never expected to hear Mr. Darcy using it,” she teased him, her voice and eyes tearful with emotions.

“I did not expect to hear myself using it. In fact, I never expected myself to feel it, until I met you, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth. You must be warned that I shall use it quite often if you do me the honour of becoming my wife.”

“I would be honoured to, Mr. Darcy. But even more, I would be happy and grateful. And I look forward to hearing that word used every day.”

The bliss was too deep to be voiced further.

And they were in full view of the house, so there was no kiss, no embrace, no tender gesture that day, but that was fully compensated for as soon as their engagement was acknowledged and private walks were allowed with no restriction — even encouraged by Mrs. Bennet.

Mr. Bennet’s blessing was obtained the same afternoon, but, except for Georgiana and the colonel, the engagement was made public only after Bingley and Miss Bennet’s wedding.

Two more busy weeks — madness, as Mr. Bennet called it — followed until, in the middle of February, Darcy and Elizabeth were married by licence in Longbourn Church.

There was much joy for some and much resentment for others about their wedding. Some supported it, others objected and refused to acknowledge it or responded with rage — like Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Others — like the Matlocks — needed some time to accept the idea that a fortuitous meeting in Hyde Park had brought more consequences than they had assumed at the beginning, and that the man who had been the least pleased by that meeting had benefited the most from it.

In the end, however, nobody and nothing altered the strength of Mr. Darcy’s decision, nor the happiness his wife brought him from the day of his proposal to the day when he held her in his arms as the carriage took them to their London house — and on all the days that followed.

Pemberley was their beloved home — as well as Georgiana's — and the place where their extended family often gathered. Among many other newly acquired skills, Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy learnt to ride and drive a phaeton — activities that she came to enjoy as much as walking.

Mrs. Darcy quickly assumed her responsibilities and made efforts to learn to accomplish them in the best possible way. She was kind and warm to others yet determined and confident.

Mr. Darcy called his wife his joy, and she called him her quiet strength. Their characters and natures were different but completed each other. The world ardently was used and felt every day between them, just as they had promised on the day of Darcy's proposal.

When their first son was born two years into their marriage, both called him the perfect gift of their love.

Every time they all met, Lady Matlock still wondered how a simple ride in Hyde Park and an almost accident could have changed the lives of so many utterly and completely.

Darcy often claimed that he would have come to the same conclusion eventually. That, one way or another, he would have understood his officious involvement between Jane and Bingley and would have accepted his love for Elizabeth and proposed to her, regardless of anything else.

Still, he did not deny he was grateful that fate had intervened and hastened things and smoothed his path towards Elizabeth — towards happiness.

THE END

Mr. Darcy's Devotion

Darcy put aside the letter; he knew he was still wearing a smile on his lips. Bingley's handwriting was as careless as ever, perhaps even more so considering his obvious happiness and eagerness regarding his upcoming marriage.

Unlike in the past, Bingley now wrote often, keeping his friend informed about the preparations for the wedding and all the changes he was making to accommodate his soon-to-be wife.

Bingley's joy gave Darcy some comfort for the guilt that had troubled him since last April when Elizabeth had accused him of separating Bingley from Miss Jane Bennet.

He realised he had almost ruined his friend's chance of happiness, but fortunately, fate, as well as Bingley and Miss Bennet's kind hearts, had diminished the damage of his arrogance.

Bingley's letters had yet another reason to please Darcy: they contained a few — yet so satisfying — details about Elizabeth, who was of course always in her sister's company.

Every time Bingley mentioned his betrothed, there was something added about Elizabeth, whom Bingley called 'a true sister to him'.

Poor Bingley; compared to the selfishness and nastiness of his own sisters — who were still trying to sabotage his engagement — Elizabeth must be a real palliation.

The recollections of Elizabeth at Pemberley were certainly a palliation for him, Darcy thought. Georgiana had been immediately charmed by her too, and if not for that blackguard Wickham, things might have been different.

Even the name of his enemy enraged Darcy. No, he could not even be called an enemy; he was simply worthless. His last deception — the elopement with Miss Lydia Bennet — had certainly distressed Elizabeth, but it had tormented Georgiana too.

As difficult as it has been, Darcy had chosen to reveal the truth to his sister before the unwelcome wedding took place. He feared she might find out by accident, and likely her suffering would have been even deeper.

Witnessing Georgiana's shock and turmoil was unbearable and added more to his resentment towards Wickham.

That the scoundrel had become part of the Bennet family was another obstacle atop all the other reasons which should have kept him away from Elizabeth.

And yet, nothing could keep him away from her when he first proposed at the Parsonage, and nothing would keep him away from her now, except his doubts in regard to her true feelings and how she might respond to a second offer.

When he had returned to Netherfield with Bingley and had seen her again, Elizabeth had looked different from how he remembered her at Pemberley.

But he was probably different too. He had wished to speak to her but had found no opportunity during his short stay.

He did not dare assume her opinion of him had changed and in what way.

He hoped it had, but he had been wrong in his estimation before, so he chose to be prudent — even fearful — with his hopes and expectations.

He planned to return to Hertfordshire for Bingley's wedding. That stay would be short too, as he intended to depart on the wedding day; Bingley would surely wish to be alone with his wife on his wedding night!

A thought crossed his mind, causing him further distress. A few months ago, as he walked towards the Parsonage on his way to propose to Elizabeth, he had imagined his wedding night. But what had followed had been many nights not of love and passion but of torture.

“Brother?” he heard a soft voice calling.

“Yes, dearest. Do come in.”

“I do not wish to bother you.”

“You never do.”

His sister entered timidly and sat on the sofa close to his desk.

“Brother, I am going for a walk, and I might call on my aunt and uncle. Cousin Geoffrey is at home too. Will you not join me?”

“Is Mrs. Annesley unable to accompany you?”

“She plans to come too, but I fear you are alone too much, Brother. You have barely left the house in weeks. I can see you are unwell. That you are upset...”

“My dear, I am not upset. I am preoccupied, I admit. But please do not worry.”

“I do worry. I have not seen you smile since we were at Pemberley...when Miss Bennet and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner visited.”

“I am quite sure I have smiled a few times since then,” he tried to joke.

“Hardly... Have you decided when you will return to Hertfordshire?”

“In a fortnight. A week before the wedding.”

“What would you say to me coming with you?” Georgiana asked, taking him by surprise.

“Coming with me? To Hertfordshire?”

“If you do not mind. Mr. Bingley invited me to visit Netherfield when we last met. And I assume Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner will be there too. I would be happy to see them again...as well as Miss Bennet.”

“I certainly do not mind...but I thought it would be too much trouble for you. I shall not stay more than a week. And there will be quite a bustle there before the wedding.”

“I am well aware of that. Netherfield is only a few hours’ journey, and the late October weather is perfect for travelling.”

He was still unsure how he felt about the request, but the girl’s insistent gaze made a refusal impossible.

“Very well, my dear. I shall write to Bingley. He will be overjoyed by the news.”

“I hope Miss Bennet will not mind. Miss Jane Bennet.”

“Quite the opposite, I am sure. But you must be prepared to hear some talk of Wickham. Mrs. Bennet and some of the ladies in Meryton were quite fond of him.”

“Oh...” Georgiana lowered her eyes, hesitating for a moment. “I hope Mr. Wickham will conduct himself in a manner that does not disappoint them. Especially now that he is married.”

“I doubt that. I see little chance of improvement in Wickham. He does not lack the skills, but he does lack the honour and willingness. Otherwise, I would have supported him further.”

“Perhaps his affection for his wife...” she whispered.

“My dear, I hope you know he did not marry for affection. He eloped because he needed to escape his creditors, and Miss Lydia Bennet was young and naïve enough to join him. She was a victim of his depravation — like all of us.”

“But you said the Bennets are not wealthy. Did she have a dowry to pay his debts?”

“No...but the family made sacrifices to cover his demands. It was neither an easy nor an honourable affair. I beg you not to speak of it further — it must be unpleasant for you.”

“If this is the case, she will suffer from his deception. I feel deeply for her since I was no different. I could have been in her situation. Except I had a dowry, which I now know was his main goal.”

“My dear, please do not allow Wickham to upset you any longer. He is nothing but a scoundrel unworthy of your grief. I regret not having sent him to prison a long while ago. The only thing I can do now is to watch him to be sure he treats his wife properly.”

“I am upset, and I am certain Papa would have been too. We both cared for him.”

“You did, and he may have had some affection for you both, but his inclination for waste and deception was stronger.”

A long and deep moment of silence followed until Georgiana spoke again.

“Brother, now that Mr. Wickham is part of the Bennet family...and Miss Bennet will marry Mr. Bingley... I know you used to visit Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner... Does it bother you?”

“Not particularly,” he responded after a brief hesitation. “Does it bother you, Georgiana?”

Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by the sound of hurrying steps and voices from the entryway. With a frown, Darcy walked to the door, which opened before he reached it. Shocked, he saw Lady Catherine de Bourgh, waving her cane at a servant.

“Darcy, what sort of a household are you running here? This man would not let me enter! Does he not know I am your closest relative? You should let him go immediately!”

“Lady Catherine! What a lovely surprise,” he responded, glancing at Georgiana, who turned pale. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Indeed, it is no pleasure, Darcy! I was forced to leave my home to attend to an urgent matter conveyed in a most alarming report! It is good that I found you at home as we must discuss it urgently.”

“Please sit down — you look flushed and agitated. Let me order some tea. I hope Anne is in good health?”

“Anne is in the carriage. She is well, I suppose. At least as well as can be expected.”

“Have you just arrived from Kent?” he continued, wondering what might have caused his aunt’s precipitation.

“No, I have just arrived from Hertfordshire. More precisely from Longbourn.” The answer stunned Darcy.

“From Longbourn? What business did you have there?”

“Very important business. Have I not already said so?” the lady replied.

Before Darcy had time to enquire further, the door opened again, and the servant entered one more time, distress obvious on his face.

“Sir, I beg your forgiveness for disturbing you. The lady in the carriage...she has fainted, the coachman said!”

“Anne?” Darcy asked, glancing at his aunt. Without waiting for an answer, he hurried out, with Georgiana and Lady Catherine following him.

“Oh, I am sure it is nothing! Anne faints all the time,” he heard his aunt declaring, and rage overwhelmed him, joining his worry. What on earth had Lady Catherine done at Longbourn? Perhaps delivered a letter from Mrs. Collins? But why was she in Hertfordshire at all? She had no business there!

He finally arrived at the carriage and found Anne lying on the floor, her eyes closed. He touched her hand and called to her, but no answer came, so he swept her into his arms and carried her into the house.

“Which guest room is ready?” he called to his housekeeper, who was gazing at him,

her forehead creased with worry.

“All of them, sir,” Mrs. Gibbs replied.

“Send for Doctor Harris now, and ask him to come this instant,” he shouted while climbing the stairs. His cousin was unconscious, but he felt she was breathing regularly. He did not stop until he entered a guest room and placed her on the bed.

“Darcy, I am glad you are so worried for Anne, but there is no need,” Lady Catherine said. “It might be a weakness due to the time we have spent on the road. We have barely had time to eat anything since we left Rosings.”

His aunt’s indifference enraged Darcy, but he managed to control his anger. Anne looked extremely pale and likely thinner than he had ever seen her. He observed Georgiana at the door, staring at him.

“My dear, call for two maids to sit with Anne. And send someone to fetch Lord and Lady Matlock — I am sure they would like to know what is happening.”

“Darcy, for God’s sake, stop!” Lady Catherine cried. “Look, Anne is already recovering, she needs no doctor!”

“Anne, can you hear me?” Darcy whispered, and the young woman nodded, opening her eyes.

“Yes...I am sorry...all is well,” she answered in a small voice.

“You do not look well, Anne. I have sent for the doctor. Doctor Harris has been treating our family since my infancy. You may remember him. He should be here soon. Until then, we shall take care of you. You should just rest...”

The two maids he had requested appeared in the doorframe, the housekeeper behind them.

“I have brought some herbal tea, sir.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gibbs. Please be sure Anne is comfortable before the doctor arrives.”

“She does not need a doctor!” Lady Catherine interjected again. “What she needs is for you to keep your promise and marry her — as you should have done a long time ago!”

Darcy breathed deeply to stop himself from voicing the retort on his lips.

“Lady Catherine, I shall not indulge in such a ridiculous conversation at such a time. You might not be worried, but I am, and since Anne is in my house, I shall not allow her to leave before Doctor Harris examines her and approves of her being moved. Until then, we shall allow her to rest, and we shall continue our discussions in the library.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Darcy left the room, his aunt hurrying behind him. Georgiana was nowhere in sight, so he entered the library, waited for the lady to step through the door, then closed it.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” he asked, pouring a glass of brandy for himself.

“Yes, I would. And some port! And I need you to sit so I can speak to you at length.”

“Very well. Though I cannot understand what you wish to discuss that could not be expressed in a letter. What could prompt you to travel from Kent to Hertfordshire and then to London? Such an effort seems terribly inappropriate, especially since Anne was with you.”

“Well, Mrs. Jenkinson is visiting her sister, who is apparently dying. I suggested Anne stay at home — after all, she has an army of servants at Rosings — but she insisted on keeping me company, which I find to be very considerate of her.”

“I see... But the reason for your strange journey I still do not know.”

“The reason is — sadly — as laughable as it was worrisome. I heard that you were involved in some sort of sordid relationship with that country girl Eliza Bennet and that you were about to let yourself be trapped in an appalling engagement.”

Darcy almost dropped his glass. “What?”

“Yes! I understand your response. I knew it could not be true since everybody knows you are engaged to Anne. But I had to see for myself, and I am glad I did. You cannot imagine how horribly that obstinate, headstrong country nobody treated me!”

“You spoke to Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

“Of course I did! How else could I have known? And she refused to oblige me! She said she was not engaged to you but refused to promise me she never would be. And she tried to dismiss me and send me away!”

“I cannot believe you did that,” he said, suffocated by disbelief.

“I most certainly did! That ungrateful girl! After all the kindness I showed her when she was in Kent! She should be grateful that I even spoke to her, considering her sister’s outrageous elopement with that officer.

She is nothing and deserves nothing. I did not even send regards to her family, of course.”

“Lady Catherine, can you not realise how inappropriate your actions have been? In what position you place me, by association? You have insulted Miss Bennet so many times to me, and I am sure you did the same directly to her too! How could you do that? This is outrageous! Unspeakable! Why did you not ask me first?”

He sipped from his drink to remove the lump of fury from his throat.

“I thought I should talk to her since she was the one reportedly trying to trap you into this marriage.”

“Reportedly? What report? Where did you hear it?”

“Mr. Collins brought it to my attention, and surely you know his sources are to be trusted on the matter of that pathetic family.”

“I doubt there is anyone more pathetic than Mr. Collins — and stupid enough to

misunderstand. Who else heard that nonsense? Was the Bennet family present?" Keeping an air of apparent calm was a struggle, and he prayed that his self-control would not betray him.

"Nobody else heard. I was careful, and I talked to Miss Bennet in a part of the garden. A very small and ugly garden! As shocking as the news of your engagement to that Bennet girl was, my purpose was to keep the secret. I knew I would find a way to break it before anyone else heard of it."

As the conversation progressed, Darcy's rage became unbearable, while Lady Catherine became calmer, speaking at length while rejoicing in her success with no concern for anything else.

"You were utterly wrong, Lady Catherine! Not only did you offend an innocent young woman, whose only fault was that she showed me and Georgiana genuine friendship, but you soiled my name — and my honour too! What sort of man allows his aunt to interfere in any of his relationships? How can you be so calm? How can you not see how shockingly improper your actions and your claims are?"

"What on earth are you talking about, Darcy? How dare you speak to me in such a manner? I have never interfered in your relationships, until now. You could not expect me to remain calm and wait for you to become engaged to Miss Elizabeth Bennet?"

"Are you engaged to Miss Elizabeth?" Georgiana's little voice silenced them; the girl was looking at them with confusion and distress.

"Forgive me for interrupting you. Doctor Harris is here...Mrs. Gibbs directed him to Anne. He is examining her now. And my aunt and uncle Matlock will be here shortly. And Geoffrey."

“Thank you, my dear,” he replied. “And to answer your question, no, I am not engaged to Miss Elizabeth. If I was, I would have certainly told you. Lady Catherine assumed I was, and she went to Longbourn to confront her.”

Darcy knew he should not show his frustration in front of his delicate sister, but his patience was at an end. He felt relieved by her interruption as he knew he would have behaved in a most ungentlemanlike manner were the conversation with his aunt to continue.

“I do not understand...confront Miss Elizabeth? But if you are not engaged...she must have been shocked...offended...”

“I am sure she was. I am certainly deeply ashamed simply imagining her response.”

“Oh, stop that nonsense,” Lady Catherine interjected.

“She was not shocked, nor offended enough to make her any less impertinent. I was the one who was offended, especially when that country nobody mocked my warning that such a union would ruin your reputation forever! She cared nothing for you, for your family, for your name — she told me so very clearly! She suggested that your marriage to her would be perfectly acceptable! The audacity of that girl!”

The last statement made a deeper impression on Darcy than the lady assumed — and in a completely different way.

His agitated mind understood that Elizabeth had refused to promise that she would never accept him and that she would give consideration to a potential marriage.

If she had been completely opposed to him — as she had been last April — she would have certainly not hesitated to tell his aunt as much.

“Lady Catherine, you apparently cannot understand your error, so I shall not continue this argument. I shall write to Bingley and ask him to apologise to Miss Elizabeth and her family for any offence. After all, they will soon be his family too.”

“You will do no such thing!” the lady shouted. “I shall never apologise to that harlot!”

“I do not expect you to, Aunt, but I shall — although the damage is already done. Let us cease this conversation. We should be more concerned about Anne’s health.”

“Anne’s health is as good as can be expected. Your concern, if it is genuine, should be proved by establishing a date for your wedding, as everybody expects, not by forming a questionable friendship with the impertinent Miss Elizabeth Bennet and taking her side.”

“What is wrong with Miss Elizabeth Bennet? She might be impertinent, but she is absolutely charming.” A new voice interrupted Lady Catherine.

With the door only half closed, Colonel Fitzwilliam and his parents entered with apparent haste.

“And you are impertinent in expressing your admiration for her, as you did in Kent, Geoffrey! Do not believe me ignorant of your behaviour,” Lady Catherine scolded him.

“Lady Catherine, what a lovely surprise to see you in London,” the colonel replied calmly. “I am sorry that I upset you, though I cannot remember when and how.”

“Oh, stop your irritating teasing,” the earl interjected. “Catherine, what on earth are you doing in London? You never sent word. Has something happened?”

“Where is Anne? How is she? Has the doctor arrived?” Lady Matlock added.

Darcy rubbed his temples, trying to soothe the sudden headache.

“Doctor Harris is with Anne. Let us go to the drawing room while we wait. May I call for some refreshments?”

“I know where the drinks are — I shall pour some,” the colonel offered.

Lady Matlock sat next to Georgiana, who looked quite distressed. Lady Catherine took an armchair, holding her cane and looking around the room with apparent displeasure.

“Catherine, would you tell us what you are doing in London?” Lord Matlock enquired.

“It is too difficult to understand this absurd story. We should wait for the doctor to tell us about Anne,” Darcy suggested.

“We were talking about Darcy deciding to marry Anne,” Lady Catherine responded.

“And you have come all the way from Kent for this?” Lord Matlock rolled his eyes. “Why are you even opening up this matter again? Is it not obvious to everyone that Darcy will not marry Anne?”

“I remember him saying so more than once,” Lady Matlock added. “Catherine, I know this is hard to accept, but you cannot force a gentleman of Darcy’s age into marriage.”

“I might have accepted that if he had made a better choice! If he was engaged to or at least courting someone prettier than Anne, or healthier or wealthier. But I cannot

allow him to make a choice that will harm his name and reputation!”

“Catherine, I am sure you are wrong. One thing that defines Darcy’s character is his devotion to his family and his legacy. He would never do anything to ruin it, so I shall not even enquire further.”

“And there is nothing more immaculate than Darcy’s reputation!” The colonel laughed.

“I am glad you are all entertained, but the matter is rather delicate and distressing as it might harm a young lady’s reputation,” Darcy interjected, restless and vexed.

“Nobody cares about that lady’s reputation,” Lady Catherine replied spitefully.

“I shall explain it to you — it is quite simple. My clergyman, Mr. Collins, informed me about a rumour involving Darcy and the daughter of a country gentleman, whose estate is entailed upon him. He claimed that not only would Darcy’s friend soon be married to the eldest sister but that Darcy himself might have been forced into an engagement by the second sister’s arts and allurements! ”

Lady Matlock froze, her cup of tea in one hand and her eyes wide, while the earl and the colonel frowned.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“Excuse me, what?” The earl spoke first. “Whose estate is entailed to whom? Which of Darcy’s friends marries whose sister? And whose arts and allurements do you mean?”

“I believe this charade has gone on long enough. My friend Bingley is to be married soon to Miss Jane Bennet, whose father’s estate is entailed upon Mr. Collins.”

“And the second daughter,” Lady Catherine interrupted, “is a spoilt, impertinent girl, headstrong and disrespectful, despite the kindness I showed her when she visited Mrs. Collins! She must have devised a scheme to trap Darcy! She seemed more inclined towards Geoffrey in the spring, but she is poor, and she must have discovered that our Colonel has no money either.”

Lord and Lady Matlock exchanged worried gazes, then glanced at their son. The colonel looked like he needed another moment to comprehend, then he began to laugh, so loud and so hard that he spilt his drink.

“Lady Catherine, you believe that Miss Elizabeth Bennet used her arts and allurements to trap Darcy?” the colonel finally managed to reply. “This is why you travelled from Kent to Hertfordshire?”

“Geoffrey, I find little amusement in this situation,” Darcy said severely.

“Oh, but you should find plenty of amusement in it, Cousin. I have never seen a woman loathe a man as much as Miss Elizabeth did Darcy, Aunt. And I have rarely seen Darcy treat a lady as coldly and severely as he treated Miss Elizabeth! Arts and allurements? Forgive me for laughing, Aunt, but this is ridiculous.”

“So...allow me to understand, Catherine. Your clergyman reported this rumour to you, and you took your carriage, travelled fifty miles, turned up uninvited at Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s house, and asked her not to marry Darcy, even though she was not engaged to him?”

Lady Catherine stared at her brother’s clarification, and for a moment she looked disconcerted.

“Dear Lord, this is hilarious,” the earl agreed, laughing together with his son, while Lady Catherine turned red.

Georgiana seemed too distressed to speak, while Darcy could not regain his composure.

“Dear Aunt,” the colonel continued, “whoever told you that was surely trying to mock you! If it was that clergyman, you should punish his audacity.”

“Mr. Collins would never deceive me,” the lady declared impetuously.

“Not on purpose, but he has not enough wit to understand things properly, and you are too partial to see his silliness,” the colonel concluded.

As they talked, the doctor entered the drawing-room; he greeted everyone and accepted an offered drink.

“How is Anne?” Lady Catherine asked. “I hope she is better— I plan to return to Rosings as soon as possible.”

“Lady Catherine, I have not had the pleasure of seeing Miss de Bourgh since she was a child,” Doctor Harris said. “I must say I find her weakness worrisome, especially as she said her fainting was not a singular event. And considering Lady Anne’s tragic

death, we must show prudence.”

“I completely agree,” Lady Matlock replied.

“My doctor in Kent knows how to take care of Anne. She will be well when we return home,” Lady Catherine declared.

“I must respectfully disagree,” Doctor Harris said.

“Miss de Bourgh told me she is given some herbal teas, but she does not feel any improvement. I am not certain of the nature of Miss de Bourgh’s illness, and I would like to ask the opinion of two other colleagues.

I advise that she does not travel yet — she is too weak for further effort.

If she stays in London, I shall return to examine her tonight and again tomorrow morning. ”

“Out of the question!” Lady Catherine replied harshly. “We shall return home tomorrow unless Anne is to be married soon.”

Darcy attempted to respond, but the earl spoke first.

“Do not speak nonsense, Catherine. Anne is not to be married, and I insist she remain in town if Doctor Harris believes it is to her benefit.”

“We cannot stay in London! We shall sleep here tonight and leave tomorrow. My decision is made.”

“Catherine, do not force me to remind you that Lewis named me Anne’s guardian,” the earl continued, his voice stronger.

“Anne is of age, she does not need a guardian,” Lady Catherine said, coldly dismissing the claim.

“Since she is of age, she might decide for herself,” Lady Matlock intervened. “Georgiana, come with me, my dear. Let us talk to Anne while the gentlemen complete their business with your aunt.”

Despite Lady Catherine’s opposition, the two left the room, and the disagreement continued. Lady Catherine would not abandon her plans until Lady Matlock returned with the response that Anne was very weak and had insisted on remaining to rest.

“She is asleep now, and she will not be disturbed!”

“Honoraria, you have no right to decide in regard to Anne!”

“But I do, Catherine,” the earl added. “Let us all be reasonable and judge the matter wisely. Anne will remain here and rest, and we shall discuss matters further tomorrow. You will come home with us. You need to rest and calm yourself, and so does Darcy. Being in his house would not help either of you.”

“I shall not leave Anne here alone!”

“Oh, do not be ridiculous, Catherine. It is decided then,” the earl concluded.

An hour later, after more harsh quarrels, Lady Catherine was left with no choice. She left with the Matlocks, insisting she would return later to see Anne.

Georgiana withdrew to her chamber, and Darcy found himself alone with the colonel, in a silence that felt strange after all that bustle.

“We need another drink to appraise this situation,” the colonel declared, still

laughing. “You and Miss Elizabeth Bennet? Upon my word, I have never heard anything more ridiculous.”

Darcy, however, was deeply preoccupied, and he was barely listening to his cousin.

“Yes, pour some drinks, but we shall move to the library. I have two urgent letters to write and send immediately.”

“Now? What urgent letters? To whom?”

“To Bingley and to Mr. Bennet. I have not an instant to lose. Afterwards, we may enjoy as many drinks as you wish.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Darcy finished the letter for Bingley quickly, but the one to Mr. Bennet took longer.

He realised he had never been properly introduced to the gentleman, and they had only been in company briefly at the Netherfield ball.

During the search for Miss Lydia and Wickham, he had only dealt with the Gardiners, avoiding Elizabeth's father on purpose.

Writing apologies to someone who was almost a stranger but also an important person due to his connection to Elizabeth was a truly daunting task.

Eventually, he put down a few words,

Mr. Bennet,

You must be surprised at receiving a letter from someone you hardly know. I would not have taken such a liberty if not for my desire to apologise for the inconvenience caused by my aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh's visit to Longbourn.

I am well aware that my aunt's actions are not always within the bounds of decorum and that her impetuosity may cause harm to many.

Please know that I was not aware of her visit until afterwards, nor do I approve of anything she said.

Also, I beg you to convey my apologies to Miss Elizabeth, with whom I know my aunt had a conversation which I assume was not pleasant.

I hope you will allow me the chance to properly introduce myself and apologise in person when I next visit my friend Bingley.

Sincerely,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

He sealed it and asked it to be delivered by express; he did so with some nervousness, knowing the letter would be read by Elizabeth too. He hoped she would understand what he had not explicitly said.

“So, have you finished your urgent business?” the colonel asked.

“I have. Hopefully, Lady Catherine will not do anything else foolish today.”

“I still do not understand where such a ridiculous report came from. There cannot be two people more unlikely to be the subject of such gossip.”

Darcy filled his glass before answering.

“Well, that is not entirely true, Geoffrey. Despite my behaviour, which you criticised, I have always admired Miss Elizabeth. We did have some harsh, even painful, quarrels in Hertfordshire — and even more in Kent — but they helped me understand that I was in error in judging certain circumstances.”

“Did they? How interesting. And does she know that?”

“I hope so, Cousin. When Miss Elizabeth visited Pemberley with the Gardiners, we had the chance to clear up some of our past misunderstandings. I dare say now we are rather friends than enemies,” he concluded with a smile.

“Well, this is a surprising piece of news, indeed. I cannot remember when you last admitted your admiration for a young lady.”

“I would have if it had ever happened.”

“Miss Elizabeth is a fascinating woman, I have to say. Her manners are charming because they are natural and unassuming. She is educated and clever without bragging about her knowledge. She is witty and brave in expressing her opinion. And she is very pretty, though her complexion is not perfect. I might say Miss Elizabeth is delightfully perfect in her many imperfections. Would you not agree, Darcy?”

Darcy did not agree; to him, Elizabeth was quite perfect, and he saw nothing wanting in her. To his cousin, he responded, “I agree that Miss Elizabeth is the most enchanting woman of my acquaintance — in every possible way.”

“Oh my, what strong words coming from someone usually so severe in his judgments of people. Well, well, so it is possible that the clergyman was right. That Lady Catherine did not journey to Hertfordshire for nothing. Do not tell me that you are truly engaged to Miss Elizabeth?” the colonel enquired, his tone full of jest.

“That clergyman is never right, and Lady Catherine does many things for nothing. I am not engaged to Miss Elizabeth. I have seen her only briefly since she left Pemberley, and we spoke only a few polite words.”

“Well then, that might have caused some problems.”

“Very likely. I was content to know she no longer despises me. But that might have changed if Lady Catherine disparaged her in person as she disparaged her to me. Miss Elizabeth has every reason to loathe me and my lunatic aunt,” he ended with bitterness.

“So, Darcy, enough joking. Do you have serious designs on Miss Elizabeth? Truly? In all honesty, I wondered why you were so distressed while searching for Wickham and why you paid the idiot’s debts. Did you wish to impress Miss Elizabeth? Is it not a little too much?”

“Not at all. I specifically requested of Mr. Gardiner that Miss Elizabeth not be informed about my involvement at all. I shall not deny that I wanted to save her from the distress caused by her silly sister and that scoundrel, especially since I know how it felt...”

“True.”

“But I do not wish to impress her, and I certainly do not want her gratitude. Besides, it gives me great pleasure to have purchased Wickham’s debts. He knows I can send him to prison whenever I desire.”

“Upon my word, Darcy, I do not know what to think of all this. I know you well enough to understand that your declared admiration for Miss Bennet is not insignificant.”

“It is not. But please do not assume more. And please do not share this with anyone. I wish to avoid exposing Miss Elizabeth to more harm.”

“But I cannot deny that I am shocked. It never crossed my mind. Will you... Would you... What do you plan to do? What do you want to do?”

“See to my business, as always. Then I shall go to Netherfield to attend Bingley’s wedding, as I promised.”

“Will you... Do you intend to talk to Miss Elizabeth?”

“Of course I do. It would be awkward not to speak to her, would you not agree?”

“You know what I mean, Darcy.”

“I know, but that is all I can say. I shall be happy to meet and talk to her again. I hope she will not hold Lady Catherine’s insults against me. I shall certainly apologise to her.”

“But Darcy, do you intend to do something? In regard to Miss Elizabeth? Her family... Wickham is her brother now.”

“I am aware of that. Whatever Wickham is or does, he is not my main concern, nor the main obstacle in my plans.”

“Lady Catherine will be incandescent with rage — you must know that.”

“I do, but she is not my main concern either.”

“My parents will be shocked too. They will likely oppose such a connection...”

“I value your parents’ opinion, but as you must know, once I make a decision, I shall not be deterred by any opposition.”

“I know. That is what I fear, and I dread to assume how things will progress. I certainly need another drink.”

“I would like another one too.” Darcy smiled.

Later that day, the doctor returned to examine Anne, who was still asleep.

“I cannot give you a prognosis yet,” the doctor said.

“I must observe her for several more days. What I can see is that she is very weak. I shall tell Mrs. Gibbs what sort of foods I would recommend for Miss de Bourgh, and I have also brought some medicine that I have used in previous similar cases. My colleagues will join me tomorrow, and I hope that together we shall reach a conclusion. Miss Darcy is with Miss de Bourgh now,” he added.

“I asked the maid to prepare the medicine and bring some soup too. There is not much else we can do for now, except that I strongly advise that she remain in London for a while, to rest properly and to be under our supervision.”

“I shall insist on following your advice,” Darcy promised. As soon as the doctor left, he went to Anne’s room, where a maid and Georgiana were sitting with his cousin.

“I would like to speak to Miss de Bourgh for a moment,” he addressed the maid, who immediately left.

Georgiana was about to do the same, but he stopped her.

“You may stay, my dear,” he said, pulling a chair towards the bed. “I just want to ask Anne how she is feeling and — more importantly — what she wants to do.”

“To do?” Anne repeated weakly.

“Yes. Your decision is very important and the only one that matters. Lady Catherine should not have a say when your well-being is involved.”

“I am sure Mama wishes what is best for me.”

“Your mother wishes what she believes is best for you. As we all know, Lady

Catherine is not always right. If I were to choose between the doctor's advice and your mother's request, my choice would be clear."

"I would like to stay for a little while. But I cannot argue with Mama."

"Yes, you can. Anne, do you realise that you are of age, and as such, you have inherited your father's entire fortune?"

You may make decisions about anything, including your mother's future.

You may do whatever you want with your money and your properties.

Whatever you wish to do, I shall assist you in the best way I can. "

"Thank you, Cousin. I am sorry my mother is giving you so much trouble."

"You do not need to apologise, Anne. And please know that I refused to marry you not because I do not believe you worthy of being admired and loved but quite the opposite. I am certain that you deserve more than to be pushed into a marriage without proper affection and admiration."

"I have always admired you, Fitzwilliam."

"But not in a way to induce you into marriage, Anne. You admired me because you had not met any other gentlemen with which to make a proper comparison."

"I admire your devotion to the family...I know how much you help Mama with our affairs. And you have visited me often enough, though I know you did so only because duty demanded it."

"I shall always help you and Lady Catherine when she asks me to. And no, I did not

visit you just out of duty. I would like to see you more often, to see you spending time in town or coming to visit us at Pemberley. You are as close to me as a sister, and I shall always care for you.”

“Thank you...Fitzwilliam, is it true what Mama said? That you are engaged to Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

“I am not, but I do admire Miss Elizabeth very much. We can barely be called friends at the moment, but I wish for that to change.”

“But...forgive me for intruding...I observed you and Miss Elizabeth at Rosings. She did not seem to admire you at all. She seemed to favour Geoffrey. Mama said Miss Elizabeth is a fortune hunter and will only try to trap you for your wealth.”

As she spoke, Anne turned pale from embarrassment, and so did Georgiana.

Darcy smiled at them both.

“I thank you for your concern, but it is not needed. I am certain Miss Elizabeth is not trying to trap me — quite the opposite. She was well aware of my wealth and my situation in life when she scolded me for my behaviour and some of my actions. Indeed, nobody had ever rebuked me as harshly — or deservedly.”

“What do you mean?” Georgiana asked in disbelief.

“I am not at liberty to say more, but please believe me that I tried to express my admiration to Miss Elizabeth when we were at Rosings, and she rejected my...attempts most decidedly. I am quite certain I was the last man in the world she would have tried to trap into marriage,” he concluded, unable to conceal the smile on his lips.

“But...you and Miss Elizabeth seemed to be friends at Pemberley,” Georgiana whispered.

“I took Miss Elizabeth’s reproaches to heart and tried to make amends for my past errors. I believe she has forgiven me and granted me her friendship. I have hardly spoken to her at all since we met at Pemberley.”

“Oh...I did not know...thank you for confiding in me, Cousin.”

“I hope you will confide in me too, Anne. I am truly concerned about your health. Please consider the situation fully and let me know how I may help you.”

“I shall...but if I remain in London, I cannot stay in your house...”

“You are welcome to stay here for as long as you want, but I do agree that it would not be entirely proper for us to live under the same roof. However, you cannot move into your own house either, since you need care and supervision. You could perhaps stay with the Matlocks. I am sure they would be happy to have you. And Geoffrey too.”

“I shall speak to my aunt tomorrow. I would like to sleep now if you do not mind. Fitzwilliam, if Mama comes to see me tonight, please tell her the doctor gave me some medicine and I am deeply asleep. Would you?”

“Gladly.” Darcy smiled. “But only if you promise to try and eat as the doctor said.”

“I believe we have an agreement — finally.” Anne returned the smile.

That evening, Darcy had dinner with Georgiana, and she enquired further in regard to Elizabeth, but he had nothing more to tell her. Lady Catherine came to see Anne — as they expected — but she was denied the opportunity, and she left with even greater

resentment.

As much as he wanted to, Darcy did not open the subject of Lady Catherine's visit to Longbourn as he did not expect he would succeed in making his aunt see reason.

If things with Elizabeth progressed as he hoped and prayed for, it would mean another quarrel — more violent—with his aunt.

Until that moment came, the best plan would be to let Lady Catherine calm down in order for her to be able to receive the shock of the future changes she would have to accept.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

The next day, immediately after breakfast, Dr Harris returned with two other gentlemen who appeared to be about his age, and he introduced them as esteemed and experienced physicians.

The three of them spent half an hour with Anne, then returned with a report not much different from the previous one.

“Dr Harris,” Darcy said, “you treated my dear mother for years, till the end. Do you think Anne might have inherited her illness?”

“We cannot be certain yet, sir. This is what I have been debating with my colleagues. We need more time to observe her. In the meantime, we would like to give her some medicine that we have used in similar cases and observe her progress. We are all in agreement that Miss de Bourgh should remain in town. We also noticed her pale complexion. Has she not been taken to the sea? The summer sun and some sea bathing might be an excellent remedy for her.”

“I do not believe my cousin has been to the seaside in the last ten years. I do not remember any such discussion.”

“This is one of our recommendations for the future.”

“I shall insist it be followed, Doctor. I shall write to my aunt and uncle to come and discuss the best solution for Anne. Could she be moved to my uncle’s house? It is a short distance from here.”

“I see no danger in her making such an insignificant journey,” the doctor agreed. “But

no farther.”

“Of course.”

“If you wish me to,” Dr Harris continued, “I shall speak to Lady Catherine myself. Perhaps my direct opinion would be of some use. And I may answer her questions, if there are any.”

The other two doctors declined any invitation for refreshments and left. Georgiana went to Anne, while Darcy penned a quick note to Lord Matlock.

“Dr Harris, I must apologise beforehand for whatever Lady Catherine might say. I expect she will be strongly opposed to Anne remaining in London and will probably question your advice and expertise. Please do not take offence.”

“I shall not — I have seen too much to be easily cowed,” the doctor replied.

Darcy was proved right when his aunt arrived. She was accompanied by Lord and Lady Matlock, for which Darcy was grateful. The earl was likely the only man in the world who, as an elder brother, could keep Lady Catherine under some control.

Darcy invited them in, but Lady Catherine was anxious to see her daughter.

“We are in a hurry to leave for Kent,” she said.

“I am afraid that is impossible, Aunt,” Darcy answered. “Dr Harris will explain the situation to you.”

“Darcy, you cannot tell me what is impossible!” the lady said angrily. “Unless you have decided to marry Anne, you have no right to any opinion in regard to her!”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Catherine, do not speak of this marriage foolishness again!” the earl cried. “Let us show some decorum in front of Dr Harris!”

“Dr Harris is nothing to me. I have a doctor who has treated Anne since she was very young.”

“Not very successfully, I may say,” the earl continued.

“I shall not criticise my colleague in Kent,” Dr Harris intervened. “We are still uncertain of the nature of Miss de Bourgh’s illness, which is why I insist on her staying under our supervision for another fortnight. Nobody would be happier than me to see her improve enough to travel safely.”

“This is absurd! She cannot stay in Darcy’s house by herself. And I have no intention of staying here! In truth, one might already consider that Anne’s reputation has been ruined by sleeping under Darcy’s roof!”

“Doctor, do you have any medicine for a sudden headache?” the earl asked with sharp mockery, rolling his eyes at his sister.

“I am aware of the delicate situation,” Darcy said. “This is why I suggest Anne moves in with you and my aunt, Uncle. I believe everyone will be content with such an arrangement.”

“Certainly not me!” Lady Catherine declared.

“But I believe that Anne would be,” Darcy responded. He turned to Lady Matlock. “Aunt, please be so kind as to speak to Anne. Georgiana is with her now.”

“I shall speak to my daughter — nobody else!” Lady Catherine shouted.

“Honoraria will join you,” the earl declared. “Unless you prefer it to be me.”

Eventually, the two ladies went to Anne, while Darcy, his uncle, and the doctor continued conversing over a drink.

Around noon, despite Lady Catherine’s opposition and complaints, Anne was moved to the Matlocks’ house. Dr Harris assisted them and examined the patient again once she was comfortably accommodated in her new apartment.

“I hope Anne will improve soon,” Georgiana said. “I am so sad for her. I cannot but think...I remember when Mama was ill...”

“We shall do everything possible for her recovery, my dear, I assure you. And let us hope her illness is of a different nature.”

“I cannot understand why Lady Catherine is so strongly opposed to something that is for Anne’s benefit.”

“Lady Catherine always wishes to have her own way, and she can rarely see when she is wrong,” Darcy replied. Then he paused for a moment before continuing, “I fear I have been the same for a long time.”

“You? Never!” the girl exclaimed. “How can you even say so?”

“I cherish your trust in me, but your sisterly love makes you partial.” Darcy smiled bitterly. “Neither my manners nor my behaviour have been without fault, especially among strangers.”

“I find that hard to believe! You are always so kind, generous, and compassionate to everyone. You always provide help when it is needed.”

“I might be compassionate and generous as I have the means to be so. I am not sure I am kind, though, and I certainly am not considerate enough.”

“I think you are truly the best man that ever was!”

“That is because you, my dear, are kind and generous and considerate,” he replied with an affectionate smile. “I am grateful for your love, and I wish I deserved it.”

“Surely you do. Everyone who knows you shares the same opinion.”

“Not quite. Miss Elizabeth expressed as much clearly and deservedly. I am ashamed to admit that I almost ruined Bingley’s chance of happiness due to my arrogant assumption that I know what is best for him — just as Lady Catherine is doing now with Anne.”

“So that was the subject of the quarrels you mentioned you had with Miss Bennet.”

“That and much more. I might tell you something in regard to Miss Bennet that you will find appalling and will prove that your brother has plenty of faults.”

“Do tell me! But I am sure I shall not find it appalling if it is related to you.”

“I first met her at a ball last autumn. I was in no disposition for dancing, but Bingley insisted on me joining him. I was tired and rather annoyed — and my manners certainly showed as much. Bingley pointed out Miss Elizabeth as a potential partner, and I told him that she was not handsome enough to tempt me. I am afraid she might have heard me...”

The girl’s eyes opened wide; her disbelief so complete that it made Darcy laugh.

“You do look appalled,” he jested. “And rightfully so.”

“Poor Miss Elizabeth — she must have been so offended!”

“If she truly heard me, she had good reason for her resentment towards me. Though, in all honesty, I had barely looked at her that evening.”

“I understand why you were in no disposition for balls last autumn...after my foolishness in Ramsgate...after I upset you so deeply...”

“You did not upset me, my dear. Wickham did, last summer and this summer. I know you are still hurt by his betrayal, but he is not worthy of a single thought of yours.”

The girl paused for a few moments, then said, “Fitzwilliam, Miss Elizabeth is very pretty, is she not?”

“She is, my dear. She is one of the most handsome women of my acquaintance.”

“I believe so too. And her manners are very pleasant and kind.”

Darcy smiled again, mostly to himself. He wished to add that Elizabeth was pleasant and kind to those who deserved it.

He had also seen another side of her, less sweet but equally enchanting and appealing.

However, to his sister, he said nothing more.

Many of his thoughts regarding Elizabeth made him smile, but he would never share them with Georgiana.

Later that afternoon, Darcy was surprised to receive a letter from Longbourn. He

picked it up eagerly, his heart racing.

He went to his room to read it undisturbed, opening it with trembling fingers.

Mr. Darcy,

To say I was surprised by your letter would be an understatement, especially considering we have never spoken directly.

It was very considerate of you to worry about your aunt's visit. I confess I remained in my library throughout.

I understand the purpose of Lady Catherine's call was to speak to my daughter Elizabeth, a conversation which I was told was hardly a pleasure for either party.

Since my daughter provided me with no details of that conversation, I simply conveyed to her your apologies, and she asked me to reply that they were absolutely not necessary.

My daughter has asked me to inform you that she never assumed Lady Catherine de Bourgh had your approval for that particular conversation, and she will be delighted to discuss the matter with you at length when you next meet.

I also look forward to finally meeting you in a proper manner, and perhaps you will do me the honour of joining me for a drink.

Although I too believe your apologies are unnecessary, I am sure I must — and I shall — express my thanks and gratitude for your assistance in finding my daughter Lydia and her unworthy husband.

My brother refused to give me any details about the nature of your involvement, but

he indicated that the fugitives would not have been found so quickly without your help.

I thank you and remain in your debt for that.

Thomas Bennet

The letter gave Darcy equal joy and distress. The few words passed on from Elizabeth showed that she did not hold any grudge and that she was eager to meet him again. As prudent as he was in making assumptions, there could not be any other interpretation.

Mr. Bennet's tone was quick and pleasant, revealing a man with a love for reading, writing, and probably making sport of others.

But the reference to his involvement in Wickham's story was worrisome, and he hoped the Gardiners had not revealed the secret.

The last thing he wanted was for Elizabeth's true feelings for him to be altered by an unwanted sense of gratitude.

He took up a pen and wrote back.

Mr. Bennet,

Not speaking to you directly is one of the things I regret not having done during my stay in Hertfordshire last autumn.

From what Mr. Gardiner related to me, I am sure we would have had enough pleasant subjects for conversation.

I hope for such an opportunity when I visit Bingley in less than a fortnight.

With your approval, I shall call on Longbourn upon my arrival, and I would be delighted to have a drink with you.

Please convey to Miss Elizabeth and your entire family my best regards.

F Darcy.

The particular mention of Elizabeth was a little daring and slightly improper, but he chose to accept the risk, praying that she would understand.

There were ten days until he would see her again, and he wondered how he could bear it.

If not for the situation with Anne, he would have travelled to Netherfield earlier.

But the worry for his cousin and the sense that he had to be around his family in those difficult moments were enough to diminish his eagerness.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“This is unacceptable! My daughter has lost her mind!” Lady Catherine shouted.

“We have been trapped in London for almost a week for God-knows-what treatment, and we have neglected our affairs at Rosings. This is nothing more than a whim, which I have always disapproved of. And now you insist on me allowing Anne to ride in Hyde Park? Is she ill or not? I shall put an end to this once and for all!”

“Catherine, please do not shout,” Lord Matlock requested in a low voice. “I do lose my temper at times, but I control myself. Our servants are not accustomed to yelling, and we do not wish to incite gossip.”

“Besides, you are upset all the time, and I cannot understand why,” Lady Matlock added. “Nobody is keeping you in London if you prefer to be elsewhere. Anne is well taken care of, and she seems to enjoy our company.”

It was a warm, sunny day, and the Darcys were in attendance at the Matlocks’, together with Colonel Fitzwilliam and Anne.

Darcy visited the Matlocks daily with Georgiana and spent some time with Anne. He was relieved that his cousin showed an obvious improvement, even in such a short time. Lady Catherine was always there, of course, causing a disturbance, but he had learnt to pay no attention to her.

He was overjoyed, counting the days until he would leave for Netherfield. He had received another letter from Mr. Bennet, and one from Bingley, which gave him joy for the mere reason that they were connected to Elizabeth.

He also expected Mr. Gardiner to visit him in the afternoon, and he planned to discuss the pressing matter of Wickham.

He needed to be sure if and how much Elizabeth had been told, so he could at least be prepared.

His forthcoming meeting with Elizabeth gave him thrills that kept him awake at night and pleasure that made him smile during the day.

Even Georgiana noticed his joy and told him as much.

“Besides, you have the tendency to always exaggerate,” Darcy heard Lady Matlock say.

“Anne does not intend to ride a horse but to stay in the carriage, which is warm and comfortable, with me and her cousins. The doctor said she needs a little bit of fresh air, just as he insisted that she must go to Brighton for the summer.”

“So Anne cannot come home with me, but she can take rides in the park?” Lady Catherine continued with growing anger.

“Mama, I wish to go. I never go anywhere...I like to see people...” Anne pleaded.

“See people? Have you not seen enough people? What has happened to you, Anne? I blame Darcy for this situation! He insisted on you staying when we should have returned to Rosings, and all would be well now!”

“So, if I understood well, you blame Darcy for your unreasonable decision to travel from Kent to Hertfordshire and then to London?” the earl asked, mockery apparent in his voice. “How is he guilty for you not judging properly?”

“He is! If he had complied with his mother’s wishes and done what was right—”

“Mama, for Heaven’s sake, will you stop with this nonsense! How long will you expose me to ridicule, begging someone to marry me?” Anne cried in a voice that nobody had heard before, clearly on the verge of tears.

Lady Catherine stared at her daughter, her eyes and mouth wide in disbelief, struggling to breathe and speak, but Anne continued despite the tears coursing down her cheeks.

“I do not want to marry Darcy, just as he does not want to marry me! You cannot force me to marry or to go home! I do not need to marry — I have enough fortune to do what I please! Darcy told me I can sell Rosings if I want, can I not?” she asked, looking at him.

“You can, Anne,” he responded calmly. “You can do whatever you wish, with everything that rightfully belongs to you.”

“Anne, dear, try to calm yourself,” Lady Matlock said gently.

“Sell Rosings?” cried Lady Catherine. “Are you a lunatic? And you, Darcy, an ungrateful man with no respect for your closest relative! Your mother would die again if she saw your dreadful behaviour!”

“Lady Catherine, I shall not dignify you with an answer to such claims,” Darcy said, struggling to keep his voice level, noticing Georgiana was tearful from distress.

“Either you mind your words or I shall never speak to you again. As you may know, I resemble you in some ways — I am as resentful as you are, my temper is as bad as yours, and my good opinion once lost is lost forever. I have borne your behaviour for too long, but it all ends today.”

He expected Lady Catherine to shout again, but the earl interjected decidedly.

“Enough with this madness in my house!” he demanded.

“Catherine, you either watch your words or I shall ask you to leave. You have your own house in town to stay in if you wish, or you may return to Rosings and complete your unfinished business. I am sure Anne does not intend to sell it immediately.”

“Sell it? Stop saying such horrible things! Nobody can sell Rosings! Anne, you must recover your wits and think properly! We shall return home together and speak of all this. We shall put this whole disturbing situation behind us.”

“I shall not return home with you, Mama. I have no intention of selling Rosings unless I am forced to do so. Darcy, do I have enough money to live in town if I wish to?”

The question took everyone by surprise, and Lady Catherine turned red, gulping for air.

“Anne, what are you saying? Live in London? Where? You cannot do anything by yourself! You need Mrs. Jenkinson to cut your meat, for God’s sake! Do not make a fool of yourself! You must think of your father and your name and your reputation!”

“I shall think of myself alone for once. If I cannot do anything by myself, I shall hire help. Can I do that, Darcy?”

“You may do whatever you please, Anne. There is no need to sell Rosings since it brings you a significant income. You have several other investments I have made at Lady Catherine’s request, which are also mostly yours. I may say your fortune has increased since you inherited.”

Their conversation was interrupted by another outburst of fury from Lady Catherine until Lord Matlock unceremoniously led her out of the room.

“I am so sorry for Mama,” Anne whispered.

“I did not know that the fortune had increased. Mama never told me anything. I am not a simpleton, I knew I was the heir, but Mama led me to believe I cannot do anything without her approval. And the truth is, I never wanted to know...I never wanted to do anything by myself.”

“Your income is probably around seven thousand pounds per year,” Darcy said. “In the last five years, I have managed Rosings as carefully as Pemberley.”

“I know you have, Cousin,” Anne responded, wiping her tears. “And I hope you will continue to help me. I shall never be able to understand the business of the estate. If you leave my side, I shall be lost.”

“I shall never leave your side, Anne. As I said, you are as close to me as a sister. I shall always take care of you, and you may always count on me,” he assured her. Unexpectedly, Anne approached him and stretched out her arms, gently placing her head on his shoulder, while Darcy embraced her.

“Do not worry, Anne, you will not be alone,” Lady Matlock added.

“You have Darcy to help you with the estate, and you have all of us to help you with anything else you need. And I am sure Catherine will calm herself by tomorrow — if not completely, at least enough to carry on a reasonable conversation. She has no other choice. She will have to learn to accept that things are not always as she wants them to be.”

Darcy was not as trusting as Lady Matlock; he knew too well the depths of Lady

Catherine's resentment and her vengeful temper.

Apparently, Anne was of the same opinion, and she voiced it.

"Mama will not calm by tomorrow, dear Aunt. She will not calm down unless she has her way. She might mind her manners if she has to, but her resentment will not easily pass."

"Then she will remain alone, my dear. You must only think of yourself, as you said."

"These last few days, I have realised that I have not lived until now," Anne said. "I just allowed life to pass by me, waiting for it to end. I have always assumed I shall die young...but, as short as it might be, I wish to feel something of what life really means."

Anne's confession broke Darcy's heart, and he could see the distress on the colonel's face and the tears in the ladies' eyes.

"I am not a doctor, but I doubt you should think of dying, Anne," the colonel said.

"I do not know much, but in recent days, you look different. Your cheeks have caught a little bit of colour, your eyes are brighter, you smile more often. And — forgive me for saying so — your figure in this gown looks lovely. I feel you might have gained a little bit of weight already."

Anne laughed through her tears, and her cheeks coloured from embarrassment and apparent delight.

"You have always been a charming tease and quite skilful at flattering ladies, Cousin."

“Well, I cannot be called either charming, a tease, or a flatterer,” Darcy intervened with a smile, “and I admit I have not noticed any changes in your figure, but your face does show an improvement, Anne. I believe Dr Harris’s treatment is helpful.”

“And perhaps the fact that you have ceased being lonely, Anne,” Georgiana suddenly interjected. “Loneliness is never helpful, nor comforting.”

“I know, my dear. Now, I know,” Anne responded.

Darcy stepped back, while the ladies comforted each other.

He had felt terribly guilty imagining how his aunt had offended Elizabeth, and he was deeply worried for her. But Elizabeth was strong, confident, clever, and witty, and, as proved by her father’s letter, she would not allow herself to be affected by Lady Catherine’s rudeness.

In her endeavour to hurt Elizabeth, Lady Catherine had exposed her daughter to great danger, and — strangely enough — by doing so she had allowed Anne to see life in a new light.

“Darcy, will you join us on the ride?” Lady Matlock enquired.

“No, I am very sorry, Aunt. I must return home, as I expect Mr. Gardiner’s visit.”

“I do not believe I have met the gentleman.”

“You certainly have not, but I hope such an opportunity will arise.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are such lovely people,” Georgiana added. “I enjoyed their company immensely when they visited Pemberley.”

“If they are Miss Bennet’s relatives, they must be lovely, as she is,” Anne added, drawing an approving smile from Darcy.

“Miss Bennet? Are we still talking about her?” Lady Matlock asked, arching her eyebrow.

“We are,” Darcy responded. “She is indeed worth talking about. I am glad Georgiana and Anne approve of her since I see nothing wanting in her.”

“I can testify to that,” the colonel responded, increasing Lady Matlock’s frown.

“Darcy, is there anything you wish to share with us?”

“What I wish or not matters little as there is nothing to be shared at this moment.”

“But...now you truly worry me! Your uncle and I believed that subject was only one of your aunt’s wrong presumptions. We assumed the subject was closed.”

“The kind of relationship Lady Catherine claimed was a mistaken presumption,” Darcy responded. “However, that does not end the subject of Miss Elizabeth Bennet, whom I would be happy to talk about at any time.”

“She is the sister of the young lady whom Bingley will marry, is she not? I heard Bingley’s future wife is a flawless beauty.”

“Miss Jane Bennet is indeed beautiful, and she is kind and gentle. Bingley is a fortunate man,” Darcy replied.

“And Catherine said her youngest sister eloped with that George Wickham boy?”

“She did.”

“So , if I followed your words carefully, one sister is married to Wickham, and the other one will marry Bingley? I hope you realise, Darcy, how much below you these people are and how far from your circle,” Lady Matlock said coldly.

“I hope your judgment is not affected and that you consider all the circumstances thoroughly before you decide on any actions. You cannot afford to be impulsive and careless, and I believe you should discuss the matter with your uncle too, even today.”

The warning was clear, as well as the disapproval in the lady’s voice. Her opposition had already been aroused, not as violent as Lady Catherine’s but powerful enough to not be neglected.

“I have considered all the circumstances — I always do, both when I manage my business or in my personal life. I shall gladly talk to you or my uncle on any subject you wish. However, I hope you remember that, if I am capable of making decisions to improve the income for everyone in the family, if you trust me with your fortune, I deserve to be trusted with what I believe to be the good fortune of my life.”

“I do trust you, Brother,” Georgiana said with a timid smile.

“So do I, Cousin,” Anne said. “Utterly and completely.”

“You may always count on my support, Darcy,” the colonel added, causing his mother to frown again.

“Perhaps we should postpone the ride, after all,” Lady Matlock said coldly. “It seems there are important matters that you should discuss with your uncle, and I believe I should be present.”

“As you wish, dear Aunt,” Anne surprisingly replied. “If you do not mind, I would

like to go still, if Georgiana and Geoffrey wish to join me.”

“I certainly do,” the colonel replied, and Georgiana nodded too. They left soon after, while Darcy remained with Lady Matlock until the earl returned, already angry after the confrontation with his sister.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“I am afraid Catherine has lost her mind completely, my dear, and I have utterly lost my patience,” the earl declared, hurriedly pouring himself a glass of brandy. Then he looked at his wife, puzzled.

“Have you changed your mind about the ride in the park?”

“I have. I believe we should take this opportunity to talk to Darcy.”

“About what?” the earl enquired.

“We have nothing to discuss at this moment,” Darcy declared, “despite the fact that my aunt believes otherwise.”

“I am in no disposition for charades,” the earl responded.

“Neither am I, Uncle. Therefore, I shall explain briefly what my aunt believes to be a subject for debate.”

The earl looked at his wife, then back at Darcy, sipping from his glass and waiting.

“Lady Catherine travelled to Hertfordshire to confront Miss Elizabeth Bennet about an engagement which did not exist. As I have already explained, Miss Elizabeth is the second daughter of a gentleman. Her eldest sister will marry Bingley soon.”

“Yes, we know all this,” the earl said.

“What you may not know, although I have already confessed it several times, is that I

do admire Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I hope to have the opportunity to speak more with her and to consolidate a friendship.”

“Yes, I believe you told us as much. Either you or Geoffrey,” the earl replied with an unexpected calmness. “And? What else is there to discuss? I cannot argue with a gentleman over his desire to befriend a young woman.”

“Excuse me?” Lady Matlock interjected with apparent vexation. “Husband, have you had one too many drinks? Can you not understand your nephew’s words? His interest in this young woman is more than mere friendship!”

“That might be the case, but why would it be our concern? I hope you are aware that Geoffrey has had many lady friends, and I never discussed the matter with him.”

“Surely you are trying to annoy me, sir! You must know what I am talking about. Darcy has serious designs on this young woman. He intends to pursue this Miss Bennet, and we might be in a situation to agree with Catherine after all!”

“I might sound disrespectful, but I would rather not continue this pointless conversation—it might turn into a quarrel,” Darcy declared.

He breathed deeply, then continued. “I shall not deny that Miss Bennet is the only woman I have considered for more than a friendship, but I have no reason to believe that such an attempt would meet with success at this moment. Yes, I intend to pursue her, but it will be a hard endeavour as her opinion of me has been very ill. I shall consider myself quite fortunate if she accepts me one day.”

Lady Matlock gave a gasp of disbelief and opposition, covering her mouth with her hand. “You expect that a young woman with no fortune, no connections, no dowry, the daughter of a country gentleman would not accept you? Surely you are joking?”

“I am not joking, and I am quite certain that she will only accept a man whom she can love and admire. I am not sure I am that man, but I shall try my best to become him.”

“Darcy, you have lost your mind! Catherine was correct after all.”

“I have never been clearer minded or more determined. But I must repeat — I have had no such discussion with Miss Bennet, I have barely spoken to her since August, and she is ignorant of my intentions. Any rumours on this subject would make her uncomfortable and would make me look like a ridiculous fool.”

“So...then you have decided to have her?”

“I have if it is possible!”

“You must realise that we cannot agree with such a choice for your wife. That we cannot welcome her into our family,” his aunt said.

“If such an event does eventually occur, my wife and my sister will be my family. I would dearly welcome all of you if you wish it, but if not, I shall be content with the happiness I shall gain through my marriage.”

Darcy made his statement and immediately felt a deep sense of relief. His heart became lighter — as if a burden had been removed from his chest.

He had spoken his mind, he had made a decision, and he had stated it aloud. He would admit no arguments, nothing that would distress his wife or sister.

“Husband, you have nothing to say? You are his closest relative—you should advise him on what is best for him and for the family!” Lady Matlock addressed the earl, clearly in a perturbed state of mind.

“I might have something to say, madam, but I doubt Darcy wishes to listen. I hardly remember advising him in any matter before, so why would I be so presumptuous as to do it now? I might not agree with whom he intends to marry, but as long as she is an honourable woman who will not hurt the family’s reputation, my opinion matters little. ”

“What do you imply? Should we give him our blessing? Should we accept just anyone into the family?”

“My dear madam, I doubt Darcy would allow just anyone near him and Georgiana. Regardless, he does not need either our approval or blessing.”

Darcy listened to the conversation without interfering. He had expected opposition from his uncle and was surprised to be proved wrong. In fact, the earl did not look surprised either, so it was likely that Geoffrey had revealed pieces of the story to him already.

“I do not need it, but I would like to have your blessing nevertheless,” he finally replied. “However, I shall say again and again, we are only discussing my intentions, my wishes, with no notion of Miss Bennet’s opinions and feelings.”

“Do not be naïve, Darcy. No woman would reject you, especially not one in such a disadvantageous situation in life,” Lady Matlock said spitefully.

“You would be surprised, Aunt. Trust me on this,” Darcy concluded, unable to conceal his smile. The earl continued to drink, gazing at Darcy with apparent interest.

“I must leave you now,” Darcy eventually said. “I hope and pray that we shall meet again soon without further pointless quarrels.”

Three days passed after the day of the scandal in the Matlocks' house.

Darcy received the news that Lady Catherine had returned to Kent without any discussion with anyone in the family.

Anne remained with the Matlocks, and Georgiana visited her daily, but Darcy attended to other affairs.

He reflected for many hours upon his quarrel with Lady Matlock, wondering about Lord Matlock's calm demeanour.

Talking to the colonel, Darcy had the confirmation that his cousin had mentioned Elizabeth to his father several times and suggested Darcy's admiration for her.

So, unlike his wife, the earl had been prepared.

As planned, Mr. Gardiner visited and confessed that his wife had revealed to Elizabeth the truth of Darcy's involvement in the Wickhams' marriage.

"Mr. Darcy, I beg your forgiveness, sir. I take all the blame for betraying your secret, but Lizzy is the only one who knows all the facts. Lydia mentioned your presence at the wedding, and Elizabeth suspected something, so she questioned my wife. We had no choice but to either tell her the truth or invent a lie. But I assure you, Elizabeth is as grateful to you as we all are, and she will take the first opportunity to thank you!"

"Mr. Gardiner, I requested secrecy precisely because I did not want anyone — especially Miss Elizabeth — to feel the need to thank me. I did what I believed was right, and I handled Wickham's debts in a manner convenient for me.

That is all. I would rather forget about this whole affair and not mention it again. "

“My wife and I shall do as you request, Mr. Darcy. And we shall never speak of this matter again, either to you or to anyone else.”

As true as that might have been, Darcy’s main concern remained Elizabeth’s response, and the more the moment of their meeting approached, the more nervous he became.

Eventually, the day before his planned departure, Darcy paid another visit to the Matlocks.

Lady Matlock was seemingly in her room with a headache, and she did not receive him.

The earl, his eldest son the viscount, and the colonel invited him for a drink.

They spent an hour together and talked about Bingley’s upcoming wedding, but none of them mentioned Elizabeth again.

Despite her initial plan, Georgiana chose to remain at home with Mrs. Annesley and to continue to visit Anne daily.

Darcy heartily approved of her decision; he found it to the benefit of both his sister and his cousin and — selfishly — he preferred to have all his attention upon Elizabeth, without any concern for Georgiana’s comfort.

On a cold October morning, before the sun had even fully risen, Darcy left London to return to Hertfordshire, the place where his life had completely altered a year ago. It was only one year but so full of events, of unexpected changes, that it felt as long as ten.

The journey was uneventful; he had already taken that road several times, so it looked familiar to him, but his feelings were different. Every time he had seen Elizabeth, his feelings for her were different. Sometimes stronger, sometimes repressed, sometimes confused. Never the same.

On that trip, his feelings were deeper, more steady, clearer. He knew his heart and his mind very well; he knew his wishes, and he believed he knew the right way not only towards her house but also towards her heart.

He was content and relieved for everything that had occurred within his family. Things were clear there too, and whatever happened between him and Elizabeth, any news he would send to his relatives, they would not be surprised.

The journey lasted a few hours, and when he was close to Meryton, his nervousness, his uncertainties, and his doubts returned and troubled his peace.

The carriage rode through Meryton, and he saw several familiar faces. When the horses turned towards Longbourn, his heart raced faster than the carriage. Then suddenly he heard the coachman's voice, and the horses stopped abruptly, neighing.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

He looked out of the window, ready to scold the coachman for not paying attention. Instantly, he forgot to breathe, and his heart forgot to beat when his gaze was immediately drawn towards a pair of fine eyes, shining in a beautiful face, red from the exercise.

A most enchanting smile twisted her lips, and she whispered with apparent surprise, “Mr. Darcy!”

“Miss Bennet!”

He jumped from the carriage, and she took a step back, as though putting some distance between them, but her smile remained, on her lips and in her eyes.

“We expected you today, sir. I mean, Mr. Bingley expected you. And my father... I am happy you arrived safely.”

“I am happy to be here, Miss Bennet. And I am happy that I met you.”

“Oh... I took a brief walk...”

“Yes, I know you enjoy walking. Will you return home now?”

“Yes...”

“Would you like to take the carriage?”

“No, I would rather not...I mean...I would rather walk. The weather is so lovely, and

nature is so pretty with all the autumn colours.”

She looked flushed and somehow uneasy, and he assumed he looked no different.

“Very pretty indeed,” he said, glancing around.

“Pemberley must be beautiful at this time of year.”

“It is, I remember it from my childhood. Sadly, I am rarely there in this season.”

“Oh... Is Miss Darcy in good health?”

“She is. She is in London with...her companion.” He was about to mention Anne but chose not to open the matter of his family issues so soon.

A little pause made them aware that they were standing still, facing each other, with the carriage waiting nearby.

“Miss Bennet, if I am not intruding, would you mind if I walked with you to Longbourn? I can send the carriage ahead while I benefit from a little exercise. If you do not mind...” he repeated, his eyes meeting hers briefly.

“I do not mind at all, Mr. Darcy. Quite the opposite, I would say.”

Walking side by side with Elizabeth towards Longbourn was thrilling and enchanting but also slightly embarrassing. Neither of them was at ease, and he hoped her nervousness was of the same nature as his.

After a few minutes, she stopped and turned to face him.

“Mr. Darcy, I have planned many times how to secure a few moments alone with

you, and I cannot miss this chance. Please allow me to thank you for your extraordinary generosity to my sister Lydia...”

She spoke animatedly; she was agitated and flushed, and he found himself wishing to remove her bonnet and touch a curl of hair that was dancing on her neck.

To suppress the gesture, he placed his hand on her arm, grasping it gently to make her stop.

“Miss Bennet, please stop! Please! I am already upset with Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner for telling you. The last words in the world I want to hear on your lips are those of thanks and gratitude.”

“Oh...” She stopped, either because of his grasp or because she remembered her words when she rejected him.

“Please do not be upset with my uncle and aunt,” she said. “I wished to know...I needed to know...and I wondered why...”

“You wondered why?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “I could not imagine why you would bestow such profound kindness on a girl who was a stranger to you.”

“Truly? I was hoping that, since you discovered the secret, you had guessed why I did it, Miss Bennet. I selfishly did it for someone who was not at all a stranger to me...”

“Oh...”

“I hope you do not feel uncomfortable. Please know I do not wish to embarrass you and even less to force your gratitude.”

“I do feel uncomfortable because I am ashamed for all the trouble you went to on my family’s behalf. As for my gratitude, it is not forced but well deserved.”

“Could we please not mention it again? Or at least not before I have the chance to apologise for my aunt’s visit.”

“Could we not mention your aunt’s visit again?” she repeated, and he smiled, while she gave a nervous laugh. “You already apologised for it in your letter to my father.”

“My aunt’s actions deserve more than one apology.”

“I believe you have apologised twice,” she said, and he laughed. “Have you spoken to Lady Catherine since?” she continued.

“I have. More times I wished.”

“Oh...I assumed as much. She mentioned she would speak to you...”

“Unfortunately, she did.”

“The conversation was not too unpleasant, I hope?”

“It was. More than unpleasant.”

“May I ask why?”

“You may, but the narration would last too long, longer than a short walk to Longbourn. To explain all the details, we would need more time.”

Their eyes met again, and she said, “I enjoy walking every morning. I usually take a long walk towards Oakham Mount. It is an hour’s walk from Longbourn, at least.”

She had offered him a chance, and he took it.

“An hour would be ample time to impart all the details,” he said.

“Will you come in?” she asked when Longbourn appeared in sight.

“I would like to enter and greet your family if I am not intruding.”

“Not at all, Mr. Darcy. My father is rather anxious to see you. He would be happy to receive you.”

“And I would be happy to meet him,” Darcy replied as he accepted the invitation and followed Elizabeth into the house.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Darcy knew his previous encounters with the Bennets did not do him credit; therefore, he was not surprised when the family received him with circumspection. But, steady to his purpose, Darcy expressed his delight to be there and congratulated them on the happy event that would soon take place.

Mrs. Bennet greeted him coldly; Miss Catherine and Miss Mary barely dared to look at him.

Miss Jane Bennet welcomed him warmly, and he bowed over her hand and repeated his congratulations.

“Does Mr. Bingley know you have arrived, Mr. Darcy? He was eagerly expecting you.”

“I informed him that I should arrive today, but I happened upon Miss Elizabeth and so stopped here first.”

“You must not worry, Mr. Darcy,” Mr. Bennet said, entering the room. “Mr. Bingley will be here any minute now. He is here all the time. I am not even sure when he leaves and when he returns.”

“Papa, how can you say that?” Miss Bennet scolded him lovingly.

“Why not, if it is true? I quite enjoy having a gentleman around the house after more than twenty years surrounded only by women.”

Darcy greeted his host with much deference and a small, amused smile. Mr. Bennet

replied in the same manner.

“What a pleasure to have you at Longbourn, Mr. Darcy. I believe this is your first visit?”

“My second visit, Mr. Bennet. I was here less than two months ago when Bingley returned to Netherfield. Unfortunately, I believe you were not at home that time.”

“Since I wish to be honest with you, Mr. Darcy, I confess I was at home, but I chose to remain in my library. It was a rather distressing time, and I had no desire for company.”

“I can well understand such a feeling,” Darcy admitted.

“Would you allow me to compensate for my past absence with a drink? Or would you rather complete your journey to Netherfield?”

Darcy hesitated for a moment; he glanced at Elizabeth, who was unexpectedly shy and silent, before eventually replying. “If I am not intruding, and if Bingley will be here soon, I would be delighted to accept your offer, Mr. Bennet.”

“Good! Excellent! Please join me in the library but prepare yourself for some disappointment. From what my brother Gardiner has told me, the libraries in both your houses can be compared to very few others.”

“I confess I take much pride in my libraries as they are the work of several generations. But I find great pleasure in seeing any library which is cared for.”

“Papa, I shall order some food and bring it to you,” Elizabeth suddenly interjected.
“Mr. Darcy must be hungry after his journey.”

“Yes, yes, please do so, Lizzy,” Mr. Bennet responded.

Hunger was not Darcy’s main concern, but the mere fact that Elizabeth had thought of his comfort was thrilling.

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth,” he replied while following his host to the library.

When Mr. Bennet opened the door for him, Darcy had a strange sensation.

This was the place where, very likely, Elizabeth had learnt to read and had grown her passion for books.

The room was small indeed, but the walls were all covered in shelves full of tomes.

From just a glance, he noticed a few interesting and rare volumes, proving that Mr. Bennet took his passion in earnest.

There was a desk and an armchair by the window — obviously Mr. Bennet’s — a sofa for two people, and two more chairs near the fireplace.

“You may sit wherever you wish, Mr. Darcy. There are not many seats because, except for Lizzy and now Mr. Bingley occasionally, not many people spend time in here.”

Darcy chose the sofa, gently moving a velvet cushion.

“That is Lizzy’s cushion. For some reason, she used to hold it when she was reading. She still does from time to time.”

The brief explanation only increased Darcy’s thrilling sensation. Tentatively, he touched the cushion again as if trying to better place it. In fact, he just wished to

sense the trace of Elizabeth's fingers. He scolded himself for his poor control, especially in Mr. Bennet's presence.

"May I pour you some brandy, Mr. Darcy?"

"Yes, please."

"Before we are interrupted, I would kindly ask you to relate to me the extent of your involvement in saving Lydia. I must know as I wish to repay you for any trouble this situation might have caused you."

"Mr. Bennet, I had the same conversation with Miss Elizabeth during our short walk this morning. My involvement was only what needed to be done. It was my fault that I allowed Wickham the liberty to continue his dishonourable actions and deceptions against honourable people. I would respectfully ask you — as well as Miss Elizabeth — to put aside this subject and not discuss it with the rest of your family."

"Well, it might be a little bit late for that. I have informed my wife and daughters that they should be grateful that you helped to bring about Lydia and Wickham's wedding. I provided no details, as I know none."

"I am sorry to hear that," Darcy replied, truly displeased.

"You must not worry that you will receive too much gratitude, though. My wife considered your help was due since you apparently treated Wickham cruelly."

"Mrs. Bennet is right, in essentials. As I said, my involvement was due indeed."

"If you insist upon it, I shall only thank you again and not speak of this matter further," Mr. Bennet concluded with a sardonic smile.

“I shall drink to that agreement,” Darcy replied.

The knock on the door increased his heart rate, and Elizabeth’s entrance made him stand up and hurry to help her with the tray. In doing so, his hands touched hers, and a shiver ran through his entire body.

“I hope you will enjoy the refreshments, Mr. Darcy,” she said. “Your servants were also offered some food and drink while they wait for you.”

“That is very considerate of you, Miss Bennet.”

“Lizzy, come and sit with us for a moment,” Mr. Bennet invited her. She seemed to hesitate briefly, then she sat on the sofa. Darcy was still standing, looking around, then he put any prudency aside and sat next to her. Her nearness made him dizzy.

“Mr. Darcy and I have decided not to discuss the Wickham matter again,” the gentleman said.

Elizabeth smiled, and her look at him from inches away stirred Darcy’s entire being.

“Mr. Darcy and I decided upon the same thing,” she replied to her father, still looking at Darcy.

“I am glad to hear we are all in perfect agreement,” Mr. Bennet uttered.

“So am I, Papa,” Elizabeth declared.

“And so am I,” Darcy repeated, their smiles sealing the deal.

As expected, Bingley called at Longbourn soon, and they remained for more than an hour. In the afternoon, they returned to Netherfield and, despite Mrs. Bennet's insistence they join the family for dinner, Bingley responded that his sisters would surely want to dine with Darcy on his return.

Upon reaching Netherfield, Darcy immediately wrote to Georgiana, informing her that he had arrived safely.

The reunion with Bingley was exceedingly pleasant, unlike the one with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. Their disapproval of Bingley's engagement was obvious, and they expressed it — directly or indirectly — at every opportunity.

After the long time spent in quarrels with Lady Catherine de Bourgh and all the disagreements with the Matlocks, Darcy was in no disposition to bear more vexation.

He did owe some loyalty and devotion to his relatives and even to his friend Bingley, but he certainly did not owe anything to the man's sisters.

Therefore, he spoke little, answered their questions briefly, and withdrew with Bingley to the library after dinner.

Everything at Netherfield reminded him of Elizabeth and the time she had spent there a year ago.

It was a time of torment and confusion when his growing admiration for her found him unprepared for the sensations that invaded him.

A time when he considered his newly discovered passion to be a mere infatuation and when he considered Elizabeth the most enchanting woman he had ever met but not suited to be his wife.

A time when he tried to bury his love and affection under countless objections, and when his heart fought with his mind.

Lying in his room — the same one as last year — he recollected how many dreams had tortured him in that chamber.

Fortunately, that time had ended. His mind and his heart were now in harmony and agreement. Of his wishes, he had been long certain. Perhaps tomorrow morning, if he saw her again, she might offer him a little hint of her feelings and desires.

Tired after the journey, Darcy slept surprisingly well, so he woke up at dawn. He knew it was very early — too early — but he was too impatient to wait.

He called for his horse, but instead of riding, he held the reins and walked at a steady pace with the stallion following him. From time to time, he glanced around, though the lasting darkness did not allow much of a view until the first glimpse of daylight broke through.

After a while, he mounted, and before going to Oakham Mount, he enjoyed a refreshing gallop. When he slowed, the sun was trying to show its face, and the view was clear enough, so he rode his horse towards Longbourn.

His heart noticed Elizabeth before his eyes did, and it began to race. He dismounted and stepped towards her until he was close enough to her sparkling eyes, brightened by the exercise, and her warm smile.

“Mr. Darcy!”

“Miss Bennet...”

Neither seemed to know what to do or what to say, so they resumed walking towards Oakham Mount.

Suddenly, Elizabeth chuckled and covered her mouth with her hand. He watched her, surprised, and she lifted her eyes to him.

“I remember our encounter at Pemberley. I have never been so shocked, nor so mortified, in my life!” she explained.

“Then the feeling was mutual,” he responded.

With every step, the tension dissipated between them.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“I thought you would never want to see me again and that you would have me thrown from your estate. If I had known — if I had the smallest suspicion — that you were at home, I would never have dared to set foot at Pemberley. I still feel the need to apologise for my presumption.”

“If we begin to apologise again, we might need more time than this walk. Just please know that nobody’s presence at Pemberley has ever been more welcome than yours.”

“Thank you,” she replied, their eyes locking briefly. They walked on a few steps before she spoke again. “Would you not tell me about Lady Catherine? I admit to being quite intrigued as your tone seemed rather grave yesterday.”

“I shall, but I must warn you it is not a pleasant story. Would you not tell me first what she said to you? It would put me at ease to know the extent of the damage she has caused.”

She looked positively uneasy as she appeared to search for the right words.

“Lady Catherine came to...”

“To express her opposition to what she believed to be our engagement,” he finished for her, and she sighed in apparent relief.

“Yes... It was a rather awkward moment as I could not imagine where she might have heard such a report.”

“Apparently from Mr. Collins, with whom I shall have a private conversation at the

first opportunity,” he answered.

“We quarrelled, and I admit I might have answered her more harshly and less politely than I should have.”

“I hope you did,” he answered and noticed a smile on her face.

“Then she said she would travel to London directly. Miss de Bourgh was with her. I wonder how she endured that long journey.”

“Not too well, I am afraid. But it proved to be for the best, in the end.”

“Truly?”

“Yes...Miss Bennet, before going any further, I would like to ask...I apologise if you find my question presumptuous and improper, but I must address it. Lady Catherine said she demanded you promise her that you would never become engaged to me...and you refused.”

He heard his voice trembling slightly, and he could see she was surprised by the enquiry.

“I did... She said you were engaged to Miss de Bourgh.”

“Surely you knew that was not true?”

“I did...but it was still somehow painful.”

“I am sorry to hear that. My aunt’s claims are often painful for everyone...” He paused again before gathering the courage to enquire further.

“So, your promise was not given... May I dare assume...? Hope...? I do not expect an answer now, so abruptly. I just wish to know if your feelings are the same as they were in April. If they are, I shall never bother you again on this subject. I value your friendship, and I wish to avoid upsetting you with insistence that is not welcome...”

His voice was now trembling so badly that he wondered whether she could understand him properly. He had his answer when she stopped in front of him.

“Mr. Darcy, you cannot possibly be serious when you ask such a question. You cannot possibly believe that my feelings remain the same as in April.”

“I was serious...doubtful...but I would be the happiest man in the world if you would call me a fool.”

She was so close to him — inches away — that her scent filled his nostrils, and his body tensed at her nearness.

“You are a fool, Mr. Darcy,” she whispered, her eyes locked with his. His heart stopped, and his head felt as if it were spinning. He still did not dare make a single gesture, nor ask further.

“I have been a fool almost from the beginning of our acquaintance, Miss Bennet.”

“So have I, Mr. Darcy. In that, we are equals,” she admitted, her voice trembling too.

He held his breath as she took another step forwards.

Then her hand slowly lifted and touched his cheek.

That simple gesture dissipated all his doubts, all his fears, and gave him more hope than any words of reassurance.

The expression of heartfelt delight on her face and the tender touch of her hand spoke more eloquently than any words.

He froze for an instant, then he turned his head so his lips could touch her gloved palm.

Gazing deep into her eyes — now sparkling as never before — he took her hand in his and gently removed her glove.

He searched for a sign of opposition, but none appeared, so he nestled her hand in his and brought it to his lips.

She gasped at the same time as a thrill ran from his lips through his entire body.

“As you have already called me a fool, would you allow me to ask you another question, Miss Bennet?”

“Please do...”

“Would you allow me to tell you how ardently I have loved and admired you for more than a year now, Miss Bennet? Would you allow me to ask you to spend your life by my side, despite my foolishness?”

Tears appeared on her eyelashes, while her other hand rose to caress his face too. “If you can overlook my foolishness and ask me again what I previously refused because of my poor judgment, you certainly know my answer already.”

“I believe I do,” he replied. Slowly, gently, despite the longing that reminded him his passion had been repressed so long, he placed soft kisses on both her wrists, then finally his lips touched hers and captured them for so long that only the need for air separated them.

“I do too,” she whispered back.

They needed a long enough time to recover and to resume a reasonable conversation. Walking arm in arm, he related to her the situation caused by Lady Catherine.

She gasped, expressed her disbelief, astonishment, and worry for Anne, and in the end, when they were walking back to Longbourn, she asked, “Are you sure you would be willing to defy your relatives for me? Even though you did not say as much, I assume the colonel’s parents will oppose our union too.

I know how loyal and devoted you are to your family, and my heart goes out to Miss Darcy especially.

Now that I have properly considered everything—”

“I have considered everything properly too,” he interrupted her.

“There is nothing and nobody to whom I owe more devotion and loyalty than to our union, if you will have me. There is nothing else to be considered except for your feelings and your wishes. You have known mine for a long time. I am asking you — in this, do you think we are equal?”

“We certainly are equal in this too,” she assured him with her lips and with her eyes, both opened to him, waiting for him. The wait ended only an instant later.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Darcy watched his wife's beautiful face caressed by the morning sun. She was still asleep, nestled in his arms, her skin burning his, her loose hair caressing his chest, making his heart race as it had on their wedding night.

Nearly three years into his marriage, everything that he had imagined to be felicity had proved to be much more.

The announcement of their engagement had taken everyone by surprise, and opinions had been as strong as he and Elizabeth had expected. The general response in Hertfordshire had been one of utter disbelief.

Even Mr. Bennet — when they informed him and asked for his approval — looked at them as if they were two lunatics. Mrs. Bennet — Elizabeth told him later on — cried and almost fainted and needed several days to fully recover and to share the news with the entirety of Meryton.

To his relatives in London, the news was not so shocking as it had been the subject of quarrels, but nobody expected it to happen so soon.

Even more so since they decided to wed shortly after the Bingleys.

They were married a fortnight before Christmas, causing a significant stir within their families and within London society.

Always by his side, Georgiana accepted her new sister with an open heart and much affection, which was immediately rewarded by Elizabeth's sisterly love.

The colonel and Anne congratulated Darcy without reserve, and even the viscount reluctantly wished him the best. Lord Matlock received the news rather coldly, and Lady Matlock declared her unshakable opposition.

Those relationships remained cold for months; however, for the sake of appearances and to keep the family united, Lady Matlock soon began to show a reasonable amount of amiability towards his wife.

Darcy and Elizabeth introduced themselves into society during the first Season, facing plenty of disapproving looks, which they disregarded.

They cared little for anything but themselves and their closest family.

Three years later, the joy Elizabeth gave him amazed Darcy every day. Her strength in handling every situation — as difficult as it might be — and her commitment to accomplishing her duties as Mrs. Darcy made him grateful and proud beyond words.

He knew she was tired as their house was again full of guests.

The Bennets — all of them except for Lydia and her husband — were there, as well as the Gardiners.

The Bingleys — who had just purchased an estate in Derbyshire and moved in with their daughter — had joined them, as well as his cousin Geoffrey and his betrothed, Lady Elinor, and Anne de Bourgh, whose recovery had been complete and astonished everyone who met her.

Darcy always thought of Anne with a heavy heart.

After his wedding to Elizabeth, Anne had been as supportive of their marriage as Georgiana and the colonel.

Soon enough, Elizabeth's relationship with Anne became almost as strong as with Georgiana.

Anne was often a guest in their house either in town or at Pemberley.

However, despite looking completely healthy and in excellent spirits, Dr Harris had warned Darcy that they were still uncertain in regard to her illness, which could have disappeared or was only hidden and could return at any time.

Anne was under the doctor's continuous supervision and followed his advice, but she lived her life as she wished to, being well aware that it may not be as long as that of others.

She had purchased a cottage in Brighton, close to the sea, where she spent every summer.

She had also bought a house in town, allowing Lady Catherine to use the old de Bourgh house.

She stayed in town for the Season, attended some parties — usually those hosted by Lady Matlock, or others that Darcy and Elizabeth attended too — and she enjoyed going to plays or the opera as often as she could.

In that, her tastes were similar to Elizabeth's and Georgiana's.

Lady Catherine never reconciled with any of them; Anne made several attempts at a truce in the beginning, but Lady Catherine's response to Darcy's marriage to Elizabeth had been so violent that Darcy cut all connection with her.

Consequently, Anne stopped any attempts except for a letter sent monthly.

In regard to Rosings, Anne and Darcy appointed a steward who lived separately from Lady Catherine and provided them with monthly reports.

Anne considered selling Rosings and purchasing a smaller estate in Derbyshire, to be closer to the Darcys and the Matlocks, but she was reluctant to cause her mother another shock.

Surprisingly, Anne formed a close friendship with Mary Bennet, while Kitty found enjoyment and benefits from spending time with Georgiana. Pemberley was a home for everyone, most of the time.

Of Wickham, Darcy received regular news. He kept his commission in the North; he and Lydia had a daughter and often exceeded their income. Both Elizabeth and Jane were careful to regularly support their youngest sister.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had visited Pemberley three times. Darcy's friendship with Mr. Bennet had begun with a letter of apology in a most distressing moment and deepened once they became family, closely united by their affection and care for Elizabeth.

Mrs. Bennet's breaches of propriety continued, but it amused Darcy instead of annoying him. Everything related to Elizabeth had his complete support and approval, regardless.

The birth of their first son — Andrew Bennet Darcy — almost two years ago added further to their felicity, and Darcy often wondered whether he deserved so many blessings.

Andrew's birth was the moment when Lord and Lady Matlock paid a longer visit to Pemberley and finally welcomed Elizabeth into the family.

Darcy looked at his wife again, and as if feeling his stare, she smiled and sighed in her sleep. Her eyes opened slowly, meeting his. Her hands stretched out to embrace him, and he closed his arms around her, holding her tightly against his heart.

“Good morning, my beloved Mrs. Darcy.”

“Good morning, my dearest Mr. Darcy. Have you been awake for long?”

“Long enough to admire you in your sleep and to wonder about the happiness I feel with you. From you.”

“On such feelings, we have been equal from the day of our engagement,” she said, entwining her hands with his and cuddling against him a little longer, enjoying their warm privacy before they must attend to their duties and responsibilities.

He placed countless kisses in her hair, reflecting that she was wrong.

They were not quite equal as he had loved and admired her long before.

Ardently, passionately, as he had proved to her since they were married.

But he would not contradict her; they quarrelled and disagreed enough, though never about their love.

Why would they since she fitted so perfectly into his arms?

The End

One

On one subject, Elizabeth was utterly and completely in agreement with Mr. Collins: Rosings Park was beautiful in the spring.

Of course, she had to agree on two further subjects too: Rosings House had hundreds of windows, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh had indeed invited them to dine twice already since she arrived in Kent. Just as Mr. Collins had promised.

Elizabeth had accepted Charlotte's invitation to visit her with reluctance.

Jane was in London with the Gardiners, and her spirits were very low.

Her heart had been broken by Mr. Bingley's departure and even more so by the realisation — gleaned from Miss Caroline Bingley — that he knew she was in town but did not wish to see her.

Elizabeth had good reasons to doubt everything Miss Bingley said; Mr. Bingley's sisters had certainly put much effort into separating their brother from Jane — and in that, they had received the help of Mr. Darcy, a gentleman who had caused much sorrow to others due to his ill-tempered nature and selfish arrogance.

He was a man she never wanted to see again, but she had been disappointed to be forced into his company quite often in the last week.

As if he had a purpose of ruining her enjoyment on every occasion, Mr. Darcy had arrived at Rosings for his annual visit to his aunt shortly after Elizabeth had travelled

to Hunsford herself.

If she had known there was even a slight chance of such an unhappy coincidence, she would certainly have postponed her visit or even cancelled it.

If his involvement in Mr. Bingley's situation had not been publicly admitted, and there could be some doubt, his cruel treatment of Mr. Wickham was as certain as it was outrageous.

Not only had he ruined his childhood companion's chances in life, but he had disregarded his father's dying wish — something that a gentleman would never do.

Mr. Darcy might be a gentleman by name, family, and education, but surely he was not by his character and behaviour.

Very much unlike his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam, who, although not as handsome as Mr. Darcy, was much more likeable due to his amiability.

From the first time he had visited the Parsonage with Mr. Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam had been admired, and his visits were considered a privilege. He seemed to enjoy the ladies' company too; therefore, he called daily on his usual rides around the park.

But why Mr. Darcy came so often to the Parsonage was more difficult to understand. It could not be for their society, as he frequently sat there for ten minutes together without opening his lips; he always seemed to speak as a sacrifice to politeness, not for his own pleasure.

Colonel Fitzwilliam occasionally laughed at his cousin's aloofness and claimed it was not his usual manner. Elizabeth contradicted him in her mind; to her, Mr. Darcy was very much as usual — arrogant, haughty, staring at her and making her uncomfortable.

Even worse, Elizabeth had met Mr. Darcy unexpectedly on her ramble in the park more than once.

On several such occasions, she had deliberately mentioned the paths where she usually walked, hoping that would keep him away, but the effect had been rather the opposite; she kept meeting him — an event that ruined her enjoyment.

That day, she decided to prevent any unpleasant meetings and completely changed her direction.

Soon, she was quite glad to find herself at the gate in the palings opposite the Parsonage, in a small grove full of flowers and bushes blossoming in the spring.

She was walking with her eyes closed when suddenly she heard the sound of children's voices and barking, then laughter and a male voice, which made her quiver with disbelief.

She stepped closer, moving to hide behind some high bushes, and found shelter behind a larger tree that obscured her presence entirely.

Bewildered, she watched Mr. Darcy — of all men! — sitting on the grass with two young children, a boy and a girl no older than seven, near him. With them was Mr. Darcy's dog — the Great Dane Elizabeth had seen at Netherfield — and two puppies.

"They have grown very much in only a week," she heard Mr. Darcy say. "It means you have taken good care of them."

"I sleep with both of them," the boy declared proudly.

"Mama said you sent us a lot of meat, and we all ate it and gave the puppies some too!" the girl exclaimed.

“Are you sure your mother is not looking for you?” Mr. Darcy asked.

“No, no, look, our house is there — she can see us and call us if she wants,” the boy replied. “She and Tom are working in the garden. She said I am too young to work with them, but as soon as I am ten, she will give me some jobs to do. I am strong enough already.”

“Tom is fifteen, is he not?” Mr. Darcy asked.

“Yes, nearly sixteen. He said he wants to be a sailor and go to sea, but he must stay and help Mama,” the boy continued.

“Mr. Darcy, why are you so kind?” the girl enquired.

“Mama said we should not disturb you because you are a very important man, and if you become angry with us, Lady Catherine will be angry too and throw us out of our home. Mama said she is afraid to speak to you. And she said she is afraid she can’t pay for all the food you send us. ”

“Oh, Mama is a woman, and women are always fearful. I am not afraid to talk to Mr. Darcy!” the boy declared.

“I am not afraid either!” the girl repeated bravely.

“That’s because you are a girl, not a woman,” the boy answered wisely.

Elizabeth was equally astonished and amused by the scene, which seemed implausible to her.

“Tell your mother I thank her, but you do not need to worry about bothering me,” Mr. Darcy answered. “Tell her I congratulate her for having such kind, well-behaved, and

clever children.”

“Oh, you mean us? the girl asked. “To be honest, we are not well-behaved,” she admitted. “We were at Rosings with Mama one day, and Lady Catherine said we are not allowed there because we are spoilt brats.”

Elizabeth was curious how Mr. Darcy would respond. He seemed hesitant and finally said, “I shall still maintain my own opinion of you. You should always listen to your mother and obey her requests. I would be happy to know you are doing that.”

“I promise,” the girl said.

“And please tell your mother that she does not have to pay for what I send. It was for you because you took these small, dying puppies and took good care of them and fed them. That is all.”

Elizabeth was still in disbelief listening to the dialogue; she would never have imagined Mr. Darcy would engage in such a tender conversation with small children who were unrelated to him.

She was curious about how the three unlikely friends had met, but she could not possibly ask.

She turned to leave, feeling she had intruded long enough, when something creaked under her foot.

The sound was no louder than a whisper but enough for Mr. Darcy’s dog to hear it.

With a bark, the hound ran towards her, its teeth bared, then at Mr. Darcy’s command, he immediately sat, looking at her.

Only moments later, the dog seemed to remember her and moved closer with his tongue out, wagging his tail.

Mr. Darcy approached and so did the children, the puppies following them.

“Miss Bennet?”

“Mr. Darcy! Forgive me for disturbing you, sir, I was just walking and—”

“Are you the miss who is visiting Mrs. Collins?” the girl enquired.

“Yes. I am Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Oh, really? My name is Elizabeth too, but my mama calls me Betsy. She only calls me Elizabeth when I do not behave.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Let me tell you a secret. My mother calls me Lizzy, and she also calls me Elizabeth when she is displeased with me.”

The girl gazed at her with her mouth open, clearly trying to ponder whether she was serious.

“You look like a lady. You cannot misbehave,” the girl finally concluded, and Elizabeth laughed again.

“You are right,” Mr. Darcy suddenly interjected. “Miss Bennet’s behaviour is always without fault. I cannot imagine why anyone would be upset with her.”

He spoke in jest, but Elizabeth’s puzzlement changed into nervousness. Had he just complimented her, or was it only a mere joke?

“Allow me to introduce to you Miss Betsy and Peter. Their mother, Mrs. Gilroy, is a tenant of Lady Catherine’s.”

“No, no,” Peter explained. “My father was the tenant, but he died last year. My mama is a seamstress, and she and my brother work in the garden so we can have food for the winter.”

The boy’s explanation saddened Elizabeth, and she exchanged a glance with Mr. Darcy.

“Peter is correct, of course,” the gentleman answered.

As they spoke, they heard someone calling the children, and a woman appeared. Elizabeth estimated she was Mrs. Gardiner’s age, but she looked exceedingly thin and pale, her simple, dark clothes making her look much older.

Seeing them, the woman turned even paler, lowered her eyes, then attempted a curtsy with her head down.

“Mr. Darcy...forgive me, sir...I am so sorry. I told the children not to bother you...”

“Ma’am, please do not apologise. You certainly have no reason to. The children are very pleasant company, and I enjoy our time together very much. I am glad to talk to them — unless of course you prefer not to allow them to speak to me.”

“Oh no, sir...it is just...I do not want to upset you.”

“I am not upset. Please trust me and let us not mention this again.”

“Mama, Mr. Darcy said you do not have to pay for the food!” the girl said joyfully.

“Mrs. Gilroy, I am sorry if my simple gesture made you uncomfortable. I assure you it is nothing but what I do regularly for my own tenants, especially those who most need it. If you wish to thank me, please just accept it for the children.”

“Thank you, sir,” the woman replied, her hands clasped in front of her and her eyes still low. “You are very generous. I am not accustomed to...I mean...I do not want to upset Lady Catherine. She might be displeased...”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“Then the best solution would be not to tell her,” Mr. Darcy responded with a trace of a smile on his lips. “Would you not agree, Miss Bennet?”

“Yes,” she replied, again surprised by his manner.

“Mama, Miss Bennet’s name is also Elizabeth, but her mother calls her Lizzy! I think I like Lizzy more than Betsy. Can you call me that?”

“Be silent, child,” the mother requested with apparent mortification, but Elizabeth smiled and touched the top of the girl’s head.

“Betsy is quite lovely too.”

“Let us go now,” Mrs. Gilroy said. “I beg you to forgive me, sir, miss...I must feed the children and then finish my work.”

“Of course.”

“Mama, can we come tomorrow and talk to Mr. Darcy again?” Peter asked as they walked away. “I love his dog — did you see how large it is? These puppies will never be so big, Mr. Darcy said. I think Mr. Darcy knows everything. He is very clever. And very kind.”

Their mother tried to silence them, but the children continued to chat, glancing back and waving at Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth.

When they were finally alone, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy looked at each other. Only

then did she notice he was wearing no hat, and there were some leaves in his hair from sitting under the trees.

“Miss Bennet, are you returning to the Parsonage?”

“Yes...”

“Do you mind if I keep you company?”

She was stunned again.

“No, not at all...”

She glanced back, seeing that both his dog and his horse were following him freely. Both were tall, impressive, and looked frightening, yet they followed their master so calmly.

“I am surprised Colonel Fitzwilliam is not with you.”

“He went to the village. He should be back soon. I preferred to spend a little time with my new friends.”

Elizabeth smiled and turned her head away. He looked at her, clearly intrigued, and she decided to reply.

“Calling those lovely children your friends and seeing you play with them is something I would have never imagined.”

“May I ask why not?”

“Why not? Because nothing I have seen since we first met suggested such partiality

for playfulness or that sort of kindness.”

The last word slipped from her lips, and he gazed at her.

“I see...so your opinion of me forbade you from believing I might send food to a young widow who is raising three children,” he asked with some severity.

“Oh, no! That I can easily believe. I have long heard that you are an excellent master and landlord, and I am sure you show kindness and generosity to those in need.”

“Then...I do not understand your meaning...”

“Perhaps we would do better to change the subject, sir. I should not have said anything.”

“Please speak your mind, Miss Bennet. I have always admired your sincerity and will certainly not be bothered by hearing your honest opinion.”

She knew she should not speak further, but she did, and her irritation grew with every word. Things that she had not imagined would be said came out with frightening and imprudent haste.

“I know you are a man of many qualities, Mr. Darcy, but I never believed gentleness, kindness, and friendliness to strangers outside your circle of family and friends to be among them. I find it easier to believe that you might provide food and shelter to someone in need than that you play with children and their puppies.”

“You speak of my many qualities, but what I hear sounds more like flaws of character.”

“I apologise. I only spoke my mind as you requested. I might be wrong. I told you a

while ago that I failed in sketching your character as I hear such different accounts of you that puzzle me exceedingly.”

“I remember. And I also told you that I know you have received reports that vary greatly with respect to me, so I begged you not to sketch my character as there were reasons to fear that the performance would reflect no credit on either of us.”

“I would have gladly waited to complete that performance, Mr. Darcy, and perhaps to enquire further in regard to the various reports. However, I did not have that chance as you left unexpectedly and never returned. Neither you nor Mr. Bingley, who promised to be back in one week. Perhaps in London, weeks are longer than in Hertfordshire.”

Her statement clearly took him by surprise, and he looked at her with a frown as if he had not truly comprehended her meaning.

“Are there questions you wish to ask me now, Miss Bennet?”

“There might be, but, without being rude, I fear your answers, whether you decide to provide them or not.”

Strangely, he laughed bitterly, puzzling her.

“Betsy and Peter told me their mother is afraid to speak to me. I would never have imagined that you would be afraid to talk to me too, Miss Bennet.”

“I am not afraid to speak to you, Mr. Darcy. I am perhaps afraid of things you might tell me or conceal from me. However, I know I have no right to expect any answers from you. After all, we are nothing to each other except mere acquaintances who have always been enemies more than friends.”

He was speechless and look bewildered, while she continued; the Parsonage was already in sight.

“Sir, perhaps you should wonder what the excellent things are that you do as a habit that everyone praises you for — from your servants to complete strangers. And what are the things that perhaps require some improvement so that people — no matter who they are — will not be afraid to address you.”

He looked pale and disturbed and still did not reply.

“Forgive me if I said too much. I thank you for keeping me company, Mr. Darcy. Good day.”

She took a few steps, then he called to her, and she stopped.

“Miss Bennet, you have not said too much. Perhaps you have not said enough. I have no intention of concealing the truth if you wish to hear it. I shall be in the same place tomorrow. If you happen to be in the area, I am sure the children would be happy to see you. As for being enemies, that might express your feelings, but it certainly does not reflect mine. Good day, Miss Bennet.”

Who Are You, Mr Darcy?

Elizabeth had accepted Charlotte's invitation to visit her with reluctance.

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Her heart had been broken by Mr. Bingley's departure and even more so by the realisation — gleaned from Miss Caroline Bingley — that he knew she was in town but did not wish to see her.

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“Mr. Darcy...forgive me, sir...I am so sorry. I told the children not to bother you...”

“Ma’am, please do not apologise. You certainly have no reason to. The children are very pleasant company, and I enjoy our time together very much. I am glad to talk to them — unless of course you prefer not to allow them to speak to me.”

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see you. As for being enemies, that might express your feelings, but it certainly does not reflect mine. Good day, Miss Bennet.”

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The encounter with Mr. Darcy left Elizabeth in a state of nervousness she could not explain. She had been angry with him for so long and held resentment against him for so many reasons that her negative feelings had defeated her wisdom.

Even worse, her outburst had seemed to affect him and make him feel bad, and it certainly had not made her feel good. Before the conversation, she had been upset with him; afterwards, she was upset with herself.

Perhaps she would not have felt so uncomfortable if she had not seen him in such a candid and gentle situation with the children.

Now, she felt guilty and that she had been unfair to him, though she knew too well it was not true.

Strangely, she kept thinking of those leaves in his hair and wondered why she had not pointed them out to him.

She arrived at the Parsonage and tried to sneak up to her room, but the entire family was there.

“My dear cousin, where have you been?” Mr. Collins asked. “Colonel Fitzwilliam called, and he asked about you. It is not polite to disappoint him.”

“Mr. Collins, the colonel did not express to me his intention of calling, and he certainly called on the family, not me personally. If he was disappointed, I hope it will not last long.”

Her harsh voice turned all eyes to her, and Mr. Collins seemed to forget to breathe.

“My dear Eliza, are you unwell?” Charlotte asked. “Please have a cup of tea. I am sure it will be good for you.”

Elizabeth sat reluctantly and accepted the tea, planning to stay only as long as politeness required and to retire to her room quickly.

As she drank, she became more relaxed and continued the conversation in a more appropriate tone.

“I walked to the other side of the park and met two children, Peter and Betsy. I understand their mother, Mrs. Gilroy, is a widow.”

“Ah yes, Mrs. Gilroy’s situation is quite tragic,” Mr. Collins said.

“Her husband died last year. He was a hardworking man but not very wise. He was fonder of the brandy than the church. Lady Catherine was kind enough to give them that cottage and a little piece of garden on that side of the park, so they can grow vegetables and keep a goat and some chickens.”

“How kind of Lady Catherine.”

“Yes, exceedingly so. She is always most kind.”

“May I ask how he died?”

“He fell ill and never recovered. I am not sure... I usually avoid sick people. I do not want to catch something.”

Elizabeth looked at him and then at Charlotte and was ready to ask about a

clergyman's duty but restrained the impulse.

“The colonel said he would call again tomorrow.”

“I hope I shall be at home. I shall take another walk tomorrow, at this time. I have suffered from some terrible headaches lately, and I find walking helps me.”

As much as she enjoyed the colonel's company, Elizabeth had more important things to preoccupy her.

She was well aware that the colonel had no serious designs on her — he simply preferred the company of those at the Parsonage to those at Rosings.

Even if he had, her own feelings towards him were nothing more than those of a pleasant acquaintance she had known for a little while.

During the evening and through the night, Elizabeth pondered whether she should try to meet Mr. Darcy again or not.

He had offered her the opportunity to ask questions — something she might not have again in the future.

She was curious in regard to Mr. Wickham, of course, but most of all she wished to know more about Mr. Bingley and his plans for the future.

Mr. Darcy had claimed that he did not consider her an enemy, but surely they were not friends either, so it was unlikely he would answer such delicate questions. However, if she did not try, she would regret losing such an opportunity.

All sorts of small and silly things crossed her mind, such as the realisation that she did not know the name of Mr. Darcy's dog.

She had never heard him say it, either when they were at Netherfield or during their encounter in the park.

Of course, it was a meaningless detail, just like the leaves in his hair, and she was annoyed such things bothered her.

The next morning, after breakfast, she announced her intention to walk and refused Charlotte's invitation to join her in calling on parishioners in Hunsford.

Elizabeth took a book for company in case there was no other, and she walked towards the meeting place. She had slept poorly, and the morning found her as nervous as the previous evening. As she walked, she saw a small cart laden with food, and she wondered whether it might be for Mrs. Gilroy.

The children's voices announced to her that she had reached her destination before she realised it.

The Great Dane recognised her first and ran to her. "Angus, down," Mr. Darcy ordered, and the dog stopped.

"Angus," she repeated.

Peter and Betsy came to her, and Mr. Darcy bowed. He seemed genuinely pleased to see her.

"Good day, Miss Bennet. I am glad to see you."

"Miss Bennet, you have come again. Do you like us too?" Betsy asked.

"Of course I do!" She smiled.

“Mama and Tom are working in the field. Mama said we should stay at home, but she said we could come here if we want. We have played here every day since we moved.”

“The old house was bigger, but Mama said it took more wood to warm it and that wood is expensive,” Peter explained.

Although the children were joyful, Elizabeth’s heart ached.

“Miss Bennet, would you like to sit?” Mr. Darcy asked, indicating the blanket. She hesitated, but the children insisted.

The grove was small enough, the blanket even more so, and sitting so close to Mr. Darcy made her uncomfortable.

“What are the names of your puppies?” she asked. “They must be over two months old because they are already playing cheerfully.”

“Just Blacky and Whitey because one is black and one is white,” the girl explained with perfect seriousness.

“I see...yes, it makes perfect sense.”

“Mr. Darcy said we must find other names, but we don’t know any,” Peter added.

“I am sure you will find some good names eventually,” Elizabeth replied with another glance at Mr. Darcy.

“We found them last week just over there. Somebody threw them away,” Peter said. “Mama said you can’t throw away God’s creatures like they have no soul.”

“Your mother is perfectly right,” Elizabeth answered with much emotion.

“We were playing here, and then it began to rain, and we heard them crying, and then Mr. Darcy came, and Angus barked at us, and we thought he would kill them, but he only licked them, and we picked them up, and Mr. Darcy put them in his hat, and we took them home and warmed them and gave them warm milk, and they are all well now!” Betsy said all in one long breath as if she were afraid somebody would interrupt her.

She looked at Elizabeth with large blue eyes to see whether she was impressed.

“What a wonderful story! You are such brave and kind children. Your mother must be very proud of you.”

“My mother said we must be brave and behave. I take care of Betsy because I am older,” Peter said with much formality, breaking Elizabeth’s heart even more.

A little while later, Mr. Darcy indicated to the children they should return home as the sky had become clouded. He watched them leave and stood there until he saw them enter the house; only then did he turn to Elizabeth.

“Miss Bennet, we should walk back to the Parsonage. It looks like it might rain soon. But please do not hesitate to ask me any questions you want.”

“I...yesterday, there was another question I would have liked to ask. Now, I confess I am quite touched seeing you with the children again. May I ask why?”

“It is a delicate story and...” He paused for a moment, then looked ahead as he spoke.

“I cannot provide you with all the details as it is a private matter that involves someone else. I can only say I have been well acquainted with the children’s father,

Horace Gilroy, since I was a child and I visited Rosings with my parents. He was almost ten years my senior.”

“Oh...so you were friends?”

“Not exactly...Gilroy was Sir Lewis de Bourgh’s tenant — a hardworking and loyal man.

Sir Lewis gave him the best piece of land, which he made very productive.

They had a good house and a comfortable life.

When Sir Lewis died seven years ago, he even left him the sum of five hundred pounds in his will. ”

“How generous and kind of Sir Lewis.”

“Indeed. Unfortunately, Lady Catherine had quite a different opinion of Gilroy, and she was always displeased with him and his work.”

He paused, so Elizabeth said, “So I assume her husband’s bequest displeased Lady Catherine exceedingly.”

“Indeed.”

Elizabeth breathed deeply and said, “It is quite unfortunate when someone’s dying wishes upset those that remain. I hope Lady Catherine granted Mr. Gilroy the due amount after all.”

“She did.”

“Then it is a better situation than others — those where the sums owed were not given as requested.”

At that, he paused, looking at her, and she did the same. She could feel his repressed anger but still held his gaze boldly. Somebody had to confront him, after all. His good actions were no compensation for his dishonourable ones.”

“You are referring to Wickham, I assume,” he said directly.

“I am. I am well aware that I have no right to question your actions, Mr. Darcy, but please remember that you offered to answer. You may choose to disregard the matter if you prefer.”

“I would prefer to disregard everything related to Wickham, but sadly, it seems fate keeps placing him in my path. I am sure he complained about the living that should have been his and my refusal to grant it.”

“He did, as well as the one thousand pounds that was also left to him. I know he was your father’s godson and that Mr. Darcy had a great affection for him to the end.”

“Sadly, that part is true, and I am grateful that my father did not live to see his betrayal.”

The statement was powerful, and Elizabeth gulped the sudden lump in her throat. Surely Mr. Darcy was only bringing false accusations to excuse his own faults.

“May I ask the nature of your interest in Wickham? I am well aware I have no right to question your relationship, but if I do, it is solely for your benefit.”

“There is no need to worry about my benefit, Mr. Darcy. Mr. Wickham is a dear friend of mine and of my family’s, and he granted me his trust in confessing such a

delicate subject.

Whoever knows his misfortunes would feel sorry for him.

What could he have done to draw your resentment so much that you condemn him to poverty? ”

Mr. Darcy let out a bark of laughter that gave her thrills and made her uncomfortable. His anger was apparent, and she was alone with him at quite a distance from any house.

“His misfortunes were great indeed, pour soul. As for the reasons that caused my resentment, I could never relate them to an honourable young lady.”

She looked at him with a frown.

“Miss Bennet, I do not wish to pain or offend you, but Wickham related his pathetic story to you not because he trusted you but because it is what he tells everyone when we are both in the same place. Everyone who does not know him, of course. Usually, people come to learn his true nature rather quickly and in ways that cause them pain and loss.”

His words affected Elizabeth more deeply than she expected; no, not so much his words as his voice and the dark expression on his face.

“I told you once before that he makes friends easily but cannot keep them long. I assume you did not believe me and still do not. When you next meet him, ask him about his claim that he had no interest in the church and wished to study the law. Ask him about the three thousand pounds that he received to support his studies, in addition to the one thousand pounds that was bequeathed and given to him. Ask him how many times I have paid his gambling debts and other creditors — all in the name

of my father's love for him, which he so horribly abused. ”

Elizabeth stopped breathing. She stared at Mr. Darcy, and every word cut her like a knife.

His gaze was dark and his expression deeply hurt, and he seemed willing to say more, but he did not.

“Sir, I—”

“For proof of my dealings with Wickham, you may apply to my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam for confirmation. He is well aware of all the details.”

She found nothing to say, and even if she had wished to, she could not speak. Her mouth was dry, her heart was pounding, and her hands were shaking.

“We should make haste, Miss Bennet, it is raining already,” he said abruptly. “The Parsonage is only around the corner. If you do not need my further assistance, I shall leave you.”

With that, he mounted and departed in haste, with Angus following him.

Elizabeth remained still, gazing after him, with the rain pouring around her.

A while later, all wet, she entered the Parsonage, her head spinning with many more questions than she had before and with a pain in her chest she could not escape.

She went to change, and in the solitude of her room, she recollected all her conversations with Mr. Wickham.

He had related his story to her within two days of their first meeting, and that struck

Elizabeth with its impropriety.

Why would he trust someone he had only just met and did not know well enough to confide in?

Also, as soon as Mr. Darcy left Hertfordshire, Mr. Wickham had spread his story around the neighbourhood.

Not even that had bothered her at the time as she had been too occupied with hating Mr. Darcy and accusing him of Jane's suffering.

Everyone appeared now in a new light. Mr. Wickham had not revealed his story to her because he considered her trustworthy but because he thought she was silly enough to believe it!

A silly simpleton she had been, fooled by a charming smile and pleasant manners.

She did not even doubt Mr. Darcy's words. His revelation was too full of anger and feelings to be a fabricated story or a deception. Unlike Mr. Wickham's narration, which had been calm and steady — and she had believed it immediately.

A silly, stupid simpleton she had been — and she had made a fool of herself in front of Mr. Darcy too! Now he had good reason to despise her, indeed.

He had suggested she could apply to the colonel, which she did not need to do. But she desperately needed to speak to Mr. Darcy again, apologise for her stupid accusation, and perhaps — if he would forgive her, which was very unlikely — finally ask him about Mr. Bingley.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

That night was even worse than the previous one; restless and burdened with self-reproach and guilt, Elizabeth barely slept at all.

Adding to her torment, it had rained for the rest of the day, with no opportunity for activities out of doors.

Mr. Collins went to Rosings, despite the rain, but returned quickly.

Elizabeth had planned to stay in Kent for another fortnight.

She had exchanged two letters with Jane so far, but in neither of them had she mentioned Mr. Darcy.

Mrs. Gardiner's letters revealed that Jane's spirits had not improved at all, which upset Elizabeth and increased her anger towards all those who had caused it.

After her discussion with Mr. Darcy, when she had found out how she had been fooled by Mr. Wickham, Elizabeth thought more of Mr. Darcy from all perspectives. The most important aspect was the suspicion that he had caused Mr. Bingley to leave Netherfield.

Mr. Darcy might have intervened, together with the Bingley sisters; it was more likely that he had than he had not.

However, if Mr. Bingley's affection for Jane had been sincere and strong, how could he have allowed himself to be so easily persuaded not to return?

Did he not possess enough will? Or strength?

Or perhaps no real interest in the woman he pretended to admire?

It was like she had not wanted to marry Mr. Collins but had done so in any case because her mother forced her.

How could this be an excuse for a man who was the master of his own life?

Could his affection be shallow? Could he be a shallow man or just a weak one?

If any of those possibilities were the case, did Jane really need such a man?

When the second day came with more pouring rain, Elizabeth felt low in spirits. The day passed slowly, with annoying conversations in which Mr. Collins participated more than Elizabeth could bear.

In the afternoon, the rain did not stop, but the sun came to the Parsonage in the form of a note from Lady Catherine, inviting them all to dine at Rosings.

Mr. Collins was so overwhelmed with joy and gratitude that he needed a few moments to remember to breathe again.

Charlotte smiled as a supportive wife should, while Elizabeth struggled not to roll her eyes in vexation.

When Charlotte wrote back to accept the invitation, Elizabeth understood she would see Mr. Darcy again, without having a chance to speak to him privately at all. Under Lady Catherine's scrutiny, any words needed to be carefully pondered.

For dinner, Elizabeth arranged her appearance with extra care and put on her best

dress.

Restless, with a hole in her stomach and chills running over her skin, she tried to guess what Mr. Darcy might be thinking about her.

Their discussion made her presume that he suspected she might have a deeper interest in Mr. Wickham than mere friendship.

Was he mocking her for her foolishness? Or did he loathe her for her accusations?

Did he finally consider her an enemy, which he had denied a few days ago?

“Cousin Elizabeth, make haste! Lady Catherine’s carriage is waiting! Can you believe such consideration? To send us her carriage! And take your umbrella! Lady Catherine abhors drops of water dirtying her floors or wet dresses at her dinner table. My dear Charlotte, come, come!”

With such agitation, they entered the carriage and shortly after stopped in front of Rosings. They all climbed down, and Elizabeth’s heart pounded harder.

They were invited into the dining room, where Lady Catherine received them with an air of irritated superiority.

“I hope your shoes are dry!” she said before greeting them. “Anne is very fragile, and I would not wish her to slip and fall.” She then asked a servant to dry the floor, even though it had already been done.

Elizabeth cast a quick glance at Mr. Darcy; he was sitting in a corner by himself. Colonel Fitzwilliam came to greet them and invited Elizabeth to sit next to him.

“Darcy, come and sit next to me,” Lady Catherine requested. “And you, Mr. Collins,

here. Mrs. Collins and your sister may sit there.”

With such orders, each took their designed place, and the first course was served.

“Lady Catherine, allow me to say again how grateful we are for this invitation,” Mr. Collins said.

“To be honest, as I always am, I would not have invited you in this weather if my nephews had not insisted. You know how much I detest leaving the house or receiving guests when it is raining. Such weather is the perfect time for all sorts of illnesses, which I cannot allow in my house.”

“Dear aunt, I am sure we are all in excellent health here,” the colonel said in his usual amused tone.

Elizabeth felt Mr. Darcy’s gaze upon her, and her eyes met his briefly.

“Well, I understand Miss Bennet possesses a very unladylike habit of walking out of doors in any weather. I could not disapprove of it more.”

“It is said that walking and any other sort of exercise in the fresh air ensures better health,” Mr. Darcy suddenly interjected.

“I strongly disagree. I have never liked exercise out of doors and still have always been healthy. Unlike my poor sister Anne — God rest her soul — who liked to walk and ride yet died so young.”

The blunt statement astonished Elizabeth, and she looked at Mr. Darcy again, seeing his frowning countenance.

“Besides, even if it is healthy, I declare the habit of walking alone to be most

improper for a young woman. But when one has spent their entire life in the country, one cannot be aware of the demands of propriety.”

Elizabeth knew the rebuke was directed at her. Amused, she pondered how she should reply, but Mr. Collins spoke first.

“I completely agree, Lady Catherine. As I have told my cousin Elizabeth many times. Even a few days ago, when the colonel called and she was not at home, I expressed my opposition to her strolling in the park alone.”

“Why were you calling on the Parsonage, Geoffrey?” Lady Catherine asked harshly.

“Because I desired company,” the colonel replied with a large smile.

“I cannot imagine why you would prefer the company at the Parsonage to that of your relatives.”

“It is no competition, Aunt,” the colonel said, keeping the same smile. “You and Anne were resting, Darcy was out on his usual ride, and I went to the village and stopped at the Parsonage on the way.”

“I disapprove of Darcy’s habit of riding around the fields very much too,” Lady Catherine declared. “I have been told you are seen quite often in a certain part of the park,” she said, and again, Elizabeth saw Mr. Darcy’s expression changing.

“I ride all around the park, Aunt, just as I do at Pemberley. Managing an estate means to supervise it with your own eyes as often as possible.”

“You cannot argue with that, Aunt,” the colonel interjected again. “I know nobody more dedicated or more successful in accomplishing his duties than Darcy. And you must admit that, in the five years since he took on the management of Rosings, your

income has significantly improved.”

“Geoffrey, we do not speak about business at dinner and certainly not in front of strangers!” Lady Catherine scolded her nephew.

Elizabeth hid her smile behind her napkin.

The entire scene was equally embarrassing and amusing, and the only ones not seeing the ridiculousness of it seemed to be Lady Catherine and her loyal admirer Mr. Collins.

“Miss Bennet, I hope you returned to the Parsonage safely the other day,” Mr. Darcy suddenly said, and Elizabeth held her breath.

He turned to his aunt, who was already looking at him curiously, and explained, “I was riding to Rosings when the rain began, and I saw Miss Bennet in the lane. I hoped she was not caught in the downpour.”

“I entered the house just in time,” Elizabeth said. “Thank you for your concern, sir.”

She understood the meaning behind his words and realised he must have been just as preoccupied by their argument as she had been since he had brought it up in front of his aunt.

“What were you doing out of doors?” Lady Catherine asked.

“I was just walking, thinking about some personal matters that have troubled me lately. The walk helped me realise how wrong I was in my judgments, and now I am searching for ways to make amends, or at least to apologise for my mistakes.”

Elizabeth knew her statement was bold and could begin another quarrel with Lady

Catherine, but she accepted the risk and cast a look at Mr. Darcy. He certainly understood her and even slightly bowed his head in an imperceptible gesture of acknowledgement.

“Nonsense!” Lady Catherine declared. “This is precisely what I meant earlier. You should stay with Mrs. Collins and learn from her how to run a household. She is a good mistress — just to my liking. However, you might not need it — I doubt you will receive a marriage proposal considering your situation in life and lack of dowry.”

“Lady Catherine!” the colonel cried. “Surely you cannot say that!”

“Why not? We all know it is true! Why let her entertain hopes that will never be fulfilled? It will only harm her more.”

“I appreciate your ladyship’s thoughtfulness,” Elizabeth replied.

“I do agree that Charlotte is an excellent mistress, and I congratulate her on her felicity. As for me, I have no such expectations.” She was now smiling broadly, and she looked at the colonel, then at Mr. Darcy; both of them were frowning.

“If we are not allowed to discuss business at dinner, we should certainly not talk about the futures or marital lives of others,” Mr. Darcy interjected in a cold voice.

“Furthermore, I would not measure a lady’s chances of felicity by her connections or dowry but by her worthiness.

As proof, I have not seen many happy — truly happy — marriages between people of great consequence and great fortune.

My parents were one of the very few exceptions.”

Lady Catherine looked displeased, and she was about to respond when Mr. Darcy addressed her directly. “Do you have other examples of such cases, Aunt? If you do and you wish to debate over them, I would be happy to indulge you.”

His voice was calm and polite, though cold, and Elizabeth was surprised to see Lady Catherine’s face change colour. She abandoned the subject and demanded the next course be served.

After dinner, the conversation was scarce. Unlike the previous dinner, when the colonel had asked for some music and Elizabeth had performed while he turned the pages for her, this time such a favour was not requested. The party soon separated, when Lady Catherine declared she was tired.

Since over the last two nights, sleep had evaded her, Elizabeth was exhausted but content. The dinner — whilst neither entertaining nor comfortable — had provided her with the opportunity to speak to Mr. Darcy, admit her error, and apologise.

Even though it had been a disquieting and disguised conversation, its importance was significant.

However, new questions arose in her mind as she remembered Mr. Darcy taking her side on the subject of marriage.

He had spoken of a woman’s worthiness in opposition to her connections and dowry.

Could he have been referring to Jane? Of course, who else?

Had he realised his error in separating his friend from her sister and was now ready to make amends too?

With such hopes, Elizabeth's nervousness returned — but in a good way. She decided to take a long walk the next day and try to see him again, if only for a few minutes, to ask a few more questions. She glanced through the window; the sky was still cloudy, but she prayed for the best.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“Cousin Elizabeth, I trust you have taken Lady Catherine’s reproaches to heart and will amend your habits,” Mr. Collins said at breakfast.

“Unfortunately, as much as I respect her ladyship’s opinion, I cannot do that. I woke up with a terrible headache, and the only palliation is a little exercise out of doors. Hopefully, Lady Catherine will not find out.”

“My dear, just as you like to work in the garden, Eliza enjoys walking. It is the same. I see no harm in it,” Charlotte interjected.

“My dear Charlotte, I beg to differ. It is not the same! Lady Catherine approves of me working in the garden, but she does not approve of my cousin’s habit of walking.”

“Let us indulge Lizzy for as long as she stays with us. She will leave soon, and each of us will return to our old habits.”

Mr. Collins agreed reluctantly, and Elizabeth marvelled at Charlotte’s patience in handling her husband. It was a daunting task, but likely the reward of a peaceful household was enough for Charlotte.

When she left the house, Elizabeth was undecided about her direction. Eventually, she took the path towards the children’s cottage, hoping Mr. Darcy would be there. Besides her desire to talk to him, she missed the little ones.

As she walked, she found herself wondering about the supposed engagement between Mr. Darcy and Miss Anne de Bourgh.

Last evening at dinner she had observed both of them with much more interest than on previous occasions.

She had not noticed a single gesture, a single word, or a single glance of connection between the two.

Miss de Bourgh had spent most of her time talking to her companion and to Charlotte, without any attempt to involve Mr. Darcy — unlike Miss Caroline Bingley had done at Netherfield.

As for Mr. Darcy, he seemed indifferent to his cousin. The lack of feelings between them was so obvious that Elizabeth pitied them if they were to actually marry.

Halfway to her destination, she heard the sound of hoofs and recognised Mr. Darcy approaching. He dismounted when he reached her, and strangely, her heart began to beat faster at seeing him, and she assumed it was due to their unresolved conflict.

“Miss Bennet!”

“Mr. Darcy! I was hoping to meet you, sir.”

“And I you. I want to apologise for—”

“Oh no, it is I who owe you an apology for all the unfair accusations I threw at you. I have no excuse for being such a simpleton.”

“Do not be too hard on yourself. Wickham has deceived many people, several of them older and more experienced than you, who had more opportunities to see his true character yet still failed.”

“The failure of others is no excuse for my foolishness. But I thank you for your

forgiveness.”

“I am sorry if my response was too strong... I should have been calmer...”

“I understand...I am grateful that you trusted me enough to share the truth.”

“Since we last spoke, I have reflected deeply upon the entire situation. I should have revealed the truth to Colonel Forster and warned him. I should wager that by now Wickham has already run up debts with his fellow officers and probably many tradespeople too.”

“I cannot form an opinion on this matter, sir. If the circumstances were different, I would say that perhaps he deserves another chance — perhaps he is willing to change and improve himself. However, I have no arguments to support such an assumption.”

“That is why I would rather inform only his colonel, not everyone. The colonel will know to watch him and to take proper measures if required. In the meantime, forgive me if I sound presumptuous, but I would like to suggest you write to your father and advise him not to allow your younger sisters to be in Wickham’s company. He is not to be trusted.”

She needed a moment to understand, then her cheeks flushed. “Oh...dear Lord, surely he would not dare...”

“Wickham would dare to do anything for his own benefit or his own entertainment,” Mr. Darcy said with gravity. “Young, innocent girls like your sisters would never guess his deceptive nature.”

“I agree...I did not see the danger before as I never saw any partiality for them on Mr. Wickham’s side.”

“I heard his partiality lay towards you,” he said in a low voice, surprising Elizabeth. “I mean...I was told that,” he continued. “I admit, I was astonished, as he usually does not favour clever, witty ladies.”

Elizabeth looked at him, puzzled, wondering who had told him such a thing and why he was even interested. At his last words, she began to laugh.

“Well, then he was only acting in his usual way since I am neither clever nor witty.”

Mr. Darcy smiled back as they continued to walk together.

“Mr. Darcy, I do not wish to abuse your patience, but there is something else I wanted to ask you.”

“Please do so.”

“Do you have news from Mr. Bingley? He is in good health, I hope?”

The answer came after some hesitation.

“I know he is in good health, but I have not seen Bingley much lately. We last spoke in February, when he went to visit a friend in Oxfordshire.”

“Oh...so he was not in London?”

“No.”

“That is strange because...my sister Jane has been in town since January, and she visited Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst.”

She waited for his response, but none came.

“They told my sister that Mr. Bingley was in town but was busy with you and Miss Darcy.”

At this, he turned to her, a frown appearing on his face.

“I was informed of your sister’s presence in London. To my knowledge, Bingley had already left by then.”

“Mr. Darcy, there is no other way of asking this, even if it might raise a further disagreement between us. I know Mr. Bingley’s sisters put great effort into separating him from Jane and keeping him in town, but I sense you were no stranger to this matter either.

I am not ignorant of the fact that you never approved of Mr. Bingley’s admiration for my sister. Can you deny it?”

“I have no wish to deny it, Miss Bennet. I always take responsibility for my actions.”

They walked in silence for a short while. She felt disappointed by his cold admission of ruining Jane’s happiness. He sounded careless and arrogant, just as he used to in Hertfordshire.

“I knew his sisters opposed Bingley returning to Netherfield because of his admiration for your sister. And I knew she was in town. I suspect they refused to inform him.”

“I see...so my sister has been suffering for four months because of an evil scheme meant to ruin her happiness, and probably his too. I shall not pretend I am not disappointed and stunned by the complete lack of consideration you — as well as his sisters — showed to Mr. Bingley.”

“Miss Bennet—”

“I am sorry, I have a sudden headache. I should return to the Parsonage.”

“Miss Bennet, please, only a moment longer.”

She looked at him. His gaze was dark, and she could not read anything in it.

“Miss Bennet, I did not disapprove of Bingley’s admiration for your sister. In truth, I believe she is one of the most beautiful women of my acquaintance, and with her flawless manners, I am sure she is universally admired.”

“She is,” Elizabeth replied with pride. “I am as aware of my sister’s lack of faults as I am of the fact that the rest of my family has plenty. From our situation in life to the breaches of decorum that are not rare for us.”

She expected him at least to attempt to deny it, but to her pain, he did not.

“All those were issues to consider, and they might have been the strongest inducement for Bingley’s sisters. For me, my main concern was my friend’s happiness. I did not want him to be hurt in a marriage where most of the affection lay on one side.”

Again, Elizabeth stared at him, trying to comprehend his words.

“What could you possibly mean, sir.”

“Miss Bennet, we both know that, while my young friend fell in love immediately, your sister’s heart is not easily touched.

Anyone who saw them together, especially at the Netherfield ball, could observe that

he was deeply enamoured while your sister received his attention with pleasure but no particular interest. I do not doubt that she would have been a loyal wife to Bingley, but in the end, both of them would have suffered, even if secretly.

A marriage with unequal affection is worse than one with no affection at all. ”

“So, you separated your friend from my sister because you thought her indifferent to him?” Elizabeth enquired, almost suffocated by repressed anger and grief.

“I tried to protect him. I did not induce him to go to London, but when we were there, he asked my opinion about his situation. I honestly told him the result of my observation. Bingley left my house that day, and I have barely seen him again after that.”

She stood still, breathing hard and fighting to keep her composure.

“Have you been in love many times in your life, Mr. Darcy? And perhaps betrayed many times?”

At this question, his astonishment seemed complete.

“Excuse me?”

“I am only asking because apparently, you claim equal expertise in matters of the heart as in business and estate management. You must have had quite a lot of practice in both areas.”

“You are wrong, I assure you. I claim no expertise. I am not the sort of man to easily fall in love.”

“I assumed as much. But then you must be the sort of man who is ready to ruin

others' felicity based on assumptions that he does not even take the trouble to verify.

If your friend was ready to propose to my sister, you should know that you have destroyed the happiness of both.

My sister's affection for Mr. Bingley was not as openly displayed as his for her, but it was at least equally strong.

And her suffering is so deep that she cannot overcome it even after four months of grief. ”

Her tone was sharp, cutting, and she did not regret it, nor did she try to amend it. If she had every reason to regret her accusations in regard to Wickham, Mr. Darcy's selfish intervention and his arrogant assumption deserved the worst.

“Miss Bennet...”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“Mr. Darcy, please allow me to leave, sir, while I can still restrain myself from being as rude as my anger demands me to be. Having the chance to see you in a different light lately, to recognise your kindness and generosity, has only made me more furious with you and proved to me how little consideration you have shown to my family since we met. It is your prerogative, of course, but I have the right to condemn it, even if it will turn me into your enemy.”

“I trust I am a better man than to consider you an enemy for the mere reason that we disagreed. I have no reason to doubt you — you certainly know your sister better than I do, so if you are right, I must have been wrong. But I did everything for the benefit of my friend.”

“Your purpose might have been noble, but the result is dreadful. My sister will put her heart together eventually, but Mr. Bingley will certainly not find a woman better suited to him, nor one who cares for him more deeply. And if he is unhappy in his marriage, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that it is the result of your doing everything to his benefit.”

Her last sentences affected him so deeply that his expression was transfigured.

“Now please excuse me. I shall leave you,” she said, then hurried back to the Parsonage.

She was tempted to look back and see whether he was following her but overcame the impulse.

She entered, told Charlotte she still had a headache, and retired to her room.

Her heart was heavy, her head clouded, and she released all her tension by beginning to sob, as she had not done in many years.

Knowing that Mr. Bingley had intended to propose to Jane but had reconsidered only because he believed her indifferent — at his friend's suggestion — was heartbreaking.

It surely took most of the blame from Mr. Bingley's shoulders and moved it to those of Mr. Darcy, who, in only a few words, could cause misery with much ease.

For the rest of that day, Elizabeth did not leave her room.

She was in no disposition to see anyone, especially Mr. Collins.

She counted the days till her departure — nine.

As she lay in her bed, she wondered whether she could find a way to leave earlier.

Despite being angry with Mr. Darcy, she felt a strange desire to see him again and talk to him more, which was an even stronger reason for her to shorten her stay in his proximity.

She only gathered herself enough to write to her father and warn him about Mr. Wickham. She insisted that Lydia and Kitty should not be allowed unchaperoned in that man's company, nor should his presence at Longbourn be encouraged.

The following day, the weather was fine, but Elizabeth refused to accompany Charlotte to Hunsford.

Home alone, she wrote to her aunt, enquiring about the possibility of changing her plans, which depended on Mr. Gardiner's carriage.

In the afternoon, an invitation for tea came from Lady Catherine, mentioning her nephews were away on business and she needed company.

Elizabeth declined, expressing her desire to obey Lady Catherine's request and not go to Rosings as long as she felt any sort of illness. Mr. Collins was perfectly content.

Two more days passed in which Elizabeth did not leave the Parsonage at all. She would have enjoyed a walk, but she feared she would meet Mr. Darcy, and she could not bear seeing him again.

Later in the afternoon of the second day, just before dinner, Colonel Fitzwilliam called unexpectedly, enquiring about Elizabeth's health. She was in the drawing room with Charlotte and had the chance to assure him she was well enough.

"I shall only stay a moment as Lady Catherine is expecting me for dinner. Miss Bennet, I am glad to see you. We were truly worried for you."

"I thank you, sir. There is no need for concern — it is only a silly headache."

"I hoped that was the case. Darcy insisted on me advising you to send for the doctor if your pain persists, but obviously, it is not necessary."

"Obviously," Elizabeth replied, feeling chills at the simple mention of his name.

"Tell Mr. Darcy we thank him for his advice," Mr. Collins said. "And assure him my cousin will not go to Rosings and put Miss de Bourgh in any danger."

"Mr. Darcy is well, I hope?" Charlotte asked. "We have not seen either of you lately."

"He is. I insisted on him joining me, but he claimed his presence might be too much

and might upset Miss Bennet. I really failed to understand his reason.”

“Both you and Mr. Darcy are always welcome in our home,” Charlotte replied, while Elizabeth remained silent.

She felt unsettled knowing that Mr. Darcy had spoken of her and was concerned about her health.

She was also grateful that he had not simply appeared at her door, unannounced, which would have caused her even more distress.

The colonel left, and the family had dinner.

“How kind of Mr. Darcy to be so worried for Miss de Bourgh,” Mr. Collins said. “His affection for her is certainly growing, and Lady Catherine is expecting a marriage proposal any day now.”

“Are you sure, my dear?” Charlotte asked.

“They certainly do not behave like a couple who are courting,” Maria declared. “I have never seen either of them say a single word to the other.”

“My dear Maria, you must know that people of high society do not behave like the rest of us. They do not show their feelings so easily, especially around strangers. Besides, Lady Catherine has told me that their engagement is of a peculiar sort. They have been destined for each other since they were in their cradles. It was the particular wish of his mother and hers.”

“It sounds very complicated,” Maria replied. “I wonder why they have not married all these years.”

Mr. Collins looked appalled.

“My dear sister, let us learn never to judge either Lady Catherine or anyone in her family. They know what to do better than us.”

With that, dinner ended, and Elizabeth excused herself, blaming the same headache.

A new subject of reflection kept sleep away for most of the night.

She kept thinking of that particular engagement and could not but agree with Maria.

If Mr. Darcy had not proposed before the age of eight-and-twenty, the chances of it happening were scarce.

Unless perhaps Mr. Darcy preferred to be single for a little longer before binding himself into a marriage.

His voice when he had spoken about unequal affection in marriage indicated to Elizabeth that the subject was not completely unknown to him.

As much as she tried not to allow her mind to wonder about him, she failed; her thoughts refused to turn in another direction.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

The following morning, Elizabeth woke up at dawn with a headache that would not pass no matter what she did. Despite the early time, she took her coat and went for a walk, which she had longed to do over the past few days.

She took a completely different route from her previous ones to avoid any unpleasant meetings, but luck was not on her side; as soon as she took a right turn down a path under some trees, she saw Mr. Darcy, and he looked as though he was waiting for someone.

He walked towards her, and there was no chance for her to avoid the encounter.

“Miss Bennet.” He bowed politely.

“Mr. Darcy. I did not expect to see you here, sir.”

“I confess I hoped to see you. In fact, I have walked these paths for the last three days to that end.”

“Oh...” The honest confession caught her unprepared.

“Are you feeling better today?”

“Not entirely.”

“I am sorry to hear that...”

“There is no need, sir. It is only an annoying headache that has bothered me lately.”

“I can imagine...”

“Have you seen the Gilroy children recently? I hope they are in good health?”

“Yes, yesterday. The children are well. Mrs. Gilroy, I was told, has some backache that keeps her to her bed. I have asked the physician from Hunsford to visit her.”

“It is commendable that you put so much effort into helping them.”

“It is no effort, truly,” he replied.

“Please send them my greetings when you next see them.”

“I shall. But if you wish, you may go and see them yourself. Do not worry about seeing me. I understand my presence is uncomfortable to you, and I shall not get in your way.”

His voice was low and his countenance stern; she felt her cheeks burning.

“You are on your aunt’s estate, sir. Certainly, you are not in my way, but I would like to avoid any more quarrels that may harm our tentative acquaintance further.”

“I understand. I am sorry, as I know the quarrels were mostly my fault. However, what was done is in the past, and there is little I can do now to remedy my errors.”

“Yes, such errors cannot be easily repaired. And whilst I cannot argue with your desire to protect your friend, I cannot forget my sister’s suffering either.”

“I wished to inform you that I have written to Colonel Forster, as we discussed.”

“And I have written to my father.”

“I am glad to hear it. I also wrote to Bingley immediately after our last discussion.”

Elizabeth’s heart stopped, and she held her breath after asking, “You did?”

“Of course. I told him that your sister has been in town since January and that I met you here. I indicated to him that I might have been wrong in my judgment, and I advised him to disregard my opinion and to act based on his own wishes.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said in a heartfelt whisper.

“Please do not thank me for doing what is right. I know Bingley might be angry with me, and I even put our friendship in danger, but his happiness is worth more than his opinion of me.”

“You are an excellent man, Mr. Darcy,” she said after a brief pause.

“Sadly, not entirely. I try to be, but I fail at times. I was taught good principles, but I realise I have applied them in a selfish manner. You opened my eyes when you told me that you were not surprised that I helped the Gilroy family with food, but you were amazed that I give the children attention.”

“Oh, please forgive me. It was certainly not my right to say that!”

“No, it was not.” He smiled. “But I am glad you did so. Also, you told me that I showed no consideration for your family. That is also true. I gave no importance to anyone in Meryton during my stay there. None of them mattered at all.”

He paused, breathed deeply, then added, “Except for you.”

Elizabeth’s heart stopped, and she watched him with bewilderment before clearing her throat. “Me, sir?”

“Yes. I hoped you had noticed it a while ago.”

“Noticed it?” she repeated, her astonishment now complete.

“Yes, my interest and my admiration for you.”

For a moment, Elizabeth suspected he was teasing her. Yet, he looked serious, even stern, a deep frown between his eyebrows.

“Not at all,” she admitted. “Until I saw you with the children and spent a little while talking, I was certain that you always looked at me to find fault.”

“You revealed your true opinion when you declared we were more enemies than friends. At that moment, I realised how wrong I had been in my estimation. I should have known I was wrong in judging your sister too.”

“Mr. Darcy, please forgive me...but I feel there is a misunderstanding, and I wish to clarify it. May I ask about the nature of your interest?” she whispered.

“It is of whatever nature you wish it to be, Miss Bennet,” he responded, puzzling her even more.

“Please know that I have admired you for a long time, and I am deeply sorry for any harm I have caused you or your family through my arrogant and thoughtless actions. Your friendship — if you will allow me to have it — is valuable to me, and I shall not do or say anything to make you uncomfortable.”

In a perturbed state of mind, wondering about his meaning, fearing to assume what was still unclear, Elizabeth could only reply with a timid and silly, “Thank you.”

He smiled and seemed content. “Shall we walk a little farther?” he asked.

“Yes...for a little while. I must return for breakfast. Mr. Collins is as strict about punctuality as Lady Catherine.”

He laughed, and suddenly the barrier of tension broke between them.

“Mr. Collins emulates my aunt in everything.”

“Yes, Lady Catherine could not be the object of a more loyal adoration.”

“Something that she truly relishes,” he joked.

“Miss de Bourgh does not seem to resemble your aunt.”

“She does not. She is very much like Sir Lewis — both in appearance and in nature.”

The subject was on her lips, and although she knew it was highly improper to voice it, she could not restrain herself.

“I hear you are engaged to Miss de Bourgh.”

He turned his head, and her eyes met his.

“I am not. This is a ridiculous fantasy my aunt has entertained since Anne and I were infants. She claimed she agreed upon it with my mother — something that nobody else has ever heard of. Regardless, I would never marry someone to indulge a twenty-five-year-old agreement.”

“And Miss de Bourgh? Has she no expectations? She must be hurt if—”

“Miss Bennet, I have discussed the matter with my cousin many times. My affection for her is genuine — though of a different nature — and I would never do anything to

harm her.”

“Of course.”

They continued to walk and — for some impossible-to-understand reason — Elizabeth felt her heart becoming lighter and lighter.

She forgot that she had been so angry with him only half an hour before that she wished to never see him again.

On the contrary, she heard herself say, “I would like to see the Gilroy children tomorrow. Perhaps we may talk more if you happen to be there too?”

A broad smile appeared on his face. “I shall be there an hour after breakfast, Miss Bennet. Shall we return now? It is late already.”

They continued to walk together until they were near the Parsonage but did not speak much. After their previous storming quarrels, a peaceful silence enveloped them. They parted at the garden gate, and she entered the house while he mounted and rode off towards Rosings.

Elizabeth’s state improved drastically that morning. With anticipation, she imagined Mr. Bingley’s response to hearing such news. Mr. Darcy had fulfilled his duty. From that day on, Mr. Bingley’s behaviour would be the only proof of his worthiness and of his real interest in Jane.

The word ‘interest’ stirred Elizabeth’s imagination even more, as she recollected the way Mr. Darcy had used it.

He had declared he had admired her for a long time and held a particular interest in her.

What a puzzling man he was! What could he possibly mean?

What sort of admiration? What sort of interest?

He had refused to discuss it, and she did not dare guess what he had not said.

He had seemed hurt that she had said they were more enemies than friends.

But such a description would apply to anyone in Meryton, including her family.

He said he had misjudged her opinion of him.

In what way? He was indeed a difficult man, and he seemed to enjoy torturing her, though he pretended he valued her friendship.

Only an hour before, Elizabeth would not have called their relationship a friendship.

But apparently, he had, and she was ready to agree with him.

Breakfast had already been served when she entered, and Mr. Collins raised his eyebrow in reproach.

They were still eating when an express arrived from London for Elizabeth, and she assumed it was from Mrs. Gardiner. Instead, it was from Jane, and Elizabeth opened it with worry and curiosity.

As she read, disbelief and then joy overwhelmed her, and she felt tears pooling in her eyes. Surely it could not be! It was certainly the fruit of her imagination! Such a perfect outcome in such a short time was difficult to believe.

“Eliza my dear, what has happened? You look troubled,” Charlotte said.

“I am not troubled, only exceedingly happy. Jane writes that Mr. Bingley called on them yesterday. Apparently, he only returned to London a week ago and was informed she was in town,” she said, and for a brief though powerful moment, she felt the desire to embrace Mr. Darcy.

She flushed at such a bold thought, then put the letter down and resumed eating, eager to read it again afterwards, and planning how to meet Mr. Darcy again to thank him.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Elizabeth immediately responded to Jane; the image of her sister's happiness, so obvious through the lines of the letter, melted her heart.

All suspicion and blame of Mr. Bingley vanished in a moment.

The day after receiving Mr. Darcy's letter, the gentleman had apparently called at Gracechurch Street — a haste very much applaudable.

The next morning, as planned, Elizabeth met Mr. Darcy again at the same place. She was happy to see the children too — and the puppies, which had grown remarkably in only a week.

And she was thrilled to see Mr. Darcy, whose smile made her knees weak, and she did not even know why.

Tom, the eldest Gilroy child came to talk to Mr. Darcy too, and he reported that his mother still kept to her bed. He blamed the hard work in the garden, in the fields, and the nights she spent sewing dresses for extra money.

On their way back towards the Parsonage, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy had time to talk with no interruptions.

“Yes, I know Bingley called on Miss Bennet,” he replied calmly after Elizabeth thanked him heartily. “He sent me a letter too, one in which I could hardly understand anything. His handwriting is hardly intelligible, especially when it is driven by emotions. He sounded exceedingly happy.”

“So did my sister.”

“You were right and I was wrong,” he admitted.

“The only thing that matters is that what was wrong is now right. And you, sir, are to be both blamed and praised for that,” she said with a smile.

“May I ask when you will return to London?”

“By the end of the week. My uncle will send his carriage to convey me and Maria Lucas.”

“My cousin and I shall leave a day later. Would you allow me to call on you in London? To be sure you arrived safely?”

“Of course...I would be very happy to see you, sir. Do you know whether Mr. Bingley will open Netherfield?”

“It is very likely.”

They walked on for a little while; the Parsonage was now only a short distance away.

“Miss Bennet...”

“Yes?”

“If Bingley opens Netherfield again, I might visit him. I wonder if my presence would displease anyone in the neighbourhood.”

“Not at all, sir. Quite the opposite,” she replied, looking ahead. She felt he wished to say something more but did not dare. She did not dare insist either, so they separated

at the usual spot, with a proper good-bye.

Two more days passed, each with a similar scene. What differed were Elizabeth's feelings every time she saw Mr. Darcy: eagerness, anticipation, nervousness, and delight all together.

She and Mr. Darcy had not established a precise meeting place or time, but it always happened, as if they were of the same mind.

He still had not spoken of their relationship, but she felt they were becoming closer every day.

Small gestures, certain words, smiles, and glances were different.

As little experience as Elizabeth had in courtship, her heart and her mind told her that this was more than a friendship.

She was fearful to even imagine he might consider proposing to her.

But what else could all his hints mean? A man such as he would not show her such particular attention if his interest and his intentions were not of a certain type.

Two days prior to her departure date, Elizabeth had just left through the back door of the Parsonage for her walk when, through the open window, she heard Charlotte and Mr. Collins talking in low voices.

"My dear, I cannot believe that!" Charlotte declared.

"I heard people in the village talking! Everybody says the same! Mr. Darcy would not show such attention to a woman if it were not true! Besides, even Lady Catherine complains about how often Mr. Darcy takes solitary rides."

Elizabeth's heart stopped, and she held her breath, her body trembling. What were they talking about? Did anyone suspect something improper was happening between her and Mr. Darcy? How dare they!"

"My dear, I would advise you not to tell Lady Catherine."

"I absolutely must! She always says that as a clergyman, I must know everything that happens in my parish. What if somebody else tells her first? She would never forgive me!"

"At least wait two more days, until Eliza and Maria leave. You do not want a scandal with the two of them here."

"Very well. Two more days, if nothing else arises to add more urgency to the matter. I cannot believe that Mr. Darcy has not shown more caution, especially since he must know such rumours would hurt his future wife, Miss de Bourgh. It seems he is not the excellent gentleman his aunt believes him to be. As for the woman, I shall not even dignify her enough to mention her name!"

At this, Elizabeth stepped away carefully, then she began to run towards the grove. The notion that her friend since childhood could believe so ill of her and despise her so much, that the people of Hunsford were talking so horribly about her and Mr. Darcy, was outrageous.

As she ran, she saw the object of her thoughts, waiting. By that time, she knew tears were falling down her cheeks, and she wiped them away angrily.

"Miss Bennet?"

She looked at him; his expression betrayed concern and torment.

“Mr. Darcy, please leave, sir. Or I shall leave. We cannot meet any longer.”

“What has happened? Has someone hurt you?”

“Yes! Through horribly unfair rumours and gossip. It is damaging to both our names and reputations. We must not see each other again.”

“Miss Bennet, I beg you to calm yourself and tell me what happened.” His voice was level but grave.

She lowered her eyes, mortified to repeat such things. “I heard Charlotte and my cousin talking...saying that the people of Hunsford are gossiping...about a certain relationship — an improper one — between us. About our walking together...and your rides.”

“I am very sorry about your torment, Miss Bennet. Very sorry,” he said, handing her his handkerchief. “But I must ask, did you hear them mention your name?”

She paused and thought carefully. “No. Only yours. But it was obvious.”

“Not entirely. I have been told about the rumours, and I came to inform you, so you know what will happen next. The rumours are in regard to Mrs. Gilroy. The gossip says I procured her food and other necessities because I am in an illicit relationship with her.”

The revelation stunned Elizabeth so deeply that she needed to lean against a tree for support; with disbelief, she looked at him, speechless.

“Are you sure?”

“Sadly, yes. The rumours are vicious and will affect the entire family for the rest of

their lives. The shop boy, who delivered the purchases, probably saw me there with the children. So, he assumed the worst.”

“This is ridiculous!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

“I should have anticipated it. It was my fault. I did not consider the situation properly. I was so caught up in my relationship with you that I forgot everything else,” he whispered, causing her even more confusion.

“You were?” she whispered.

“Yes, of course...I have created such turmoil from this entire situation. There is something of great importance that I wish to tell you today. To ask you...I do not expect an immediate answer...but I thought you should know the whole truth before we part ways.”

“What truth? About what?”

“About the nature of my interest in you — what you asked me a while ago. I mean — if you still want to know.”

“I do,” she answered with thrilling anticipation, her eyes locked with his. “Very much so. I hope you will tell me before I leave.”

“But I cannot tell you now. I shall find a moment — just not now when we are discussing such horrible gossip.”

“You are right, of course,” she admitted, hardly concealing her disappointment.

“I cannot abandon Mrs. Gilroy to vicious rumours aroused by my actions and to my aunt’s mercy. Lady Catherine will be furious and will accept no explanation. She will

seek revenge.”

“I do not understand...why revenge? For what? Especially since the rumours are untrue.”

Darcy hesitated a moment, then continued. “Miss Bennet, what I shall tell you is not known by more than five people, all close to the family. I trust you to keep the secret.”

“Of course.”

“You see, Herbert Gilroy was Sir Lewis de Bourgh’s son, from a relationship prior to his marriage to Lady Catherine. When he died, he asked my father to provide Herbert with all the necessary means for a peaceful life. When my father died, this responsibility was passed to me.”

“Dear Lord,” Elizabeth whispered, covering her mouth with her palm.

“Last time I visited Rosings, Gilroy was in perfect health. I do not know what happened, why he fell ill, why the doctor was not fetched, why I was not informed at all. He died, and Lady Catherine moved the widow and the children, as you saw, still without informing me. We had a huge quarrel about the matter.”

“So, Lady Catherine knew about Mr. Gilroy?”

“Yes, she had known for at least twenty years. You can imagine her resentment.”

“I can. Dear Lord,” she repeated. “So, what will you do now?”

“I shall make arrangements to move the family to Pemberley.”

“Oh...I understand, but will that not feed the gossip?”

“Perhaps, but it will not affect them any longer. The family will be safe. They will be offered proper jobs to suit their skills. They will be under my protection.”

“The gossip might affect your reputation, though.”

“It might. But the only one truly hurt by such reports would be my future wife.”

At that, Elizabeth blushed, and her fingers became cold and trembling.

She feared to enquire further, but he stepped forwards, his eyes looking deep into hers, and said, “If I succeed in winning the affection of the woman I have long considered the perfect match as my wife, if she accepts my hand in marriage and agrees to stand by my side, I have nothing to fear. That woman — wise, witty, clever — would not be affected by such silly, irrational gossip.”

Elizabeth forgot to breathe, waiting for him to continue, but he did not.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“Please return home now, Miss Bennet. I hope I shall have the chance to talk to you very soon after I settle this distressing matter.”

She nodded, and for the first time, he took her hand in his and placed a brief kiss on her palm, then left.

At the Parsonage, Elizabeth could feel the tension and agitation.

Charlotte and Maria went to Hunsford; Elizabeth was invited too, but when she refused, nobody insisted.

Mr. Collins hurried off to Rosings, so Elizabeth remained in the house alone to comfort her own turmoil.

She admitted that she expected Mr. Darcy to finally speak his mind.

She hoped that the unthinkable would happen and he would propose.

She had prayed for that before, and then something horrible had happened to overshadow what could have been a beautiful moment.

She was torn between disappointment that he had not finished his confession and gratitude that he had postponed it.

But what other moment could he find to complete their discussion?

Surely, they would need to wait till they were both in London.

She quivered, imagining what Lady Catherine would do when she found out that the Gilroys would all move to Pemberley.

She would certainly be furious in a dangerous way.

But then, what would the lady say when she heard about Elizabeth's engagement to Mr. Darcy — if such an astonishing event did take place?

Her mother and father would be shocked too, but Elizabeth was not worried about them.

Lady Catherine, however, had the determination, the means, and the hateful nature to control people and hurt those who had upset her.

Apparently, Mr. Darcy was not impressed by his aunt, regardless of what schemes she used.

A while later — perhaps an hour or two — the doorbell rang, and the servant announced Mr. Darcy. With her heart beating wildly and her cheeks burning, she greeted him. He looked agitated, and his clothes were in some disorder.

“Miss Bennet, I shall only stay an instant. I know Mr. Collins is at Rosings and Mrs. Collins at Hunsford, and I hoped to find you alone for a minute.”

“I am glad you came,” she said, stepping towards him.

“I apologise for this unusual turn of events, which is certainly not how I imagined this moment and not what you deserve.”

“I am just glad you came,” she continued, and he ceased talking, looking at her. “We only have a moment. Please just say what you wish to. Anything else can wait till London.”

He nodded and suddenly looked shy as he cleared his throat and said, “Miss Bennet, you must allow me to tell you how ardently I love and admire you. It took me some time to admit the depth of my love and to accept that my life cannot be happy or complete without it. I do not expect your feelings to be the same — only a short time ago you considered me to be your enemy. Nor do expect a hasty answer.”

He paused and breathed, and she took another step forwards. Her knees were weak, her feet unsteady, and chills ran all over her body.

“I am only begging you to reflect upon my words with consideration for your sentiments, not mine. To ask yourself whether your feelings are of such a nature as to allow you to accept my marriage proposal one day. But most importantly, to ask your heart whether you could be happy with me. As I told you once, there is nothing sadder for both spouses than a marriage in which one cannot return the other’s affection. ”

When he had finished, she was only inches away from him.

“Mr. Darcy, you have offered me time to reflect and ask my heart, but I have already done that, every day since I saw you with the children and the puppies and with leaves in your hair.”

He looked puzzled, and she added, her fingers touching his hair timidly, “I wanted to pick the leaves from your hair that day, but I could never have imagined I might be allowed to do just that only a fortnight later. I was stunned to hear that you admired me at times when I believed you despised me.”

She was emotional, and he took her hands, holding them in his.

“We were both wrong in many ways,” he said.

“Yes. What matters is that we seem to be right now, would you not agree?”

“Completely,” he said, placing gentle kisses on both her hands. She felt dizzy and wondered whether she could stand long enough to complete her response.

“So, you must allow me to tell you this very moment that I do not need any more time to consider my answer. I have never felt how I feel when I am with you, and I have never wished for anyone’s presence as much as I long for yours.

” She lowered her eyes and added, “My hands and yours are already entwined.”

“So they are... Then...are you saying yes to everything I asked?” he enquired, incredulous.

“I already said yes, did I not? As for your fear that I cannot return your affection, allow me to dissipate your concern.”

With that, she lifted up onto her toes, entwined her hands in his hair, and shyly pressed her lips to his — the first kiss of her life.

An instant later, his arms closed around her, and she leant against him while his lips captured hers for the second kiss of her life — still timid, still gentle, but incredible.

He stepped back, looking at her adoringly, and said, “I must leave now. I shall call on you in London.”

“Very well.”

“I would suggest we do not announce our engagement before we have your father’s blessing.”

“Of course.”

“Besides, I would not leave you here knowing Lady Catherine had heard about our engagement.”

“I understand, but surely you know I am not afraid of her.”

“Not in a verbal confrontation,” he replied. “I shall tell you more soon so you may understand my concerns.”

“We shall have enough time to talk in two days’ time. Is the family ready to leave?”

“Yes. Mrs. Gilroy is distraught, as you can imagine. I do not think she knows of her husband’s true situation, and she cannot understand what she has done wrong and why Lady Catherine despises her and her children.

At first, she refused my offer — as you surely guessed.

I needed all my powers of persuasion to convince her that it is for the benefit of her children. ”

“She will soon understand how fortunate and blessed she will be to have your protection.”

“You will have the chance to meet her again at Pemberley soon,” he said, still holding her hands.

“You will decide what assignment you have for her employment and how you wish to

help the children. You will be the mistress. Of Pemberley and of my heart,” he ended, with a smile that melted her own heart.

Then, before she had time to reply, he left in haste.

An hour later, the Collinses returned, and the scandal burst out that evening and increased the next day.

Carrying Darcy’s words in her heart and mind and the touch of his lips on hers, having felt the comfort of his arms, Elizabeth found the strength to bear the madness for two more nights and a day.

She was the only one who knew everything but chose to remain silent, without interfering in any discussion between the Collinses.

To Elizabeth’s astonishment, Lady Catherine herself came the next morning, looking transfigured, to take Mr. Collins with her to a meeting with her solicitor.

In the heat of her anger, she declared she would sever the connection with her nephews and would forbid their further involvement in her affairs.

She declared she had been betrayed, cheated, robbed, and Mr. Collins approved of her every word.

Both Elizabeth and Charlotte kept silent, though for different reasons.

On a bright Sunday morning, the distress ended for Elizabeth.

In Mr. Gardiner’s carriage, together with Maria Lucas, she began her journey to London.

She left all the chaos behind her and smiled at the future unfolding ahead of her.

Soon enough, she would see Darcy again, the man responsible for her happiness as well as Jane's; the man whom, until recently, she had not truly known.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Such a large gathering had rarely been seen in front of Longbourn Church. From each family in the neighbourhood, there was at least one member present, as if people did not believe the double wedding would truly take place and wished to be convinced with their own eyes.

That Mr. Bingley had returned to open Netherfield and was now marrying Jane Bennet was surprising but understandable; however, the announcement of Mr. Darcy's engagement to Elizabeth Bennet had fallen like a storm.

It came just after the news that Mr. Wickham — everyone's favourite — had left the regiment just before it was ready to move to Brighton for the summer.

He left behind a series of debts, which were later paid by Mr. Darcy, a few broken hearts, and a large sum of money missing from Colonel Forster's house.

It had been believed, however, that Mr. Darcy would never set foot in their small town again, considering how much he had despised his previous visit. And the notion that he could marry Elizabeth Bennet — the young woman he had called tolerable and refused to dance with — was beyond imagination.

Elizabeth's reasons for marrying such an arrogant, disagreeable man, people could only suspect. With his income of ten thousand a year, owning a most impressive estate in Derbyshire, and being so tall and handsome, no woman would refuse him.

The gentleman's reasons for proposing to someone so below his situation in life remained a mystery, and until the wedding ceremony began, some people still believed it was a farce or a misunderstanding.

In truth, among those who feared that were both Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, who had hardly recovered from the shock that Mr. Darcy would become their son-in-law — part of the family of which he was the severest critic.

Yet, the double wedding was completed, and Mrs. Bennet mingled among those in attendance, moving from one son-in-law to another, her nerves bearing the situation remarkably well.

In the large crowd were the Gardiners, Miss Georgiana Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr. Bingley's sisters — the only ones who remained separate from everyone else.

Elizabeth watched the entire scene with a smile, her soul filled with pure happiness; not just for her but also for her dear sister Jane and her Mr. Bingley, who were holding hands like they feared they might lose each other again.

Elizabeth had no such fears, though she had needed some time to understand that Mr. Darcy was the only man in the world who could be her perfect match.

She saw her father talking to her uncle Gardiner, while Mrs. Gardiner approached her.

“My dear Lizzy, I confess I still do not believe it. You, the mistress of Pemberley? I would never have dreamt that. I barely dared to dream that I would visit Pemberley again one day, and now Mr. Darcy has invited us all to spend the entire summer there.”

“Dearest aunt, you sound almost like Mama!” Elizabeth laughed.

“Well, this time I do feel like your mother. The thought that I shall take a ride around Pemberley Park in a phaeton with white horses is exhilarating.”

“You have an advantage over me, as I have not even seen Pemberley yet.”

“You will — and you will love it.”

“I would love it in any case because it is my husband’s home. My home.”

“You will go to London first, I hear?”

“Yes, Aunt. We shall leave immediately. Then we shall stay in London for a fortnight, to become acquainted with his family. I admit that, after the scandal aroused by Lady Catherine, I have some concerns in meeting Lord and Lady Matlock.”

“They will need some time to accept and love you, but they will, eventually.”

“I hope so. However, Fitzwilliam’s love and Georgiana’s affection are enough for me to be the happiest woman in the world.”

As they spoke, Darcy approached them, and he took his wife’s hand.

“I am sorry to interrupt you, but we should leave now. I would like to arrive in London before dinner. My sister and my cousin will come tomorrow.”

“Yes, we plan to travel all together,” Mrs. Gardiner said.

“I look forward to having dinner together at the end of the week,” Darcy said, while the entire family came to take their farewells.

Half an hour later, while the rest of the guests travelled to Netherfield for a celebratory breakfast, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy began their journey to London together.

They sat together on the same bench, and as soon as they left Meryton behind, his arms closed around her, and her hands entwined in his hair as they enjoyed the first kiss of their marriage.

“I still wonder whether this is true or only a dream,” Elizabeth said. “Everything happened so quickly, so unexpectedly! I barely realised when we became engaged, and now we are already married.”

“It might have happened quickly for you, my love, but for me, it was a sweet, long torture. I have been miserable in my love for almost six months, trying to become accustomed to the notion that I should never have what I most desire. Even worse, the arrogant fool that I was assumed that you returned my feelings and that perhaps my departure had disappointed and hurt you. Then I met you in Kent, and finally, my reason became at peace with my heart, only to realise that you despised me — and rightfully so. I tried to prove to you that I was not as bad as you believed me to be, and I slowly improved your opinion of me.”

“So you did, my beloved husband.”

“And then somehow, something astonishing happened, and I won your love sooner than I dared hoped might happen. I have wondered so many times when the moment was that you felt the first touch of affection. There were only a few days between me writing to Bingley and the moment I made half my confession and half my proposal. At times I fear it was too hasty.”

“Do you doubt my love for you?” Her voice trembled with concern.

“Of course not,” he answered, placing tantalising kisses on her face. “I am certain you would not have accepted my marriage proposal if you did not love me. And if you did not love me, your kisses would not be so sweet and your caresses so passionate.”

“I hope there is much more proof of my love than just my kisses,” she answered, her smile returning to her face.

“I certainly have further proof, but your kisses are my favourite, beyond a doubt,” he teased her.

Elizabeth caressed his face tenderly. “I am quite certain that I felt the first touch of affection when I saw you for the first time with the children and the puppies. Did I not tell you that? I believe I did. I began to love you before I stopped hating you for what I believed to be your cruel and selfish behaviour. I began to love you before I was even certain of who you really were, Mr. Darcy.”

He turned his head and placed a soft kiss on her palm.

“But I could ask the same thing, Mr. Darcy. When we met at the assembly, you called me tolerable and refused to dance with me. Then you claimed that during that party at Sir William’s, you were already in love with me. There were no more than a few days between those two moments, were there?”

“True. I even admitted my admiration for your fine eyes to Miss Bingley! Can you imagine?”

“Poor Miss Bingley! What a shock she must have suffered when she heard of Charles’s marriage to Jane as well as our marriage.”

“Indeed. Bingley only mentioned they had a huge quarrel, and I requested no further details. I have my own share of quarrels to deal with.”

“So, when did you fall in love with me, Mr. Darcy?”

“I really cannot say. I was in the middle before I even knew it. And I failed to

recognise the depths of my affection precisely because I had never felt it before.”

“I wonder,” Elizabeth asked, “if not for those horrible rumours about Mrs. Gilroy, would you have proposed that day?”

“I wonder too. I was eager to confess my love, but I feared I might have misjudged your feelings again, that I might have been too hasty, that I had assumed too much. I hesitated to open my heart to you and even more so to propose so quickly. I do not know what I would have done. I probably would have waited until we met again in London.”

“I was afraid that I might assume too much too. Although I recognised your attention to me, I wondered whether you would take such a bold decision — against your family’s expectations. I am afraid to ask what your uncle and aunt said when you first told them.”

“Well, the first person I completely shocked was my cousin Geoffrey. Just imagine the torment of leaving Rosings and the scandal Lady Catherine created — her screaming that I had betrayed her, that I was the ruin of her and Anne’s lives simply by offering the Gilroys another home, far away from her.

She was angry about losing her power over them. ”

“I am relieved the Gilroy family is safe,” she whispered in his arms.

“Mrs. Reynolds informed me they are well accommodated at Pemberley. Mrs. Gilroy is working as a seamstress, and she has some clients from Lambton,” Darcy said.

“I am glad the children are well taken care of. I cannot wait to see them — they must be happy there.”

“I hope they are. Tom has expressed a wish to join the army. Once we are home, I shall see how we can better support him.”

Elizabeth looked at him adoringly, touching his face. “So, what were you saying about the colonel?”

“We finally left that madness of Rosings, and about an hour later, out of nowhere, I told him we were engaged. I still laugh recollecting his dumbfounded expression. It took half of our ride to London to convince him I was not joking.”

“Poor Colonel! But he could not have been more shocked than my uncle and aunt, Jane, and poor Charles. Or my own parents. I too needed a long time to convince Papa I was serious. As for Mama, she has been asking me several times a day whether it is true. While you were in London, she was terrified that you would run away and not return.” She laughed.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“I can safely say that your mother loves me as much as you do, though in a completely different way,” he said, joining her in her laughter. “Poor Bingley must feel neglected, as she has not given her affection equally.”

“Do not worry — Charles will be the recipient of my mother’s whole attention from today. In fact, he might have more than he can handle. I pray he and Jane will have some peaceful days to begin their marriage.”

“Netherfield is large enough to provide them with privacy, and the master suite is quite separated from the other rooms,” Darcy replied, and Elizabeth blushed.

“Bingley insisted we should stay for another week, but that was not appealing to a man so deeply in love and so yearning for his new wife,” he answered, kissing her again.

“I am glad we left. I look forward to being alone with you. As much as I love your family, I wish for no other company but yours.”

“So do I, my love.”

“I hope poor, dear Georgiana does not mind that we left her there,” Elizabeth said.

“Not at all. She seemed to enjoy your young sisters’ company.”

“Mary is quite enchanted with Georgiana’s accomplishments. And Lydia and Kitty are behaving so much better since the regiment left Meryton. I am happy that Papa is supervising them more carefully. Mr. Wickham’s deceptive nature was a valuable

lesson for all of us.”

“Yes...”

“My love, when you told me of his real betrayal and his attempt to elope with Georgiana, I better understood what a complete fool I had been and the danger we were in. If he attempted to seduce either Lydia or Kitty, neither of them would have had the wisdom to protect themselves. A tragedy could have happened.”

“Wickham had taken the last steps to ruin his life completely. He will never have another chance for an honourable living in England after stealing from and cheating his own colonel. I expect to hear tragic reports about him soon, and I am sorry to imagine how hurt my father would have been.”

“There are people who are given all the chances in the world to take the right path, yet they still choose the wrong one. I am very happy that Mrs. Gilroy took the opportunity you offered her. She is a wise woman and fortunate to have escaped Lady Catherine’s revenge for something she was not guilty of. ”

“The most amusing part is that Lady Catherine, once she found out about our engagement, lost the rest of her reason. Despite being enraged with Geoffrey too for helping me remove the Gilroy family, in her unreasonable search for revenge, she demanded my uncle Matlock’s assistance in removing my responsibilities in regard to Rosings.

Once they consulted a solicitor, she was clearly told that she had no rights over Rosings and that only Anne is allowed to make the decisions.

To make things worse, they discovered among Sir Lewis’s papers a note instructing that if Horace Gilroy died, each of his children would receive one thousand pounds. ”

Elizabeth looked at him, bewildered. “Is it true?”

“Geoffrey just informed me two days ago, when he came for the wedding. Just imagine the Matlock residence shaken by screams and curses, with all the servants witnessing the madness.”

“Dear Lord! What will happen now?”

“I am not sure, and it matters little to me. I hope my uncle Matlock will find a way to keep his sister under good regulation before everyone thinks she has lost her mind.”

“I am afraid to imagine what Lady Catherine said when she heard of our engagement,” Elizabeth said. “Poor Anne must have been exposed to such torment. And poor Charlotte — I wonder whether Lady Catherine might seek revenge against me through them.”

“She must have been furious, but she cannot afford to lose Mr. Collins’s adoration, which is irreplaceable,” Darcy said, rolling his eyes. “I am worried about Anne, but Geoffrey said he would visit them again with his father. If only Anne was not so much under her mother’s influence.”

“How could she be different when she has spent most of her life at Rosings? If Lady Catherine refuses to maintain any connection to you, what will happen to the estate?”

“I am in Sir Lewis’s will, so she cannot remove me. However, I shall not impose my presence on Anne. I shall gladly continue to manage Rosings if Anne asks me to. If not, I shall step away and allow her to decide as she wishes.”

“There are so many responsibilities on your shoulders, my love,” she whispered.

“So many people depend on you, and you must make so many decisions that affect

others' lives.

You are an impressive, admirable man for so many reasons, my dear Mr. Darcy," she said seriously.

"I know I shall love you more than anyone else could. But I hope to be worthy of being your wife and help you carry the burden of all your duties."

He embraced her tightly, and she cuddled into his chest. "You do not need to hope, for I have been certain of that for a long while. As for my duties, I shall put them aside for the moment. My only task at present is my beautiful wife and the wedding night waiting for us at home," he whispered in her ear, making her blush and shiver.

She turned in his arms, and a long kiss left them breathless. Many others followed until the carriage finally stopped at their destination and Elizabeth stepped into her new home and her new house arm in arm with her husband.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“My dear Lizzy, I cannot believe that you drive the phaeton so masterfully,” Mrs. Gardiner said as the two of them returned from Lambton.

“I cannot believe it either, Aunt. Not just the phaeton, but I absolutely adore riding too. Since I married Fitzwilliam, I wonder every day about the things I have learnt by his side.”

“You have always been wonderful, Lizzy. That is why Mr. Darcy chose you out of all the other young women who fought for his attention. But I admit that I have watched you with admiration and pride since you became Mrs. Darcy. You have learnt so much and improved so much in many aspects of which you knew nothing before your marriage. I can only guess how many responsibilities lie on your shoulders. The people of Lambton, as well as several of your tenants that I know, speak so highly of you that it leaves me tearful.”

“I am happy, Aunt. Happier than I ever imagined and fortunate to be married to a man who completes me so perfectly. I live every day of my life with my soul full of gratitude.”

“I can see that, my dear. Everybody who knows you and your husband can see that. Both you and Jane have been fortunate to find your perfect match.”

“True. I am glad Charles purchased the estate in Derbyshire. They will be only thirty miles away from us.”

“I look forward to visiting them too in the next month. Will Mr. Bingley’s sisters stay with him?”

“Hopefully only briefly. I know they spend most of their time in London.”

“Speaking of sisters, there is such a wonderful improvement in Lydia, Kitty, and Mary! Spending so much time with you, Jane, and Miss Darcy has certainly benefited them greatly. Hopefully, the days of them chasing officers are over.”

“They have grown to be wonderful young ladies, and I am very proud of them, as I am of my dear Georgiana,” Elizabeth admitted.

“All of them spoil your son, which might be dangerous,” Mrs. Gardiner joked.

“Well, who would not spoil my beautiful son?” Elizabeth replied in the same tone. “I do too, and so does his father, my father, my mother, Mrs. Reynolds, and all the servants. Mrs. Reynolds claims that he is even more handsome than Mr. Darcy was at his age.”

“He is the first boy after six girls in your family. I am sure your father adores him, especially since you named him Andrew Bennet.”

“Papa says Andrew is the greatest joy of his life, even above the Pemberley library!” Elizabeth laughed.

“And my mother is relieved that I have given Mr. Darcy a male heir, as he deserves, she says. I suspect Mama is still afraid that Fitzwilliam will change his mind about marrying me and will run away one day.”

“My dear, I hope this does not ruin your disposition, but do you have any news about Mr. Wickham?”

“No. Fitzwilliam received some reports about him two years ago when he apparently left England for India. Since then, I have not even asked. I have rarely despised a man as much as I do him.”

They were approaching Pemberley House, and in front of it, by the lake, was a large gathering, with the entire Bennet family, Bingley and Jane and their daughter Marianne, Mr. Gardiner and their children, as well as the Gilroy children and the two puppies they had found three years ago — now handsome dogs.

Betsy and Peter were now ten and eleven years old and were studying diligently under Georgiana's supervision.

Betsy enjoyed music and painting, Peter was skilled at riding and planned to follow in the footsteps of his brother Tom, who was now an officer in a militia regiment.

A short distance from the large group was Colonel Fitzwilliam, talking to Georgiana and Anne de Bourgh.

"I am stunned to see Miss de Bourgh here," Mrs. Gardiner said.

"We are happy to have her. Anne has been living in London with Lady Matlock for the last year, after another huge fight with Lady Catherine. We met a few times while she was there, but she was always with Lady Matlock, both when we visited them or when they came to our house."

"I am glad Lady Matlock has been supportive of your marriage, despite her initial opposition."

"I am grateful for that too. Both Lord and Lady Matlock have been of great help for my introduction into society. This summer, Anne is staying at the Matlock estate, and we were surprised when she asked permission to visit Pemberley for a fortnight."

"Will Mr. Darcy take up the management of Rosings again?"

"Anne has asked him to do that, and I believe he will accept. But Lady Catherine is still living there, and I cannot imagine how their next meeting will be.

They arrived in front of the house and stepped down, and a servant took the phaeton and drove it to the stables.

The two dogs — who had kept the names Blacky and Whitey — ran to Elizabeth, weaving around her legs begging for attention.

Moments later, older, wiser, and better behaved, Angus the Great Dane appeared, sitting at Elizabeth's feet, waiting patiently for affection too.

The master arrived then, holding his son, who stretched out his arms to his mother, babbling happily.

Elizabeth took him in her arms, while Mrs. Gardiner went ahead towards the group, allowing the Darcys a little privacy.

“We both missed you exceedingly,” Darcy said.

“I am glad to hear that, though I have only been away for two hours.”

“I cannot speak for our son, but I miss you when you are away for even two minutes,” he answered.

“As I miss you, my love. You know that. Did you have a pleasant morning?”

“I was too busy entertaining our guests to feel any particular pleasure,” he jested. “I am lucky to have Bingley, your uncle, and my cousin among the company, and they carry on most of the conversation.”

“You have certainly improved significantly in that area, my dear, haughty Mr. Darcy.”

“That is because I took the trouble to practise, under your guidance, as you advised

me a while ago.”

“I remember. My memories of Rosings are not all unpleasant,” she teased him.

“Speaking of Rosings, something quite interesting happened this morning. Anne told me Lord Matlock revealed to her that Horace Gilroy was her half-brother.”

Elizabeth looked at him in disbelief. “Did he? Without even informing you?”

“It was his right to do so. Today, Anne asked me to facilitate a discussion between her and Mrs. Gilroy. She said she wished to acknowledge that she is aware of the situation and to be part of the children’s lives in any way their mother finds appropriate.”

“That I did not expect! What a beautiful, generous soul Anne is! Very few people in her position would do that.”

“I agree. I shall speak to Mrs. Gilroy this afternoon. Will you join me? As much as she was aware of her husband’s filiation, she will not expect such a turn of events.”

“Of course, my love. I am always by your side,” she answered with an adoring gaze.

“Elizabeth, do you remember on our journey after the wedding, you said you were certain of your love for me but fearful about your ability to fulfil your duties as Mrs. Darcy?”

“I do remember, and I recall that you said you trusted me completely.”

“So I did, and I was right. Since my mind accepted the choice of my heart in loving you, I had no doubts that my choice was the perfect one, and I am grateful for it every single day. As my cousin used to say, there is nothing I enjoy more than being right.”

She laughed under his loving gaze and quivered as his dark eyes held hers.

“You were certainly right when you asked me not to sketch your character before I had full knowledge. I am thankful that I did it at the right moment, when I came to understand exactly who you are, my beloved Mr. Darcy!”

The End