



Six Inches Deep in Mud

Author: Michelle D'Arcy

Category: Historical

Description: Fitzwilliam Darcy is known among his friends and acquaintances for his reserve and his well-chosen words. He prefers to keep quiet if he has nothing to say that is worthy of being heard. Or at least that once was true.

His stay at Netherfield is getting worse and worse. Not only does he offend the only young lady to ever catch his eye and interest, but he does so during a public assembly, causing his blunder to rapidly spread throughout the room, making him the enemy in the eyes of the same lady's neighbours and friends; Miss Elizabeth Bennet is a local favourite, it seems!

Realising his mistake, as the young lady proves to be worthy of admiration, instead of correcting his error, he makes another blunder by speaking of her to Miss Caroline Bingley.

And now the young lady is staying under the same roof as him, tending to her ailing sister. Trying to navigate the awkward circumstances, caught between his growing feelings, his inner conflicts, and his duty, he manages to again offend Miss Elizabeth when she overhears another of his conversations with Miss Bingley.

He decides that apologising is the only course, allowing himself to enjoy a friendly acquaintance with the pert miss during the last days of his stay in Hertfordshire. He will then leave and continue his own life, will he not?

Miss Elizabeth Bennet is known among her friends and neighbours for her friendliness, quick and accurate judgment of people, wit, good humour, and love of nature, reading, and walking. While not the most beautiful young lady in the county, she certainly is handsome—second only to her sister Jane.

Coming to Netherfield to care for her beloved sister, she must consider spending several days (and nights) under the same roof and in the company of the one man who scorned her beauty and refused to dance with her while mocking her family and neighbours with the lady who is hosting her. He wants to apologise, but she has heard enough to know there is no possible apology. Is that not so?

He wants to apologise. Will she accept his apology? And if she does, will their relationship change?

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

I part from Lydia and Kitty in Meryton and continue walking as fast as I can.

My heart is heavy with worry for Jane and my mind burdened by unwanted thoughts — unsuitable for a gentleman's daughter — of vexation with both my parents.

I cannot decide whether I am angrier with my mother's unreasonable and improper search for single men in possession of a good fortune and in want of a wife, or more irritated by my father's tendency to make sport of her, all the while allowing her imprudent actions.

Yesterday, Jane received an invitation for tea from Caroline Bingley and Louisa Hurst, and Mama insisted that she go on horseback. It was cold and cloudy, and we all knew it would rain; and this was Mama's plan to force Jane to stay at Netherfield longer.

Well, that plan was successful to such an extent that my dear Jane became ill and was kept to her bed. As soon as I received her note this morning asking me to go to her, I dressed and hurried towards Netherfield. On foot, since the carriage was needed elsewhere and riding — even if a horse could be found — was not a choice I would ever make. As Lydia and Kitty wanted to visit Maria Lucas, we all walked together as far as Meryton.

Papa joked at breakfast about Jane having a dangerous fit of illness and dying in pursuit of Mr Bingley, but I could not laugh. Sometimes I wonder whether Papa cares about anything except for his library, his books, and his brandy. And perhaps me — occasionally.

I know he does love us and Mama, but his love is careless, derisive, and often inconsiderate. This is why Lydia and Kitty are never censured and became so reckless at such a young age.

I continue my walk, crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles. I know I should be more careful and watch my steps, but in this moment, haste is more important than caution.

I know these grounds intimately, but this particular walk is different, and distressing, due to my concern for Jane as well as my reception at Netherfield.

I can feel my feet and hems grow heavy with dirt, and I can only imagine the disapproving looks that will greet me at my destination. Not that I shall care; except for Mr Bingley, those people are the last in the world whose good opinion I would court.

Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst are both insincere, fastidious, and presumptuous and think themselves much higher than they should. I wonder how it is possible that they are related to the amiable and pleasant Mr Bingley. Character traits have been distributed unevenly in their family. But then again, we are five sisters and so utterly different in appearance and nature.

More annoying than the Bingley sisters, whom I can easily disregard, is the famous and infamous Mr Darcy. The mere thought of seeing him again gives me strange chills, and I already feel uncomfortable. I cannot explain what it is about this gentleman, but I always feel unsettled in his company. That he is an unpleasant sort of man, arrogant and believing himself above his company, I know too well. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew this half an hour after he graced us with his presence at the Meryton assembly.

He is handsome enough, but what does it matter? In truth, I have never met a

gentleman so favoured in appearance and so disagreeable in manners.

That he is rude and hates to dance, I also know too well. I feel fortunate that he refused to dance with me at the assembly; the prospect of ever being trapped with him for half an hour is dreadful.

But even more than all this, there is something about him that flusters me and causes me a nervousness that I have never felt before. Something I cannot name; nor can I dismiss it.

And his stare upon me! It feels like a burning flame that I cannot escape from. I know he always looks for something to disapprove of and criticise in me — and goodness knows I have plenty of faults to be disapproved of — but why would he be interested in doing so? Why would he take the trouble to watch me at all?

I often feel that he finds Netherfield tiresome and wishes to amuse himself by irritating some hapless victim. He, for some reason, has singled me out, and so he irritates me. That must be the reason why he asked me to dance at Sir William Lucas's party. I felt offended that he considered me such a ninny as to accept. Who could imagine Mr Darcy dancing — and with me, of all women — at a small, intimate party in a small, insignificant town? Ridiculous. Perhaps I should have accepted after all to see how he would have responded. Now that would have been an entertaining moment.

I feel my left boot sinking into a puddle, and I almost lose my balance — and my boot! I put my hand down to steady myself, but when I look carefully, I am torn between laughing and crying. My gloves are now beyond dirty, my boots and stockings are a disaster, and my petticoat is at least six inches deep in mud.

I am already within view of the house, but I shall not go any farther without attempting to improve my wild appearance. I take off my gloves, arrange my bonnet,

and wipe my boots on the grass to remove some of the mud. It is all I can do, and it is too little, as no improvement can be seen. Resigned, I continue walking, my weary ankles slowing my pace.

I should go down the lane to the front gates, but I am too tired and impatient, so I choose to climb over the small fence. I hitch up my skirts and reach the other side with little to no effort, only to regret it an instant later.

I find myself face-to-face with the last man in the world I would want to see me in my present state — and after scaling a fence in a most unladylike manner.

But I have no way out of this dreadful circumstance, nowhere to hide or to go, so I have to face his astonished gaze, his expression of disbelief, and a strange, annoying grin that looks more like a smirk on his lips, which are pressed together.

“Miss Bennet?”

“Mr Darcy. I have come to see my sister. I know she is ill. She sent me a note asking for my presence.”

“On foot?” His tone is somehow amused, somehow incredulous, somehow offensive.

Narrowing my eyes, I hold his gaze for a moment. Of course, his appearance is impeccable, which makes mine look even more miserable.

“Yes. Excuse me, I have no time for further discussion. I wish to see my sister.”

“Of course. Please allow me to show you the way.”

His voice sounds different from how I have ever heard it before, and that makes me even less comfortable. He walks by my side, and I am sorely aware of my dirty gown

as I know he has noticed it. I should not care, but I do, and that annoys me even more.

Once in the house, Mr Darcy leads the way, and I find myself in the breakfast parlour, where all but Jane are gathered. I can see the surprise my appearance has created, and I bear their scrutiny stoically.

Mr Bingley is the first to recover, and he jumps to his feet, greeting me and immediately offering refreshments, but I decline, enquiring about Jane.

“The maid informed us your sister is resting now. You will be taken to her.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Miss Eliza, I am afraid I do not understand.” Miss Bingley’s tone is disapproving.

“You walked three miles, all by yourself? In such...dirty weather?”

“Yes, to see my sister.” I choose to keep my reply brief.

Mr Bingley grins. “How very brave of you. It shows your affection for your sister, and I find it commendable!”

“Thank you,” I repeat, pleased by his genuine response. In his manners there is something more than politeness; there is good humour and true kindness.

Mr Darcy is standing by the window, still staring at me. He has said very little, but his gaze is unpleasant enough. Mr Hurst is tucking into his meal with great gusto, and he has said nothing at all.

A maid is called to take me to Jane, and she arrives swiftly, leading me upstairs and to the chamber assigned to my sister.

“I am Penny, miss. I have been taking care of Miss Bennet since last night. Please ring if you need anything at all.”

“Thank you, Penny. Can you tell me more about my sister’s health?”

“She slept ill, miss. She coughed a great deal and was very feverish. She isn’t well enough to leave her room.”

“Oh dear...”

My concern increases even more when I step into Jane’s room. She is happy to see me and stretches out her hands to me, but I take a moment to look at her before I embrace her. I immediately feel that she is still feverish, and I caress her flushed, warm cheeks.

“Oh Lizzy, I am so glad you came!”

“My dear Jane, you look very ill. And hot.”

She laughs. “You do not look your best either, Lizzy.”

“Well, well, you might not be so ill after all, if you can tease me.”

“Oh, I am sure it is nothing, only a cold, Lizzy. Everybody has been so kind to me. I am so grateful for the extraordinary generosity, and I am sorry to give Mr Bingley so much trouble.”

“I sense that Mr Bingley does not mind.” I smile at her, and she blushes even more.

“Caroline and Louisa have been very kind to me too.”

“I am sure they have.” I try not to roll my eyes.

“And Mr Darcy suggested fetching a doctor, but I refused. Surely there is no need for that.”

I look at her again and touch her forehead. Although it pains me to admit something so shocking, for the first and probably last time ever, I agree with Mr Darcy.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

“Dearest, you are still feverish, and I believe we should call Mr Jones before things turn worse.”

“I do not think so much trouble is necessary for a trifling cold.”

“Jane, you are speaking just like Mama, which terrifies me,” I try to joke, and I am rewarded with a little smile from my sweet sister.

As we are speaking, Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst arrive to enquire after Jane’s health. Mr Bingley has accompanied them, and he is standing in the doorway waiting for information about Jane’s condition. The gentleman’s face reveals the deepest and most genuine concern. He speaks little, in contrast to his sisters, who take turns in expressing their worry in so many words that they become tiresome. I cannot reproach their behaviour towards Jane, but something strikes me as being insincere.

“Mr Bingley, I would kindly ask you to send for Mr Jones, the apothecary,” I dare to request, looking over Miss Bingley’s shoulder to the amiable gentleman still looming at the door. “Jane claims she is well, but her fever and cough are reasons for concern.”

“Of course, Miss Elizabeth. I suggested as much earlier, before you arrived — and so did Darcy. I shall send a servant with my carriage at once.”

I thank him with all my heart and am pleased to see Jane’s smile of gratitude and Mr Bingley’s pleasure at receiving it as well as having something useful to do. Shortly after his departure, his sisters follow, seemingly concerned to not tire ‘dear Jane’ any longer.

A while later, Mr Jones arrives, and he asks me to leave the room so he can examine the patient, which I find slightly irritating. Jane and I have grown up together, have shared a room and all our secrets, but as much as I cannot understand why my presence is not acceptable, I try to stay calm and do as asked, waiting just outside the door. In this moment of nervousness, my stomach remembers I have not eaten anything since the evening before, so I go in search of a maid to ask for tea and perhaps some biscuits. I do not want to ring for Penny, and so I move towards the staircase, expecting to meet a maid or a footman. Netherfield is a large house, and I am not acquainted with it, so I descend the stairs and look around tentatively, hoping to find someone. No footman is in sight and no maid either, so I clear my throat, to no avail. After a few minutes, I decide to be bold.

“Is anyone there?” I call, first in a low voice, then a little louder. A door opens several steps from where I stand, and I finally receive my reply, though not the one I hoped for.

“Miss Elizabeth?”

“Mr Darcy... Forgive me for disturbing you. I was looking for a maid.”

I expect him to leave, but he continues, stepping closer.

“Please allow me to direct you...” He briefly touches my arm to show me the way and walks by my side. “How is Miss Bennet feeling?”

I cannot help but look at him. His voice is pleasant and — shockingly — carries a trace of warmth that, because it is so unusual for him, induces me to believe his concern is sincere.

“Not as well as I expected. I hoped we might return home today, but I fear it will not be possible. Mr Jones is with her now.”

“Yes, Bingley told me.”

“I heard you insisted on calling for the apothecary earlier. I wish to thank you for that, sir.”

“No need to thank me. We all hope Miss Bennet will recover soon. Although I know my advice is unsolicited, I would suggest not removing your sister from Netherfield until the apothecary approves of it.”

My bewilderment is now complete. Mr Darcy’s amiability has continued for more than a minute, and there is even a little compassion added to it.

“Any advice given with genuine kindness is received with genuine gratitude, sir,” I reply. To my own surprise, I feel a smile on my lips and see him smiling back. I wonder whether I — or he — have developed a fever too, as our conversation is certainly not progressing as I would expect.

“You should find a maid in here,” he says, gesturing towards a door. “Do you need my further assistance?”

“No...thank you.”

“Then I shall return to the library. I hope for good news from Mr Jones.”

After bowing, he departs, and I turn to watch him as he walks away. Why, I cannot imagine, but it soon proves rather foolish, as he turns too and catches me staring at him. And he smiles again, which makes me doubt his suddenly changed behaviour.

He must have some interest to improve his manners so suddenly, I decide, but I do not have time to reflect much upon it. I pass my request on to the maid, then I hurry back to Jane, where Mr Jones is waiting for me.

“Miss Elizabeth, as might be supposed, Miss Bennet has caught a violent cold. She is in no immediate danger now, but she might be if we do not attend to it properly.”

“Of course. We shall do as you say.”

“I suggest she take some draughts and a mixture of herbs in a tea for several days. I shall leave everything, and instructions, with the maid attending her. She must take the draughts three times a day and the tea as often as she can, whenever she feels thirsty. The fever has already increased, and she is complaining of acute headaches, which is expected.”

“Oh...”

“When her fever rises, her forehead must be cooled with a sponge and cold water.”

“Very well, sir.”

“I shall ask Mr Bingley to send me word of how Miss Bennet feels tonight and tomorrow morning. If my presence is needed, call me immediately.”

“We shall, sir. Please tell me what we owe you for this visit, so I can inform my father.”

“Do not worry, Miss Elizabeth. Mr Bingley has taken care of everything. Your only concern should be your sister. She must stay in bed, eat at least a little soup, and drink often.”

“Of course...”

As Mr Jones is speaking, I glance at Jane. She was already flushed and, despite her forced smile, I notice she keeps closing her eyes, probably due to the headache. As

soon as Mr Jones leaves, I ring for the maid and ask her to prepare the draughts and tea. I sit on the bed next to my sister and touch her hand briefly, enough to feel the high fever. Mama and Papa must be informed about the situation, and I am pondering the best course of action when I hear a knock on the door. It is Mr Bingley, looking disturbed, rubbing his hands together.

“Miss Elizabeth, I have just spoken to Mr Jones. Of course, you must stay with your sister, unless you have other previous engagements.”

“Thank you, sir. Nothing is more important than Jane.”

“I agree. Please write a note for your parents, and I shall send a servant immediately to deliver it and to bring you a trunk.”

He seems to have read my mind, and I feel the need to embrace him with gratitude. “Thank you, sir.”

“Please do not thank me. I look forward to seeing Miss Bennet’s health improve and to having the pleasure of her company.”

He looks almost as troubled as I am, so I bow my head to him in acknowledgement.

The following hours are agitated, as I examine Jane every other minute, fearful that her fever might have risen. I know it is too much; if I had a cold, I would consider my own behaviour ridiculous. But it is for Jane, so I cannot help myself.

A few hours later, a servant from Longbourn arrives with a note from Mama and a supply of clothes. Opening the trunk, my vexation with my mother returns. She has sent a couple of very elegant dresses and nightgowns for Jane, completely inappropriate for a patient fighting an illness. What on earth was in Mama’s mind? How did she imagine that Jane — lying in her bed — could impress Mr Bingley with

the elegance of her garments? And nightgowns! What could she have been thinking?

Good Lord, give me patience and strength to keep my composure! Even more so as dark clouds threaten my peace of mind when I read the last lines of her note; Mama has promised to visit tomorrow, together with Lydia and Kitty. I know it will turn the situation from bad to worse.

Later in the afternoon, after two cups of the medicinal tea and a little soup, Jane has begun to improve. The fever has dropped, and she is sleeping peacefully.

I disregard the dinner bell when I hear it. But when a maid comes to convey the invitation for dinner, despite my first temptation to refuse, I reconsider. First, because my hunger is bothering me again and I assume I shall have a long and sleepless night ahead of me. Second, because I presume Mr Bingley will be expecting some news about Jane, and I owe him that much.

I ask Penny to watch Jane for me, then I put on a modest evening dress and push a few pins into my hair; it is far from perfect, but it should do for now.

I walk towards the dining room, hoping I remember its general location. I certainly remember where the library is after Mr Darcy appeared from there earlier. I hear some noise in one of the rooms and no footman in front of the door, so I open it, only to halt and catch my breath. It is a large room, dominated by a billiard table, and Mr Darcy is the sole occupant, playing by himself. In an instant, I notice his hair is in some disorder, his coat resting on a chair while he wears only a waistcoat over his shirt, his bright white neckcloth loosened.

“Miss Bennet?”

I startle as if he can read my thoughts, and I feel my cheeks burning. Perhaps I can pretend I have caught a fever from Jane.

“Mr Darcy, I deeply apologise for bothering you again... I was looking for Mr Bingley and Miss Bingley and...”

“Bingley is in the dining room. I shall accompany you there as I am going that way myself. If you will excuse me, I shall only be a moment,” he offers, putting on his coat before I have time to refuse. Besides, how can I reject his politeness when I am truly lost and cannot find anything in the house?

“Since we have the pleasure of your company, I assume Miss Bennet is a little better?” he asks. Strangely, his friendly tone is still evident.

“A little. I shall return to her immediately after dinner.”

“Your devotion is admirable. I have a sister too, and I can easily imagine your worry.”

“Thank you. I hope your sister is in good health?” I know not what else I can say in reply to his statement.

“She is. She is in London, with her companion.”

“I imagine you miss her.”

“I do,” he admits. “I look forward to seeing her soon.”

My head is spinning from the realisation that I am conversing amiably with Mr Darcy about our sisters. How is that even possible?

Fortunately, as we enter the dining room, Miss Bingley instantly demands his attention, attaching herself to his arm so tightly that she must be cutting off his blood flow, asking him his opinion about this or that, directing him not too subtly to sit next

to her. Mr Darcy seems reluctant, and he looks around as if he is pondering what to do. I sit on the empty chair between Mr Bingley and Mr Hurst, and Mr Darcy finally takes the space between the sisters. I hope the dinner will not last long. I wish to eat, politely answer a few questions if addressed, and return to Jane as quickly as possible.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

I still wonder what was in my mind when I admitted to Miss Bingley my admiration for Elizabeth's fine eyes. Caroline Bingley — of all people! If I were completely honest with myself, I would admit there was nothing in my mind — except for Elizabeth. A dangerous situation that has already gone on long enough. More than two weeks. Too long. Fate has a strange sense of humour and is probably attempting to punish me for refusing to dance with her at that assembly. It is ludicrous that I told Bingley she was not tolerable enough to tempt me; now I cannot get rid of this temptation that I am ashamed to admit.

She has been at Netherfield for three days already; she arrived — on foot — after walking more than three miles to tend to her ill sister. Upon my word, the moment I saw her jumping over the fence, with her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling, with her petticoat six inches deep in mud, bonnet askew, and a few wisps of hair on her nape...breathing a little heavily because of the effort, through her parted lips — lips that looked full and moist — I forgot myself completely. I felt like a simpleton with no other thought but that I wished to kiss her. Kiss her? A daughter of a gentleman, whom I hardly know? What on earth is happening to me? I walked her to the house, whereupon Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst kept talking and talking, and I could only think that she was probably cold...and wet under all those clothes that needed to be taken off...and perhaps she needed to take a long, hot bath. Inappropriate!

As much as I desire her presence, I am not happy that she remains at Netherfield. How can I be happy to be so close to the danger? I have slept little and poorly in the last fortnight, but since Elizabeth has been under the same roof as me, I have been unable to find any rest. My mind has never been so perturbed and my body never so stirred. What a disgrace! A grown man of eight-and-twenty with the education and knowledge of a gentleman and the restraint of a schoolboy. I actually feel a fluttering

sensation in my stomach when I look at her, or even just think of her. How absurd! Yes, this is what I have become — a foolish, lovestruck schoolboy.

Yesterday, her mother and her two younger sisters came to visit. I thought it would be useful for me to spend a few minutes with that vulgar, simpleminded woman and her silly younger daughters to help me overcome my absurd infatuation with Elizabeth. It worked for only the length of the call. I feel weaker than ever before; my self-control and my judgment have betrayed me utterly and completely since Elizabeth caught my attention. I am well aware of her situation and the inferiority of her family — from all perspectives — but nothing is as bad or as alarming as her mother's total want of propriety. Her younger sisters are the same, but I cannot blame them — whom could they have learnt from?

I assume Elizabeth resembles her father in wit; I heard Bingley mention something about Mr Bennet's interest in books. And in truth, Miss Jane Bennet's manners are quite pleasant; she does not take after their mother either. If I had to spend more than half an hour with Mrs Bennet, I would certainly lose my sanity.

Well, I have already lost it, or else I would not keep staring at Elizabeth in such a ridiculous way. I know I look like a fool, and yet, I cannot help it. I have become obsessed with watching her whenever we are in the same room, observing her and discovering small enchanting details, like how she frowns when reading her book, her arched eyebrows when she is provoked, the way she bites her lower lip while preparing to deliver a witty reply, her fingers playing with a lock of hair when she is deep in thought — and I could go on. Which again shows just how lost my mind is.

She arrived downstairs later than the rest of us tonight, and I am already tired of Miss Bingley's insinuations. Since I told her I admired Elizabeth's eyes, she has persistently provoked me with it. I wonder what she would do if she knew the eyes are only a very small part of all that I admire about Elizabeth. Now that would be amusing — to tell her that! As it is, she keeps herself entertained by sending me

veiled barbs about Elizabeth or complaining loudly about Charles promising a ball in this “uncouth society”. I cannot say I approve of the idea either, but I am keeping this opinion to myself.

Elizabeth’s mind is as enchanting as her appearance. I have met many educated women and even more beautiful ladies. Elizabeth is different from them, as neither her education nor her beauty is flawless by society’s standards, but she is just perfect in her imperfection. I wonder whether she is aware of the effect she has on me. I hope not; I pray not! I can see she is not indifferent to me either. I can see her smiling at me, her teasing, her pleasure in arguing with me. It pains me to know I shall disappoint her when I leave for London. I try to behave cautiously, so she cannot guess how deeply I actually admire her and form expectations that cannot be fulfilled. She certainly favours me, and without doubt, such a marriage would be beyond her hopes. And she certainly deserves such happiness, but I cannot be the one who offers it.

The mere thought of Elizabeth marrying another man — which I am sure will eventually happen — makes me shudder. To imagine another man sharing her bed, touching her, kissing her, gives me chills and makes me sick. Only my own bed knows — and I am ashamed to admit it even to myself — how many times I have dreamt of her being in it, in my arms. Tormenting, delightful, secret dreams I have never had about any other woman, nor did I ever imagine I would experience them. I am definitely losing my sanity. If I were wise, I would leave immediately; but I am not strong enough to do so. I need a little more time in her company, and then I shall put the memory of her behind me. I wonder whether the distance will finally release me from this hold she has on me, from this sweet, unbearable turmoil. I cannot say; I have no experience at all to call on. I have never harboured such feelings, nor have I ever fought against them.

There are moments like this, when I watch her replying to Miss Bingley’s rudeness with a smile on her rosy lips — lips she was biting just moments before while

preparing her answer — when I allow myself to dream that I do not have to fight after all. I do not know Elizabeth well enough, but as little as I do, I see nothing wanting in her. I doubt that any other would honour the Darcy name more than she would. However, I cannot possibly consider the daughter of an insignificant country gentleman, with no fortune, no connections, and with such an ill-behaved mother as the future Mrs Darcy. Or can I?

“Mr Darcy, what are you doing there so secretly, sir?” Miss Bingley asks, and I can hardly refrain from rolling my eyes. I hate her insinuating voice, which she probably believes to be alluring, when she tries to catch my attention; it is terribly annoying.

“It is no secret. I am writing to my sister.”

“Dear Georgiana, how sorely I miss her! How I long to see her! I cannot wait to be back in London. Has she grown since I last saw her?”

“Yes, I believe she is now as tall as Miss Elizabeth Bennet.” Elizabeth glances at me, and Miss Bingley comes to sit by my side. What luck!

“How delighted Miss Darcy will be to receive such a letter!” she continues, glancing at my paper — another thing that I absolutely loathe.

“You write uncommonly fast, Mr Darcy.”

“You are mistaken, Miss Bingley. I write rather slowly.”

“You must have occasion to write many letters, I suppose. Letters of business, too, which I find odious and tedious.”

I struggle to stay calm, wondering how much nonsense she can say in one evening.

“It is fortunate, then, that it is I who must write them, not you,” I reply.

“I am afraid you do not like your pen. Let me mend it for you. I mend pens remarkably well.”

At this, I pause and look at her to see whether she is serious. She is!

“Thank you. I always mend my own.”

“How can you contrive to write so even?” Miss Bingley continues. Somehow, I feel that Elizabeth is looking at me; I turn to her and see the broad smile that brightens her face. She is entertained, amused even, by my ridiculous exchange with Miss Bingley, without a doubt. And it is not even over yet.

“Tell your sister I am delighted to hear of her improvement on the harp. And pray let her know that I am quite in raptures with her beautiful little design for a table.”

Being enraptured myself with Elizabeth’s fine eyes, I hear little of Miss Bingley’s sentence and understand even less. But her words, echoing through my inner thoughts, startle me, so my instant — expressive and distinguished as one could expect from me — reply is, “What?”

I see the astonishment on the faces in the room, so I clear my throat.

“Forgive me, I did not understand what you said.”

“I was talking about Miss Darcy’s improvement on the harp and her design of the table. Can you please mention it in your letter?”

“I am afraid I must postpone your raptures till I write again. At present, I have no room to do them justice.”

“It does not matter. I shall see her in January,” Miss Bingley says.

I really feel I deserve congratulations for my forbearance, inner strength, and self-control. Not only in regard to Elizabeth but even more so in regard to Miss Bingley. My appreciation of and friendship with Bingley is a strong inducement to keep my words under good regulation.

Miss Bingley is, sadly, not to be interrupted in her attempts to flatter me, and she continues the conversation on the subject of my writing, then Bingley joins it and we begin a little argument over our writing styles. I do not even know why I allowed myself to be drawn into this, perhaps for the pleasure of hearing Elizabeth subtly disagree with me. I adore this battle of words, this duel of wits, particularly the sparkle in her eyes and the little wry smile crushed between her lips.

“I do not know a more awful object than Darcy, on particular occasions. At his own house especially, and of a Sunday evening, when he has nothing to do,” Bingley claims.

Elizabeth is smiling, and Bingley seems pleased. I am vexed with his statement, but in all honesty, I cannot contradict him. So I smile back, refrain from answering, and turn to finish my letter.

After dinner, during which Miss Bingley again sat next to me and affected my appetite with her repeated praise, Bingley asks the ladies for the favour of some music. Elizabeth declines, but his sisters play for a while, from Italian songs to a lively Scotch air.

Elizabeth is listening rather absently, and I cannot help but notice the heightened colour of her cheeks and the unruly locks of hair dancing on her nape. The line of her jaw, her collarbone, her shoulders timidly revealed under her dress, her lips, which she worries sometimes, and her long eyelashes, all are exposed to my admiration.

Before I realise what I am about, I find myself walking towards her and asking, “Do you not feel a great inclination, Miss Bennet, to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel?”

I am astonished by my own words. She smiles but makes no answer. I sit down next to her on the sofa and repeat the question, with some surprise at her silence.

“I heard you before, sir, but I could not immediately determine what to say in reply. I assume you wanted me to say yes so that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste. But I take delight in thwarting such schemes and cheating such premeditated contempt, so I made up my mind to tell you that I do not want to dance a reel at all — and now despise me if you dare.”

Her long reply puzzles me; why would she assume I wish to despise her?

“I assure you that is not the case, Miss Bennet. Despising you was never in my thoughts. I simply asked whether you wished to dance.”

“Come now, Mr Darcy, we both know that is not true. You cannot convince me that you intended to dance a reel with me, here, in your friend’s drawing room.”

“I intended to dance with you at Sir William’s also, and you refused me,” I reply, trying to insert a lightness into my tone.

“Only because Sir William insisted on it. You would have never asked me, or any other woman, to dance at that party, since you refused to do so at an assembly.”

“Oh...Miss Bennet, I...” I need a moment to choose my words carefully, wondering what she knew of that particular circumstance.

Her smile broadens. “Please do not make yourself uneasy. I did feel a little offended

that you called me tolerable, but you are entitled to your own opinion, and I respect your honesty. Besides, I am well aware I am not the most beautiful woman, and there must be many men not tempted to dance with me.”

I am stunned. Somehow, she knows too much and too well. That evening at the assembly I did notice — too late — that she was standing close to us, next to a pillar, but I never presumed she heard my statement.

Before I can speak further, the music stops, and Miss Bingley asks me something. I rise, bow to Elizabeth, and leave her, returning to my previous seat. From here, I keep my eyes on Elizabeth as the music resumes. She looks at me with an air of suspicion, and our eyes meet briefly.

I stare at her, though I know I should not. There is a mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner that leaves me confused. Sitting so close to her, her scent intoxicated me, but now I hope to regain my composure. I have never been so bewitched by any woman as I am by her.

But her words sound in my mind with a new, different meaning, and her arched eyebrow expresses more challenge than teasing. Can she really believe that I intended to despise her and to mock her? Does she still hold a grudge for my offence at the assembly? But how is it possible for her to know I admire her and also assume I despise her? How is it possible to return my admiration if she holds a grudge?

Unless... Good Lord, can it be possible? Can I have been wrong all this time? Can she know my feelings but not welcome or return them? Am I caged in an admiration that neither myself nor the object of it desires? If that is the cruel truth, how shall I ever escape from this trap?

I hear Elizabeth excuse herself and retire for the night, and I do not have the chance to respond.

My head is becoming heavier by the minute, and it fills with puzzling, unwanted questions, all spinning around Elizabeth. Better said, around my obsession with her — which suddenly becomes even more unreasonable.

I am in no disposition for vain conversation, so I retire too, shortly after Elizabeth. I had hoped the solitude of my chamber would bring me some peace, but I am wrong again. I dismiss my valet for the night after only accepting his help to remove my coat, and I fill a glass of brandy. So, her entire opinion of me is based on my behaviour at the assembly. And yes, it is true I would never have asked her to dance that evening at Lucas Lodge if that annoying man — Sir William! — with his pathetic pride in his title had not insisted. But I regret that she refused me. If she had accepted, I would have certainly danced with her.

I lie in bed, trying to recollect all our previous encounters, all our conversations. What I said, what she said. Her looks. Her smiles. Everything with a different meaning now — so different that I feel an icy claw gripping my chest. I do not even know why, since I have dismissed any possibility of a further connection to her. I am about to leave Hertfordshire and never return, so why should I care if she despises me? Perhaps it is even better that she will not be hurt by my departure. Then why can I not get rid of this weight on my heart?

I rise and pour myself another drink in an attempt to induce a drunken slumber. With all the disdain I have felt and expressed for the gentlemen who do not know when to stop and the scorn I have delivered to my cousin and to W—

But I need to rest my mind. The bottle is empty; I cannot sleep without one more glass at least. I know I am not acting like myself, but I leave the room in search of a new bottle. I know Bingley has several in the library. Thank God everybody is asleep and cannot see me wandering around clad only in trousers and a shirt. The library door opens with a creak that sounds like thunder in the silent house. I leave it open a crack and go to the cabinet, grabbing a bottle, too distracted to care what it is.

It is so cold that I am suddenly shivering, and only then do I realise I am barefoot. As I step towards the door, a soft sound holds me still like a stone, and I stare at the image in front of me: Elizabeth, wearing her nightgown and robe, with her hair falling loose on her shoulders, her chest, and her back, looking at me in shock, her eyes wide open and lips parted.

“Miss Bennet!”

“Mr Darcy...forgive me, sir, I came to find a book to read... Forgive me, I shall leave...”

“No, no, please do not leave. What book would you like? I am quite familiar with them...I might help.”

“There is no need to bother yourself, sir...”

“No bother at all, I assure you.”

“Then...any work of Shakespeare’s would do,” she says, and I feel she is in a hurry to be away from me. I notice her measure me briefly with her eyes, and only then do I remember my attire, which must be outrageous to her.

I hand her the book and she takes it; her fingers brush over mine briefly, and she withdraws them in haste, like they burn. Surely it is not the same delicious burn that I felt at that fleeting touch.

“Miss Bennet...only a moment please... This is hardly the right time or place, I know, but there might not be a better one.”

She looks at me, flustered, confused, flushed from unease, looking around nervously.

“Yes?”

“You must allow me to tell you how deeply I regret my horrible behaviour at that assembly...and to assure you that, regardless of my words, they do not express my feelings. Which are, in fact, quite the opposite.”

Amazement transforms her beautiful face, and a frown of doubt appears between her eyebrows. I continue in haste, as I do not feel secure either on my feet or in my response.

“I hope you will accept my sincere apologies. That evening at the assembly, I was distracted by some personal troubles, and I did not wish to attend at all. Bingley insisted and I — feeling I owed him as his guest — finally agreed. I hope you will believe me when I say I would not have danced that evening with anyone, but I would be honoured and delighted and grateful to dance with you on any other future occasion.”

Her astonishment seems now complete, and she stares at me in silence. I do not know what else to say, so, feeling I have made a fool of myself again, I bow stiffly to her and slowly step past her immobile figure, almost reaching the door. I shall berate myself when I am no longer in her presence.

“Mr Darcy?” I finally hear her low voice and turn. “Thank you for telling me... I have no reason to doubt your words...”

“Thank you,” I whisper back, ready to finally leave.

“And sir,” she adds, stopping me again, “I would be delighted to dance with you whenever you ask again.” There is a smile in her eyes and on her lips. A different kind of smile. One that I have not seen before.

With that, she walks past me and leaves the library first, while I gaze after her, smiling like a fool; but a fool who suddenly feels light-hearted, albeit cold, and can breathe with no effort. It seems I shall not need that bottle to sleep better, after all.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

Ever since I can remember, I have been proud of my name, of my family, and of my heritage. From a young age, I tried to be worthy of my legacy and to make my family proud of me. I felt their love every day, but the sentiment was exquisite when I saw pride for my accomplishments in the eyes of my father — a man whose excellent character matched his kind heart. It was my inducement to study, to work hard, to strive for improvement in all aspects of my life. I hope my parents would be pleased with the man I have become.

Most of the time, I have been reasonably proud of my actions and achievements too. Yet, to my recollection, I have never been so ashamed of myself before tonight, as I lie in my bed, half an hour after speaking to Elizabeth in the library.

I should be pleased, content, relieved that I cleared up the misunderstanding and apologised for my rude behaviour at that assembly. I should have been thrilled with her teasing and her peculiar smile when she assured me that she would dance with me the next time I asked her.

Suddenly, the prospect of the ball Bingley promised to host at Netherfield does not sound so awful. I shall not miss the chance of a set — it might be the first and last occasion for such delightful enjoyment.

I know what I should feel, and yet my feelings are so much more complex. They are deeper, disturbing and stirring my senses, awakening me from my agitated sleep and making me embarrassed — ashamed.

Those minutes with Elizabeth in the library are replaying in my mind, and all sorts of shocking and inappropriate details are popping into my head. I remember every lock

of hair falling on her shoulders, her robe slightly open at the neck, revealing the modest edge of her nightgown, the colour of her skin, which looked different at the boundary between darkness and light. Her figure was disturbingly alluring in the nightgown that caressed her curves, and I spotted an inch of her bare ankles. And that sensation of the brief brush of her fingers over mine when I handed her the book still gives me thrills.

I do not remember feeling such thrills when I was young and touched a girl's hand for the first time. I do not even remember who she was — probably a family friend with whom I danced. Well, I do remember touching Elizabeth now — very clearly. And I shall probably not forget it soon.

I laugh at my foolishness in calling her tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me. What a joke — and how fate is punishing and mocking me! Well, I assume I deserve it.

I feel more tempted than ever before; in truth, I did not know that such a level of temptation could exist. The fact that my character and my education curb my temptation provides me little comfort. Even if my actions do not show it, and others do not observe anything, I know my wishes and am equally bothered and embarrassed by them. The more details I remember about our brief encounter, the more I wish I could have embraced her, caressed her, kissed her, filled my nostrils with her scent, felt her warmth, tasted her...

And there are so many other wishes that I do not even dare acknowledge and admit to myself.

A few days ago, I told myself that, if not for the inferiority of her connections, I would be in some danger. I know now I am in great danger, and neither the inferiority of her connections nor anything else I can think of will dissipate the sense of panic that envelops me.

I might have admired women from afar before, and I have enjoyed the company of some too. My senses might have been touched occasionally, but neither my heart nor my mind were, in the slightest, and my self-control was never challenged; now, it is almost entirely crushed.

Yes, I must return to London very soon; perhaps after the ball that Bingley is planning. The distance and different company will surely help me escape this partiality, which has turned into obsession.

I should not have drunk the last glass of brandy; I hoped it would help me sleep but it has only given me a headache. But then, I would not have wandered into the library to search for another bottle and would not have encountered Elizabeth... My head is hurting, as if knives are splitting it open like a ripe melon. I wonder how Elizabeth's hand would feel on my forehead. A gentle touch, nothing more. Her fingers only brushed over mine. What if they entwined for an instant?

No, I cannot allow myself to indulge in such thoughts; I cannot torture myself even more than I am. And yet, one day, Elizabeth's hand will surely caress someone else's forehead. Someone else will be allowed to touch her hair and remove her robe. If only... No, that is enough! No more thoughts about Elizabeth! No more torture! I must conquer this!

One thing that I loathe about winter is that the days are so short and the nights so long. I feel like I have been awake for hours, yet it is still dark outside. It must not yet be half past six in the morning, I assume. I am tired; my head is still hurting, and I should sleep some more. I need to sleep, but I cannot! I have no patience to stay in bed either; I have no patience to even ring for my man.

Better that I dress and go and ask for some coffee. Some people say coffee helps

them with tiredness and keeps their mind sharp. My cousin Richard says that often; he should know, as he misses many nights of sleep, but hopefully in a more cheerful manner than I did. From my previous experience, I cannot testify to the miraculous effect of coffee, but now would be an excellent time to test it properly. If it helps, I need a lot!

I open the door and step into the hall, then stop, wondering whether I am actually awake or caught in some silly dream. There is Elizabeth, carrying a tray with some steaming hot beverages and a covered dish, and what strikes me is the strong, unmistakable smell of coffee.

“Mr Darcy?”

“Miss Bennet, good morning... Are you carrying that tray by yourself? May I help you?”

I hear my own words, and I know they sound ridiculous; of course she is carrying the tray by herself, unless there is some invisible help. I am pathetic — a mumbling idiot; surely no amount of coffee will help me enough to regain some wit.

“Yes and no,” she replies, smiling at me. “I am taking Jane her herbal tea and some toast. And some coffee for me. I barely slept last night.”

“Oh? I hope you are not unwell. Or is Miss Bennet?”

Now I sound panicked and still ridiculous. She smiles at me again; she is probably amused by my stupidity.

“We are both well, thank you. I stayed awake because I was worried about Jane, but she slept peacefully, and her fever is gone.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

“Are you well, sir? You look a little pale...”

“I am well enough. I too slept badly. And I have a horrible headache. I am going to ask for some coffee too.”

“Oh... I took the entire pot, and it might be a little while before they make another one. Would you...do you have something I can pour some coffee into? There is more than enough for both of us.” She looks at me expectantly. “A cup, perhaps?”

Her reply stuns me. And her voice sounds strangely sweet and comforting; she seems genuinely worried about my headache. She wants to share her coffee with me. Something to put the coffee in? Do I have something?

“Yes, I believe so... I would love some coffee if you can spare it,” I answer, dazed.

She remains in the hall, waiting, looking at me. I glance around, then hurry to my room to look for something. I find no cups, only glasses, as expected; after all, I have drunk no tea in my room.

I return to the hall holding a glass, and she looks at me.

“Mr Darcy, take this saucer and put your glass on it, or else the hot coffee will burn your fingers. And please take as much coffee as you like.”

She is holding the tray, looking at me, still smiling. I follow her orders and fill my glass with fresh, steaming coffee, then put the pot back on the tray.

“Thank you,” I manage to say. “Shall I help you open the door?”

“No, thank you. There is a maid with Jane. She will help me.”

With that, she walks away, and I remain in the hall, gazing after her, holding the saucer with the glass filled with black liquid.

I return to my room and put the glass on the table. She was right; it would have burnt my fingers if not for her suggestion. Her comforting voice and her gentle smile only increased my agitation. But somehow, my headache seems mostly gone, and I have not even drunk the coffee. Her presence and a few words proved to be excellent medicine.

I sit and hold the glass; slowly, I take a sip, then another one. Can it be more tasty than at other times? Coffee is coffee — why do I enjoy it more than before? Can it be for the simple reason that she shared it with me? Can I be such a bewitched fool? Despite my opposition, this seems like the more logical answer.

I finish the drink, thinking of Elizabeth. I do try to think of some other things, but I fail. Some time passes, and there is finally full daylight, and I go downstairs to find Bingley. Breakfast should be ready soon; once my headache vanished, I felt the hunger.

However, my headache makes itself present again when I happen upon Miss Caroline Bingley, alone.

“Mr Darcy, how glad I am that you came. I have been longing for company. Neither Louisa nor Charles are down yet.”

“I shall ask for some coffee,” I say.

“Oh, come and sit. The servants will bring breakfast soon. You look ill, sir.”

I sit reluctantly, rubbing my forehead with my fingers.

“I must say that you have looked ill since Mrs Bennet’s visit.” Miss Bingley laughs. “I saw how she embarrassed you, so I hope you will give her a few hints as to the advantage of holding her tongue once a certain desirable event takes place and she becomes your mother-in-law.”

I roll my eyes but choose not to accept the challenge; after all, it was my stupidity and my own failure in holding my tongue when I mentioned my admiration for Elizabeth’s fine eyes that exposed me to Miss Bingley’s mockery.

“And it would be helpful if you could cure the younger girls of their habit of running after the officers. If you take them to London for the Season, they will surely embarrass you.”

“I shall take note,” I reply curtly. But she continues.

“And, if I may mention so delicate a subject, endeavour to check that little something, bordering on conceit and impertinence, which your lady possesses.”

“On that, I must contradict you, Miss Bingley. I happen to admire and approve of a woman’s wit, even if it does hold a hint of conceit and impertinence. I find it quite refreshing.”

I can see my answer discomposes and, I hope, silences her on this subject.

“I hope you do not have anything else to propose for my domestic felicity.”

“In fact, I do. Do let the portraits of her uncle and aunt Phillips be placed in the gallery at Pemberley. Put them next to your great-uncle the judge. They are in the same profession, you know, only in different lines. And I understand there is another

uncle, a Mr Gardiner, in London, somewhere near Cheapside.”

I am annoyed and growing angrier, and I am about to reply sharply when we are suddenly interrupted.

“Forgive me. Are you talking about my relatives?” I hear Elizabeth enquire.

I am too stunned to respond, and my mind is not completely alert yet. Miss Bingley’s face changes colour several times, and Elizabeth continues, “I am quite sure I heard Miss Bingley mention my uncle and aunt Phillips and my uncle Gardiner. Please be so kind as to enlighten me as to how it is that they are the subject of your conversation.”

Elizabeth is looking straight at me, and her gaze is neither sweet nor caring. I wonder what I can say to exonerate myself and that will not sound like a ridiculous, pitiful lie.

“It was nothing,” Miss Bingley quickly says. “Mr Darcy and I were talking about what Jane told us before you arrived.”

Elizabeth’s frown does not disappear, nor do the sharp arrows she is throwing from her eyes, mostly in my direction.

“Miss Bingley and I forgot our manners,” I say. “Talking about people who are not present nor part of our families. We apologise, Miss Bennet. We should have enough subjects of conversation regarding our own families and ourselves.”

Elizabeth’s countenance changes slightly, but there is no time for further conversation before Bingley enters, followed by the Hursts, and we all settle down to eat our breakfast.

As we eat, Bingley talks to his sisters. I have nothing to say, and Elizabeth only gives

short answers whenever she is asked something directly. She is upset and with good reason. I wonder how much she heard of our conversation, and I fear she might believe I colluded with Miss Bingley to make sport of her family. How horrible would that be, after her kind gesture of sharing her coffee?

Strangely, the preposterous conversation with Miss Bingley remains clear in my mind, though for other reasons than she intended.

Miss Bingley's mockery about the Bennet family matched my own thoughts, but somehow, hearing it from her mouth changed my way of seeing them.

Yes, Mrs Bennet's manners are disgraceful, from the little I have seen. But my aunt Lady Catherine's behaviour is no better most of the time. In fact, all the silliness I have heard from Mrs Bennet, I have heard from Lady Catherine too, only in a different form and in a different tone.

Mrs Bennet's obsession with marrying off her daughters is distasteful, but most mothers, even those from the most illustrious families, share the same obsession. Including Lady Catherine.

As for Elizabeth's relatives who make a living as attorneys or in trade — well, they are no different from Bingley's father. Besides, Hurst is in no way better — quite the opposite, in fact — and there are many other men in his position, living off nothing but their names and their wives' dowries.

I know Miss Bingley entertains some unreasonable hopes that I shall offer to marry her; ridiculous of course, just like my aunt Lady Catherine's hope that I shall marry my cousin Anne. If Miss Caroline Bingley considers herself suitable to be my wife, why could a gentleman's daughter not be considered from such a perspective?

Yes, I fell in love with Elizabeth against my will, against my reason, and choosing

her would be against my family's expectations as well as mine.

But — shockingly! — Miss Bingley has shaken my reason enough to understand that it does not mean it is impossible.

After all, the line between appealing and appalling is very thin, and tremendous could mean something very bad as well as something very good.

I gaze at Elizabeth across the table and meet her quizzical gaze. Has she noticed something? Have I been staring at her again? I watch her lick her lips and sip her tea.

For the first time, I truly imagine the possibility of having Elizabeth at my side, sharing breakfast and dinner together every day. What could be more appealing than such an image?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

“M r Darcy!”

“Yes, Miss Bingley?” I reply, confused. Apparently, she has something more to say — what a surprise!

“I was asking Charles whether he is really serious about considering hosting a ball at Netherfield. And I advised him to consult the wishes of the present party. For some of us, a ball would be more a punishment than a pleasure.”

Yes, I see it; it is another attempt to please me. Another misguided one.

“Miss Bingley, while I am not particularly fond of balls, I believe the master of the house has the right to do as he wishes. Those of us who find no pleasure in it can simply go to bed.”

The woman is hit by my reply, and Elizabeth’s expression changes again. She seems surprised too; I wonder whether she is thinking about our discussion of dancing.

“Caroline, you used to enjoy balls,” Bingley says.

“I do not enjoy anything unless I am pleased with the company,” Miss Bingley replies petulantly. “There is something insufferably tedious in the usual process of such parties, especially among strangers. It would surely be much more rational if conversation instead of dancing was made the order of the day.”

At that, I cannot refrain from rolling my eyes. Who would not, when such stupidity is voiced? Fortunately, Bingley replies accordingly.

“Much more rational, Caroline, but it would not be near so much like a ball. You may go to bed, as Darcy suggested. Regardless, I am not considering the ball — the ball is a settled thing. And as soon as Nicholls has made white soup enough, I shall send round my cards.”

Bingley is quite amusing when he becomes passionate about something, especially if his sisters disapprove of it. I am well aware his enthusiasm is due to the prospect of him dancing with Miss Bennet. I cannot blame him, since my own thoughts are not that different.

Breakfast is now over, but we are all still at the table. I am about to either go to my room or to the library. I hope Bingley does not have some particular engagements for me, as I really need to sleep. I have drunk so much coffee that I can feel it in my veins, but it has not helped.

“Darcy, I am going to Meryton. Would you like to join me?” Bingley asks, standing and showing us to the morning parlour.

“If you do not have particular need of me, I would rather not. I slept very ill last night, and I would rather rest. And I need to write to my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam today, as well as to my solicitor. After that, I shall take a book and read a little in my room, hoping I shall find some rest.”

It is true, though not completely. Both letters can wait for another day or two.

Miss Bingley once more has something to say. “I slept ill too. It must be the country air or the tedium of country life. Fortunately, we have a good library. I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading. How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book!”

I am rolling my eyes again. Except for Elizabeth — and Bingley when he was

searching for me — nobody else in the house has ever entered the library.

“When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I do not have an excellent library,” the lady continues. I am watching Elizabeth; she still looks upset about my early indiscretion in regard to her relatives, but a slight smile is now twisting her lips.

“Darcy, would you like some more coffee?” Bingley asks after installing himself in a chair.

“We have had enough coffee. A real drink would be better,” Hurst says, sinking onto a sofa, and I tend to agree with him. Still, I decline both; I have already had too much coffee, and it is too early for brandy.

Now Miss Bingley is walking around the room, moving towards the window.

“Mr Darcy!” she calls to me, and I am forced to look at her.

“You have a splendid library at Pemberley.”

“I hope I have. It is the work of many generations.”

“It is exactly how I dream of my future library to be,” she says. I can see that Elizabeth’s smile has broadened.

“I hope Charles will have a similar library when he purchases his own estate.”

“Caroline, to have a similar library, I must have a house similar to Pemberley, and I should have had several generations before me with an interest in books. Neither of those conditions are met, so you will have to adjust your expectations.”

Bingley’s wit can be most entertaining at times; this is one of those times.

“Speaking of books, Mr Bingley, I hope you do not mind if I choose one to read while I sit with my sister today,” Elizabeth says.

“Of course not. Please take anything you wish from the library. In truth, I am not even certain what books are there. I believe the only one who knows is Darcy.”

I observe Elizabeth rise, readying herself to leave, and I struggle against the impulse to do the same and follow her.

“My dear Eliza, will you not stay with us a little longer? I am sure dear Jane is well, and there is a maid taking care of her, is there not?”

“Yes...” Elizabeth replies hesitantly. “Jane is feeling better, and she has the best care. I am thankful to you all for that. I hope we shall return home in the next few days.”

“Then do stay a little longer with us,” Miss Bingley pleads.

Elizabeth looks perplexed, and I know I am. Perplexed and curious about what might follow.

“I know how fond you are of exercise, and you must have missed it while you have been kept in the house.”

“That is true, but nothing is more important than Jane’s health,” Elizabeth replies.

“Let me persuade you to follow my example and take a turn about the room. I assure you it is most refreshing after sitting so long in one attitude.”

Elizabeth’s frown matches the one I imagine is on my own face. What on earth is happening in Miss Bingley’s mind? Even Bingley and Hurst look at her suspiciously.

Clearly perplexed, Elizabeth finally agrees to it. I assume she does so out of gratitude for the care her sister is receiving while recovering, as I feel Elizabeth is still angry with both me and Miss Bingley.

The latter takes Elizabeth's arm and directs her across the room, passing directly in front of me. Now, I have caught on to Miss Bingley's scheme. She is trying to draw my attention, and she certainly succeeds, as I gaze at the strange pair.

Miss Bingley's figure is elegant, and her gait is carefully studied to show her figure to best advantage. She must have had teachers for that. But I am watching Elizabeth, and my mind is returning to the moment I saw her climb the fence, her petticoat dirty and muddied, and to the brief encounter in the library last night, wearing her nightgown and slippers.

"Mr Darcy?"

"Miss Bingley?" She is talking to me again.

"Will you not join us?"

"I thank you, but no. I am in no disposition for exercise. Besides, I feel I would intrude and ruin your purpose, in any case."

"I assure you it would not be an intrusion. And what purpose do you mean?" she asks coyly, while Elizabeth is only gazing at me with curiosity.

"What do you mean, sir?" Miss Bingley insists when I do not respond. "Miss Eliza, do you know his meaning?"

"Not at all," Elizabeth answers with another glance at me. "I believe he wishes to find amusement at our expense, and our surest way of disappointing him will be to ask

nothing about it.”

I smile at Elizabeth; if only she knew how tortured I am and how little amusement I find at her expense, she would be shocked.

“Oh, but I am dying to know!” Miss Bingley continues. “I insist on knowing!”

I am smiling again, and she assumes I am smiling at her. From the corner of my eye, I steal a glance at Elizabeth and see she is curious too. I adore the small expressions on her face that betray her thoughts. Now, I am truly amused.

“I have not the smallest objection to explaining my meaning. You either chose this method of passing the morning because you are in each other’s confidence and have secret affairs to discuss, or because you are conscious that your figures appear to best advantage when walking. If it is the first, I would be intruding, and if the second, I can admire you much better from here.”

I end up locking my eyes with Elizabeth’s, and she must be stunned.

“Oh! shocking!” Miss Bingley cries. “I never heard anything so abominable. Eliza, what do you think? How shall we punish him for such a speech?”

Miss Bingley’s response is as insincere as Elizabeth’s was genuine.

“Nothing so easy, Miss Bingley,” she replies. “Tease him. Laugh at him. Being such close friends as you are, you must know his weaknesses.”

“I assure you that our closeness has not yet taught me that. Mr Darcy is all calmness and presence of mind. There is nothing to reproach him for and nothing to laugh at.”

“Mr Darcy is not to be laughed at?” Elizabeth repeats, looking at me with her

eyebrow arched. “That is quite uncommon, and unfortunate for me. It would be a great loss to me to have many such acquaintances. I dearly love to laugh.”

I can feel the sharpness behind her charming smile. I have seen many smiles trying to catch my attention but none like hers when she is silently mocking me.

“Miss Bingley has given me too much credit. The wisest and the best of men — nay, the wisest and best of men’s actions — may be rendered laughable by a person whose first object in life is a joke.”

I might have been too harsh, but she seems to enjoy the challenge as she utters, “Certainly there are such people, but I hope I am not one of them. I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense do divert me. But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without.”

“I cannot judge myself. But it has been the study of my life to avoid those weaknesses that often expose a strong understanding to ridicule.”

“Such as vanity and pride?”

I pause, looking at her. I thought we had overcome our previous misunderstandings when my behaviour might have displayed vanity and pride. Were there more such instances? Or was it the consequence of her overhearing mention of her relatives?

“Yes,” I reply, “vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride — where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will always be under good regulation.”

Elizabeth throws me another look, then turns away to hide a smile.

“Have you completed your examination of Mr Darcy, Eliza?”

“I have. I am perfectly convinced that you were right, Miss Bingley, and that Mr Darcy has no defect. He is one of the very few men without fault.”

For some reason, her tone and her smile are now hurtful to me.

“I have made no such pretension, Miss Bennet. I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding. My temper could perhaps be called resentful. I cannot forget the follies and vices of others so soon as I ought, nor their offences against me. My good opinion once lost is lost forever.”

I might have been too serious in my response; after all, it is just a silly conversation begun by Miss Bingley in a morning parlour. I really feel that I should have made light of it. Elizabeth seems to have taken my response in earnest too.

“That is a failing indeed!” she says. “Implacable resentment is a shade in a character. But you have chosen your fault well. I really cannot laugh at it. You are safe from me.”

I should stop, I really should. But I continue. I might not be much better than Miss Bingley in this regard.

“I believe in every disposition there is a tendency to some particular evil, Miss Bennet. A natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome.”

“Is your defect the propensity to hate everybody, Mr Darcy?”

“I am not sure, Miss Bennet. But I dare guess that your defect would be to wilfully misunderstand people.”

She stares at me for another moment, apparently trying to reply, then suddenly says, “I thank you for the stroll about the room, Miss Bingley. It was most refreshing.

Now, if you do not mind, I shall wish you all a pleasant morning and go to my sister.”

A moment later, she is gone, leaving me with regret for failing to conduct the discussion better and with Miss Bingley continuing with her annoying chatter, which brings back my headache.

What happened? Earlier this morning, Elizabeth shared her coffee with me. Then, I allowed myself to engage in a stupid conversation about my marital felicity with none other than Miss Bingley, and Elizabeth heard some part of it that might have sounded offensive.

Unlike the situation from the assembly, this time I cannot explain the circumstances to her, and I am sure a mere apology will not convince her. What else can I tell her? That I shared my admiration for her fine eyes with Caroline Bingley? That will surely prove to her that I do have plenty of faults, and stupidity is one of them.

I stand up abruptly, interrupting something that Miss Bingley was saying.

“Excuse me, I must attend to my letters. Bingley, I hope you will be successful with your plans in Meryton. I shall be in the library if any urgent business requires my presence.”

I allow no time for replies, and a minute later I am alone in the library. My first impulse is to shiver. There is a fire, but it has not been tended because almost nobody spends time in here. I add two more logs, then move to the desk.

I should write, but my temples are burning, and I can hardly keep my eyes open. I keep thinking of my conversation with Elizabeth, recollecting what was said and wondering about her meaning.

Time passes, and through the window, I observe Bingley departing. Perhaps I should

have gone with him, after all. My nervousness increases, as well as my tiredness. I must agree with Hurst — since the coffee did not help, maybe a strong drink will, so I pour myself one. I pace the library for a while, and then slowly, the room becomes warmer, and I become calmer.

If I desire Elizabeth's good opinion, I simply must talk to her. I must find a way for another brief meeting, perhaps before dinner. After all, I am not doing anything wrong — I may even ask her directly to allow me a few moments for a discussion. That would be perfectly proper. Yes, that is the simple solution.

Now that I have clarified that with myself, I need to clear my head completely, then write those letters. I shall only lie down here, on the sofa, for a short while, until my headache passes. Only for a few minutes. I have no pillow, but this blanket over me will be enough.

I know I shall not sleep for long, or peacefully. I am sure I shall dream of Elizabeth again. Yes, I am already doing it. The dream is so lifelike that I can feel her hand touching me, pulling the blanket from me. A sweet dream in which I am glad to rejoice, so I grab her hand and bring it to my mouth, allowing my lips to taste the skin of her palm.

“Mr Darcy! What are you doing?” I hear her voice, still clear. I turn and remember that I fell asleep on a narrow sofa only when I feel the hardness of the floor as I hit it, and I open my eyes to see Elizabeth standing over me, stunned and flushed.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

I should not have come to the library; I have no business here. What prompted me to come against my feelings and common sense, I cannot imagine. It must be the same ridiculous reason that induces me to spend so much time reflecting on him — the most puzzling man I have ever met.

I cannot understand what is happening to me; I feel I am losing my common sense. Am I becoming Lydia? Otherwise, I cannot account for wasting my night recollecting Mr Darcy's image in his night clothes. Who does that? Thank God nobody will ever know my thoughts, or I would be mortified for life. Thinking of Mr Darcy cannot bring me anything good. He is a handsome man — nobody denies that. And he can be charming and amiable when he wishes to be, which depends on his mood. Should a man's character depend on his disposition? Should a woman of some wisdom be impressed by a few stray signs of friendliness amidst many examples of arrogance?

Yes, I am impressed, I must admit that, though with some embarrassment. I have thought of Mr Darcy in the last few days more than I have ever thought of all the gentlemen I have ever met in my entire life. I cannot tell anyone, not even my dear Jane.

I find myself doing all sorts of silly things these days; acting strangely and exposing myself to ridicule. It is nobody's fault that I have unreasonable expectations and assume people have changed simply because they apologise for a rude comment.

He sounded and looked amiable and kind last night in the library. I was surprised, and that must have been the reason why I felt so shocked when he gave me the book and his fingers touched mine.

I have danced with gentlemen who have touched my hand in the past — gloves are sometimes forgotten — but such a strange sensation I have never before experienced. Something is utterly wrong with me. I pray Jane will be healthy soon and we may return home. Being under the same roof, in the same house, as Mr Darcy seems to be affecting my sanity.

Though, offering to share the pot of coffee with him was evidently not enough incentive for him to check his arrogance and contempt when he spoke about my relatives. It is truly ironic that his partner in conversation and mockery was none other than Caroline Bingley, whose own father made his fortune in trade. That woman's arrogance is as great as his, though she has far less reason for it. Besides, Mr Darcy does not seem to show much consideration or respect for Miss Bingley either; he seems to enjoy making fun at the expense of others. It is a habit that annoys me even in Papa — making sport, is what he calls it! — and even more so in Mr Darcy.

Fortunately, I had the chance to have my own amusement at his expense when we spoke of his faults; or better said, lack of them. Miss Bingley is pitiable with her need to flatter him for all sorts of nonsense.

Such a strange man as Mr Darcy is rarely found, which is quite fortunate. His changing manners are so confusing that I can hardly sketch his character. His arrogance and conceit are beyond doubt. But why would he pretend amiability and even friendliness towards me? It confuses me. Last night, he apologised for his offence at the assembly, and he explained the circumstances. I was so surprised that I promised I would dance with him next time he asks. I doubt he will ever ask me again, so my offer was rather ridiculous. And he looked ill and thankful when I offered him coffee. It was almost like a discussion between friends, only to hear him talking about my uncles later. Hateful man.

Then why did I come to the library, knowing he might be here? What did I expect

from him? No, I have not come to find another book — that would be a poor excuse I might give someone else, but I cannot deceive myself. I knew it was foolhardy, but I entered and I stepped forwards even when I saw Mr Darcy asleep on the sofa.

I should have retraced my steps immediately and left the room. But I did not. I thought he must be ill, after all; he did look ill. It was cold in the library when I entered, with the fire almost gone out, so I put another log on it.

Then I moved closer to the sofa on an impulse that I now deeply regret, but I would have done it for anyone. He was sleeping, and the blanket had slipped off him, so I picked it up and draped it back over him. Who would have expected him to take my hand? Who would have imagined he would kiss it? Who could have guessed I would feel his lips in my palm and that the sensation would shake me so badly that I would forcefully pull my hand away and make him fall from the sofa?

Now I am standing here, watching him as he stares at me from the floor, bewildered. I can still feel the touch of his lips on my palm like a brand. I would not be surprised to see the form of his lips printed on my skin. Feeling it still burning — and only my face is burning hotter — I close my fist, as though I am trying to hide that particular spot. There is just one thing to do next: turn and leave, which I try to do when his voice calls out to me.

“Miss Bennet, please, can you stay for a moment? Forgive me, I still have a terrible headache...”

“Perhaps brandy at such an early hour is not the best medicine,” I reply harshly, noticing the half-full glass.

He finally gathers himself to stand.

“Allow me to apologise. I am afraid I fell asleep...”

“I noticed. I tried to put the blanket over you. You should sleep in your room, sir. It is rather cold in here.”

“Indeed, it is. I need a moment to tell you...I cannot pretend I did not notice. I assume you heard me talking to Miss Bingley before breakfast, and you must have thought—”

“There is nothing to assume, Mr Darcy. I did hear you talking to Miss Bingley about my relatives, this morning as well as on the day I arrived. I am well aware that my family’s situation is significantly below yours, but nobody claimed otherwise. Therefore, I see no reason for you to mock them. They cannot have hurt you in any way, so you cannot blame your resentful temper.”

As I speak, I feel myself growing angry, and I cannot understand why. It should be a simple conversation, and he seems to be attempting an explanation. Why am I responding so strangely, so unreasonably? My voice sounds irritating even to me.

“I understand you are upset. However, the reason behind that conversation was not my sense of superiority nor my resentful temper. I would say...quite the opposite.”

Unnervingly, his tone is calm and his voice low, which makes my own high pitch even more ridiculous.

“I find it difficult to understand your meaning, Mr Darcy.”

“It is difficult to understand, and it might be even more so if you knew the truth.”

“Will you trust my judgment enough to reveal your truth to me, or are you only teasing me?”

“I am not teasing you, Miss Bennet, and I do trust your judgment. But I

am...um...concerned about your response, nevertheless. I am not sure how such a circumstance can be explained.”

“Mr Darcy, you make the situation sound serious, when I am sure that is not the case. Miss Bingley seems to spend her life attempting to flatter you, and for some strange reason, she finds enjoyment in offending me and my family. I try not to respond to her as I would wish to since I am grateful for the care my sister has been offered during her recovery.”

“Your sister’s comfort is entirely due to Bingley.”

“I assumed as much. And I remember your timely insistence on calling Mr Jones.”

“I am happy Miss Bennet is improving,” he says, and I feel annoyed again. He is certainly trying to change the subject and to avoid providing an explanation that likely does not exist.

“Is there anything else that you wish to tell me, Mr Darcy? I believe you began to but apparently changed your mind.”

“I would like to tell you. It will surely offer you a better understanding, but you will be no less upset with me.”

“I doubt that. Regardless, we must end this conversation one way or another.”

“Very well,” he says, then turns his back on me for a moment, then turns again. “Miss Bingley’s behaviour towards you is mostly due to an indiscretion on my part. I was imprudent and careless in mentioning something to her. Something I should have kept to myself.”

“I am not sure why your confession to Miss Bingley would concern me in any way.”

Truly I am not, and his strange explanation has only annoyed me further.

“It does, Miss Bennet, as the confession was in regard to you.”

“To me?”

“Yes...” He paces a little, with visible agitation and reluctance, while I am losing my patience.

“Miss Bennet, do you remember Sir William Lucas’s party? When I asked you to dance and you refused me?”

“I do remember. Your invitation was not serious, so there was no other possible answer. But we have already canvassed this subject.”

“I confess I enjoyed your witty answers and admired your spirit,” he says, and I frown. Did he? I certainly did not notice on that particular evening.

“Miss Bingley caught me in some sort of reverie and asked me about it. She assumed I was tired of the party and the company, so I told her she was wrong. Paying little consideration to my words, I admitted I admired you... To be entirely honest, I mentioned I particularly admired your eyes. Since then, Miss Bingley has been teasing me about it and making all sort of jokes about...a union between us and our families... That is how the conversation about your uncles arose earlier.”

He finally stops, looking at me. His speech had been difficult to follow, as both his words and his tone were hesitant. He appears unsettled, which is no wonder, considering what he just said. I knew I was staring at him as he spoke and waiting for him to laugh; it must be a joke — what else? He told Miss Bingley that he admired my eyes? I can hardly repeat that; no part of that statement could be real — or serious.

“I am sorry that my indiscretion gave Miss Bingley ammunition for her ridiculous jealousy and fed her rudeness. I shall have a serious conversation with her and make sure she ceases making such improper jokes.”

“But...” I am still staring at him, not knowing how to reply. “But was it true?” I ask and regret it a moment later. Lydia! Get out of my head!

“If you are referring to my admiration for you — of course. I do not take pleasure in mocking an honourable young woman, nor do I joke about my admiration,” he answers seriously. “Please know my confession was made with all due respect, though I understand if it has upset you.”

“It has not upset me, sir, but it does amaze me. In truth, of all the gentlemen I have met, you are the last man in the world whom I expected to admire me.”

“Really?”

“Really. I was convinced that you only looked at me to find fault or to criticise.”

“My thoughts have never even been close to that assumption, Miss Bennet. As I said, please be sure there is nothing disrespectful in my feelings, nor I hope in my behaviour towards you.”

“No...of course not,” I whisper. I am completely bewildered, and the place where his lips touched my palm is burning even more powerfully. It is a struggle to resist looking at it. He is still looking at me, but somehow his gaze has changed, and the heat from my palm is spreading into my body. The strength of the sensation is overwhelming.

“I apologise if my confession has made you uncomfortable, Miss Bennet. I just wished you to know that I did not speak of you or your relatives in an inconsiderate

manner. I am guilty of not stopping the hurtful mockery and inappropriate jests of Miss Bingley, but no disrespect was meant on my side.”

“Thank you. I understand...” I whisper. I am indeed uncomfortable, like never before. And dazed and doubtful of my judgment and my observations.

I am in a real storm of feelings of all sorts; some of them I cannot even name. But I am not upset. In fact, I congratulate myself on my boldness in coming to the library when I knew he might be here. Many questions need answers, but I do not feel confident enough to enquire further at present.

“I shall return to my sister now,” I say.

“Very well... Miss Bennet, did you need something from the library?”

“No...I mean yes...I came to find a book. I am sorry for disturbing you.”

“Please do not apologise. I am grateful for the opportunity to have had this conversation. Is there any particular book you would like to read?”

“As you are more familiar with Mr Bingley’s library, do you have any recommendations?”

He pauses for a moment and appears thoughtful. “I believe I do,” he says and stretches to a higher shelf, then hands me a book.

I look at it for a short moment, then turn it so I can read the title.

The Lady of the Lake, Walter Scott.

The title is not familiar to me, though the poet is — for who has not heard of the

author of Marmion — and I take it from his hand. I am embarrassed to admit to myself that I hope our fingers might touch again; but they do not.

“I am curious to know whether I was right in guessing your preference,” he says.

“I shall let you know.”

“Please do. I shall be in the library most of the day.”

“Very well, then...”

“Miss Bennet, one more thing... When I woke up abruptly...if I did something improper...please know I was asleep...”

My cheeks are burning again.

“Yes, I know. You have nothing to worry about, sir,” I reply as I walk towards the door, the place where his lips touched my palm still scorching.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

I enter Jane's room with my heart pounding and my breathing irregular, still incredulous that my conversation with Mr Darcy actually happened. His confession is difficult to believe and even more difficult to accept. But the hot spot in my palm where his lips touched my skin is clear and burning proof to contradict my incredulity.

He said he was asleep and probably did not even remember the kiss. What kiss? It was not even that, only a brief touch of my hand. If I cared to, I could probably remember occasions when some gentleman kissed my hand, at balls or parties or in farewell; I was wearing gloves during those times, and the touch of their lips was on the back of my hand, not in my bare palm. That must be the reason why I have no recollection of any response at those times and why my mind is so perturbed on this particular occasion. I am grateful that he did not remember it, as his ignorance will certainly diminish my mortification next time we meet.

My distrust of him, based on our previous disagreements, induces me to dismiss the truthfulness of his claimed admiration. But my common sense argues with such a notion. It is too convoluted a story to simply be invented. And why would he do that? Why would he take the trouble of concocting a story that places him in such a position? I must admit that I tend to doubt Mr Darcy not because I suspect he has a deceptive nature — no, of all the faults that I can find in him, deception is not one of them — but because I cannot accustom myself to all the changes in his behaviour and to the revelation, now repeated at least twice, that he admires me.

I also try to not believe his words because they perturb me. Perturb and thrill, in a way I have never felt before and in which a wise woman should not feel about such a man.

Mr Darcy's admiration, if it is even real, cannot be expected to lead to anything more. I am well aware of his situation in life, and mine, and the fact that probably many young heiresses in London are as desperate as Caroline Bingley to gain his attention.

If he does have an inclination for me, it must be because I did not admire his handwriting and offer to mend his pen. Poor Miss Bingley; how can she not see how desperate and ridiculous her attempts appear? How must she have felt when Mr Darcy confessed to her that he admired my eyes? That was cruel of him, and I almost feel pity for the lady. I have never felt the bite of jealousy, but it must be painful. I understand better now her barely restrained antagonism towards me. How she must loathe my staying at Netherfield and my conversations with Mr Darcy. But in truth, how can she entertain any hopes of marrying a man who is indifferent to her most of the time and mocks her the rest of it? Yes, his mockery is subtle and within the bounds of politeness, but it is obvious.

"Lizzy darling, are you well?" Jane enquires when I have stayed silent too long.

"Yes, of course."

"You look flushed. I hope you have not caught my fever."

"Not at all. I hurried up the stairs, that is all."

"Did you find a book?"

"A book? Oh! Yes, yes, I did. Mr Darcy recommended one to me. I had not known of it until now."

"Oh...how kind of him."

"Indeed... How are you feeling, Jane? That is the most important thing."

“I am feeling well, Lizzy. I believe tonight I might join you for dinner.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful! Then, my dear, we should think about returning home.”

“Yes. Please write to Mama today, Lizzy, and ask her to send the carriage.”

“I shall do so immediately. I only hope we are able to use the carriage tomorrow and the horses are not wanted in the farm.”

I feel a cold claw in my chest thinking about my departure, and I know why, but I also know the sensation is silly and should be instantly dismissed. As much as I feel flattered by Mr Darcy’s admiration, I must preserve my sanity, and therefore, I must put some distance between me and him. Once I am at home, I shall be more objective in my judgment and observe from afar whether he shows any further partiality or it withers into indifference, as usually happens with a gentleman’s infatuation.

Infatuation? Why did I even think of infatuation? Mr Darcy did not say anything of the sort! He said he admired me — or rather he admired my eyes. Surely, I shall not become Caroline Bingley, assuming more than the man said.

“I shall inform Mr Bingley that you will dine with us, Jane. I am sure he will be delighted.”

I smile as I see dear Jane blush, and I pray she will find happiness soon. If it depends on Mr Bingley only, that might happen sooner rather than later. I wonder how much influence his sisters have on the gentleman — and how Mr Darcy might alter his decision if his advice is requested.

Soon after, Jane falls asleep; her health might be improved, but she is still weak, thin, and pale, and she needs more rest than usual. I need sleep too, but I feel too restless

for that.

Miss Bingley's words sound in my mind; she was amusing herself at my expense, but she was right. I do miss my walks and I do need some exercise. I pen a quick note to Mama, then take it, as well as my coat, bonnet, and gloves, downstairs. A stroll in Netherfield's gardens is just what I need.

"Miss Elizabeth, may I help you?"

"Mr Bingley! In fact, I was just looking for you, sir."

"I am just returned from Meryton. I stopped at Longbourn and called on your father. I informed him that Miss Bennet is improving. I hope I was not wrong?"

"Not at all. My sister is feeling much better. She will join us for dinner tonight."

I smile seeing his face brighten. "Will she? How wonderful! But...I see you are dressed for the out of doors. Are you going somewhere?"

"Only for a stroll in the gardens. I miss my exercise."

"Oh...do you need some company?"

"No, thank you, sir. Solitary walks are my speciality. Besides, I shall stay close to the house. But I do have a favour to ask. Would you be so kind as to ask for this note to be delivered to my mother? It is a request for her to send us the carriage tomorrow so we can return home."

"Tomorrow? So soon?" Mr Bingley asks with an amusing air of desperation.

"Yes. Jane is feeling well, and she agrees it is time."

“I hope she has not been displeased by her stay?”

“Quite the opposite, sir. She is grateful for your care and attention, just as I am. You may ask her yourself tonight, at dinner. I am sure she will be happy to tell you.”

“Miss Elizabeth, if you need a carriage tomorrow, as much as I regret seeing you leave, I would be happy to provide you with mine.”

“Thank you. Then I shall only inform my parents that we shall return,” I reply, hurrying to the desk in the entrance hall to amend my note.

“I shall send a servant to deliver the message,” he says, clearly eager to help.

Once the matter is settled, I leave the house. The chilly air is refreshing and most welcome, and I breathe deeply with my eyes closed. I shall not admit it too often, but Miss Bingley was right — I have missed my walks dearly.

Although I planned to stay near the house, my steps take me a little farther. Netherfield is still in full view, but the gentle breeze seems to call and invite me to enjoy it. I am even tempted to take the turn towards Oakham Mount. I have never walked there from Netherfield, only from Longbourn. But I change my mind; tomorrow I shall be home and shall return to my usual habits.

It might be half an hour later or even less when I turn back towards the manor.

I am already in the shrubbery next to the house when I have to stop and quickly regain some composure as Mr Darcy himself is walking towards me.

I wonder about my appearance and feel my cheeks flush.

“Miss Bennet.” He bows to me. His voice is the same as when we last spoke, and he

wears a smile. I wonder why I am shivering, as I was not cold until now.

“Mr Darcy.”

“I do not wish to disturb you. I was waiting for you so I might apologise again if my earlier confession troubled you.”

“Please, sir, no more apologies. As for our earlier conversation, I was surprised, but no more than Miss Bingley must have been.”

His smile broadens.

“Did you have a pleasant walk?”

“Yes, but it was rather short.”

“I was tempted to join you as I need some exercise too, but Bingley told me you were not desirous of company, and I did not want to intrude.”

Again, his words catch me unprepared.

“Oh...it would not have been an intrusion. Mr Bingley had just returned home, and he asked me whether I needed company, which I did not.” The notion that I could have walked alone with Mr Darcy makes me shiver again. Now I am feeling truly silly, and I hope he does not notice it!

As we speak, we take a few steps through the shrubbery. He does not seem willing to return to the house, and neither am I.

“Have you walked far?” he enquires as if struggling to continue the conversation.

“Not really. I usually enjoy long walks, sometimes of several hours.”

“I see... Is it not dangerous to walk so far alone?”

“No. There is no danger in our neighbourhood. Everybody knows me and that I have had this habit of wandering since I was a child.”

“Do you have a favourite path?” he asks, and I hear a hesitation in his voice.

“I do. There is a special place — Oakham Mount — an elevated point that offers a perfect view over the fields. You can see both Netherfield and Longbourn from there.”

“I see. I have never been there.”

“It is dangerous for a rider who does not know the area. I assume you are more fond of riding than walking, sir.”

“I am. Probably because Pemberley is too large for walking, or perhaps because I have not found the right companion to make me favour such exercise. My cousins, as well as my sister, are all excellent riders too.”

Again, his voice is perfectly polite and friendly, but for some reason, I feel uneasy and wonder whether there is something more hidden under his words.

“You seem to be excellent at everything,” I try to joke. “I am inclined to agree with Miss Bingley — you seem to have no faults.”

He looks at me and presses a smile between his lips. Those lips whose touch I have felt.

“That description might better apply to my sister. As for me, I thought we had already decided upon my faults — which are in fact many.”

“We decided that I have no reason to laugh at your faults.”

“Please do not refrain if you feel the desire to laugh at me, Miss Bennet.”

I look at him again, exchanging glances and smiles; I am enjoying our teasing conversation more than I should.

“I might do that, sir. And I shall remind you that you encouraged me.”

We take a few more steps, and then he says, “I understand you will return home tomorrow.”

“Yes, it is time.”

“I am glad Miss Bennet is fully recovered. However, you should ask Mr Jones to examine her again, to avoid any risk.”

“I shall do that, sir. And your sister? Have you received any letters from her? I know you wrote to her.”

“Not yet. I expect one shortly. You should know I mentioned you and Miss Bennet to her.”

I am stunned again, as I remember how he told Miss Bingley there was no room in his letter for any additional words.

“I hope Miss Darcy will not find it dull to hear about a patient and someone who takes care of her.”

He smiles again. "My sister enjoys reading about people I find interesting."

I do not know how to reply to that.

"You seem to have a lovely, close relationship with your sister, Mr Darcy."

"I hope so. I am trying my best to be worthy of her kind heart and generous character."

"She must have been very young when your parents died."

"Indeed. She was five years old when my mother died and ten when my father followed her."

"Poor dear..." I whisper with more familiarity than I should. "Considering your age difference, I am sure you have had a great influence on the excellence of her character and her accomplishments, of which I have heard much praise."

"I cannot claim any credit," he replies, "but I hope I have offered her the support and affection she needed."

He speaks with so much feeling and warmth that it impresses me.

"I cannot imagine what it would be like to have a brother to take care of you," I say, trying to sound light.

"I know Georgiana has always desired to have a sister."

I turn to him, and our eyes meet and lock. Why does his innocent statement make me nervous?

“Mr Darcy! I have been looking for you everywhere, sir!” It is Miss Bingley’s voice. She is walking towards us with Mrs Hurst.

“You have been absent all day today,” she continues.

“Yes, I have not been feeling well. I came out to enjoy some fresh air before dinner.”

“So did we! Miss Eliza, that maid Penny is looking for you. Dear Jane probably needs you.”

“I shall go to her directly.”

“Do I understand you will return to Longbourn tomorrow?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“I am sure you are pleased. It is the greatest comfort for anyone to be among one’s own family.”

I am certain that was a subtle way of saying they had had enough of us and wished to be left alone.

Fortunately, I know her brother’s opinion is different, so hers does not matter.

“Mr Darcy, I hope you will walk with us for a little while,” Mrs Hurst says. “A stroll would be beneficial for all of us before dinner.”

He looks trapped and annoyed, and I am sure I see him roll his eyes.

“I am certain a stroll will be beneficial, especially since you look so lovely all together,” I say, stealing a look at him. It is too brief a glance to know whether he is

more amused or vexed by my teasing, but at dinner I am sure I shall have the chance to find out how beneficial the exercise was for him.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

“Y ou look lovely, Jane!”

“So do you, Lizzy. Staying at Netherfield suits you.”

Jane is joking; she knows nothing about what has really happened during my stay, and I am not willing to reveal anything to her yet. On careful reflection, there is nothing to be revealed.

We go downstairs together, and Mr Bingley is waiting for us at the foot of the stairs. He immediately offers his arm to Jane and helps her to sit in a chair near the fire, asking her whether she is warm enough, offering to fetch her another shawl, and when she declares she feels perfectly well, he pulls up a chair and sits near her. It is amusing that he entirely overlooks me, but I do not mind at all. His attention is in exactly the right place.

I sit too, and after a few minutes, the Hursts and Miss Bingley enter, then Mr Darcy.

“My dear Jane, you look beautiful!” Miss Bingley says, then she and Mrs Hurst engage my sister in conversation. They seem friendly, but I know they are not. I know they look forward to seeing both of us leave.

During dinner, Mr Darcy is as talkative as usual, and by that I mean hardly at all. He glances at me from time to time, and I wonder whether he enjoyed his walk with the two ladies. He does not look enchanted in the slightest.

“You must be so happy to finally be returning home,” Miss Bingley says. “I know I am looking forward to returning home to London.”

“You may return to London whenever you please, Caroline,” Mr Bingley interjects.
“But to me, Netherfield is home now. That is why I rented the estate.”

“But Charles, did you not say you have to return to London soon?”

I see Jane pale slightly, but Mr Bingley replies lightly, “I must go to London for a week or so, probably after the ball. I have some matters of business that can be easily concluded in a few days. Then I shall return and remain at Netherfield for the winter. Miss Bennet, would November 26th be convenient for the ball, do you think?” His sisters exchange displeased glances.

“Yes...if you wish, sir,” Jane answers, blushing.

“Excellent! I shall write my invitations. Darcy, you will stay for the ball, I hope?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I heard you say you were eager to see your sister soon,” Miss Bingley tries again. She seems determined to return to London and take both her brother and his friend with her. I can only hope her plan will fail, for Jane’s sake.

“I am. I am always eager to see Georgiana.”

“Yes, but I thought you wished to be in London sooner. In truth, I look forward to seeing Georgiana too. She is the most accomplished young woman I have ever met. I know Charles admires her too. He often speaks of her most highly.”

That was a mischievous attack on my dear Jane; her smile falters, and she looks distressed. I become angry and prepare to intervene.

“Of course I speak highly of Miss Darcy,” Bingley answers. “One must not be in his

right mind to say a bad word about her. But I am sure Miss Darcy does not miss any of us. In truth, there are times when I feel we are rather trying and tiresome to her.”

Mr Bingley sounds genuine, unaware of the effect of his words. Mr Darcy hides his smile behind his glass. Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst exchange appalled glances.

“You speak nonsense, Charles! Georgiana is my dearest friend! I am sure she misses us as much as we miss her!”

Miss Bingley’s desperate tone is both irritating and amusing. She looks at Mr Darcy, probably waiting for his assurance, but his attention is firmly on his plate. There is no better proof that Mr Bingley’s assumption is correct. Also, it shows that, despite Miss Bingley’s insinuation, there is no particular friendship between Mr Bingley and Miss Darcy.

We eat in silence for a little while, then Miss Bingley speaks again.

“Will you spend Christmas in town, Mr Darcy?”

He hesitates briefly, then replies, “My plans are not settled yet. I have only decided that I shall stay at Netherfield till the ball. The rest of the year is uncertain.”

Mr Darcy’s answers are as I expect. I know he will leave Hertfordshire soon, and yet I feel a tightness in my chest.

“If I had a house like Pemberley, I would never leave it!” Miss Bingley continues.

“In that, we are in agreement, Miss Bingley,” Mr Darcy replies. “I would never leave Pemberley if it were my choice only. I always feel I do not spend enough time there.”

“Perhaps that will change once you marry, Mr Darcy, if your wife loves Pemberley as

much as you do,” Mrs Hurst interjects.

Mr Darcy hesitates again, then I believe — but I am not sure! — he casts a glance at me, then looks back at Mrs Hurst, ready to reply. Mr Bingley does so first, though.

“I cannot imagine anyone not liking Pemberley. It is not just a fine property but one where nature and humanity are in perfect balance. I have never seen a house better situated, nor a park better managed.”

“Thank you, Bingley,” Mr Darcy replies.

“Indeed, we have been fortunate to spend three summers in a row at Pemberley,” Miss Bingley says. “And I look forward to next summer.”

“Unless Darcy marries by next summer and his wife does not favour our company,” Bingley says, and his sister’s face changes colour. “But I do not see Darcy marrying soon. In fact, I wonder whether I have ever seen Darcy show any admiration for anyone. He is simply too fastidious.”

At that, Miss Bingley’s face turns crimson. She looks at Mr Darcy, then at me, and I know quite clearly what is in her mind. Mr Darcy looks uncomfortable too, but he keeps his smile.

“I am not fastidious, only more restrained, Bingley. You and I are very different people.”

“Indeed we are, Darcy. I often wonder why you accepted me as your friend. You are older, cleverer, better connected, of higher rank, and richer than me beyond comparison. I have very little to offer you and certainly nothing that you do not already own, including loyalty and entertainment.”

“I am sure Mr Darcy can see your excellent character and honest kind heart, Mr Bingley,” Jane suddenly interjects, and all eyes turn to her. “Those are qualities that everyone looks for in a friend but very rarely finds.”

I am surprised by my dear Jane’s intervention. Once she has finished, I can see her emotions in the trace of redness on her throat and the slight trembling of her fingers on her glass.

“Miss Bennet,” Mr Darcy says, “you expressed my sentiments most accurately. Bingley is very modest, but he is an excellent man, one of the best of my acquaintance.” He smiles at Jane, and she replies with a timid smile of her own. I have no reason to doubt Mr Darcy’s reply, nor his obvious intention to put Jane at ease.

There are so many small — yet significant — details that I discover about Mr Darcy whenever we are in company that it is no wonder my feelings for him are so restless and undecided. I know my first ill impression of him is long gone; I am not brave enough or calm enough to reflect more on the subject, and perhaps I should not do it at all, considering he will leave Hertfordshire soon in any case.

After dinner, Mr Bingley helps Jane move to an armchair close to the fire. She is perfectly capable of walking by herself, but his care is touching, and he seems to enjoy it as much as Jane does.

The Bingley sisters and Mr Hurst try to tempt the rest of us with a game of cards, but we all decline. Half an hour later, Jane thanks everyone and retires for the night. I join her, despite my secret desire to stay longer. There might be only one reason for my lingering, and I fight against it.

“Lizzy,” Jane says once we are in our chamber, “Caroline speaks so much of Miss Darcy...and Mr Bingley declared he admires her...I wonder...”

“My dear Jane, I hope you are not so silly as to wonder whom Mr Bingley admires more and in what way. I am sure he admires Miss Darcy — and deservedly so, from what I have heard. But that sort of admiration is nothing like his behaviour towards you.”

Jane still looks unsure, so I say, now laughing, “Mr Bingley mentioned that they are probably annoying to Miss Darcy, and Mr Darcy did not attempt to deny it. I am sure I would like Miss Darcy very much since we seem to be equally vexed by Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst.”

“Lizzy, I am grateful to them. They have been very kind and caring towards me. I am sure they want nothing more than their brother’s happiness.”

“My dear, one day I told Mr Darcy that they had been very kind to you. And he replied that Mr Bingley deserves all the credit for how well you have been cared for.”

“Oh... Mr Darcy seems a great friend to Mr Bingley. But Lizzy, when did you have such a conversation with him?”

Now I am sure my cheeks are red.

“We met a few times around the house...and in the library.”

“I hope you did not argue with him, Lizzy. I know you were upset with him, but I am sure he is not such an unpleasant sort of man as we were so quick to believe.”

“You must not worry, Jane. I am no longer upset with Mr Darcy. Now let us sleep. You must be tired.”

Jane is tired indeed, and she falls asleep rather quickly. But I have no such luck. The thought that I must return to Longbourn the next day is unsettling. All my nights at

Netherfield have been agitated — for one reason or another — and I have hardly been able to sleep. Now I feel tired, but sleep is nowhere to be found. I keep thinking of Mr Darcy. We have been in company for only a few days, and he has stirred more feelings in me than any other man.

My opinion from the day I arrived and happened upon him — with my petticoat six inches deep in mud, which brought about his sarcastic smile and critical eye — to the present is utterly changed. In fact, it is quite the opposite, and I admit that to myself with a sense of panic and a nervousness that I cannot control.

I am not sure when I fall asleep, but it is morning and full daylight when I wake up rested and in relatively good spirits.

We prepare for breakfast, and a maid helps to pack our small trunk so we can return home as soon as Mr Bingley can provide us with his carriage.

This time, I meet Mr Darcy — who is in the dining room alone with Mr Bingley — with more calmness, and I enjoy his friendly greeting.

“Caroline, Louisa, and Hurst will join us soon,” Mr Bingley says.

“We are in no hurry, sir,” Jane answers. They are again sitting next to each other at the table.

“Mr Bingley,” I say, “Mr Darcy recommended a book to me yesterday. I find it delightful but have had no time to finish it. Would you mind if I kept it for a few more days?”

“Miss Elizabeth, you may keep any book — or all of them — for as many days as

you want. And you may come and take others once you have finished them,” Mr Bingley offers with excessive graciousness, causing me to laugh.

“Thank you, sir.”

“In fact, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr Darcy says, “that book is mine. I purchased it not long before we came to Netherfield. It was first published less than a year before, but this edition containing engravings just came off the press.”

“Oh...”

“I recommended it because I assumed you would enjoy it.”

“I am enjoying it, sir, very much.”

“Then please keep it as long as you need. I have already read it and would like to hear your opinion of it once you have finished.”

His voice is soft, and the smile on his lips has gained some more warmth, which gives me in turns waves of heat and chills down my spine. I am definitely a ridiculous woman, with my ridiculous, strange impulses.

“You were right to choose it, then, Mr Darcy. I do like it very much. It would be interesting to share opinions on it. I should complete it in a few days.”

“There is no rush,” he says. I am enjoying the book as much as the author’s previous work, but I did not know it was so new. That he can guess my tastes in reading material is pleasant and disturbing.

I look at him, and our gazes lock for longer than they have previously.

“Mr Bingley, I hope we are not abusing your kindness by asking for your carriage,” Jane says.

“No, not at all. The carriage will be ready whenever you are.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I wonder,” Mr Bingley asks suddenly. “Would you mind if we accompanied you to Longbourn? We have some business in Meryton, and we could travel on there after seeing you safely returned. But if you prefer to be alone, my coachman will take you home and then return for us.”

“Oh no,” Jane answers hastily. “Of course we do not mind. It sounds like an excellent plan. But only if you are certain we are not disrupting your day?” My sister is clearly pleased, and Mr Bingley even more so.

“Of course not! Then it is settled. In fact, it was Darcy’s idea. He suggested I seek your approval.”

I look at Mr Darcy again, surprised. Did he suggest it? Of course, it is nothing extraordinary, only a brief carriage ride. Then why do I feel nervous?

“Since you approve of it,” Mr Bingley continues, “we should stop and greet your parents for a few minutes.”

Jane now looks overjoyed, while I am still agitated; even more so when I hear Mr Darcy say, “I have not had the pleasure of being introduced to Mr Bennet yet, nor of visiting Longbourn. This will be a good opportunity, if you do not think it would be an intrusion that will displease your parents.”

He is mostly addressing me, and I need a moment to find the words to reply.

“No...I am sure it would be no intrusion.” But I am not even sure that is the truth. Such a visit might not displease Mama and Papa, but it will certainly astonish them.

I do not remember much of the breakfast or when Mr Bingley’s family joined us at last, but now it is around noon, and we are in the carriage, comfortably situated, with Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley sitting on the opposite bench and Miss Bingley staring from one of the windows on the first floor of the manor.

I cannot guess Mr Darcy’s thoughts, but I am quite certain what is in Caroline Bingley’s mind — and it is not pleasant.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

Sitting in Longbourn's library, which also counts as Mr Bennet's study, talking to our host, I wonder what Elizabeth is doing. Bingley and I escorted the Miss Bennets back to Longbourn, and I was introduced to Mr Bennet. I feel like a hypocrite for not revealing my true intention. I suggested this call to Bingley in order to become acquainted with Elizabeth's father and open the way for future calls.

My wish, indeed my plan, is clear: I want to know Elizabeth better, to understand her wishes, to convince myself of her feelings for me. Then to show her my own feelings, to court her, and to propose to her. A plan that will certainly face many obstacles and much opposition, the strongest of which up until now has been mine. I am confident that since I managed to overcome my concerns, adjust my beliefs, and make such a bold decision that will affect my life forever, I shall surely be able to counter others' disapproval. The only person's disapproval I fear and that could ruin my plans is Elizabeth's.

At the moment, she seems to enjoy my company and looked pleased with my visiting her father. I have not seen her much since we arrived in her home because we have spent most of the time with Mr Bennet. I hope that in the coming days I shall meet her during her walks. I look forward to seeing Oakham Mount if it is her favourite place.

I am sure she will enjoy the park, the paths, and the woods at Pemberley. And I hope I shall have the chance to show them to her one day.

"My library at Netherfield is better than I deserve," I hear Bingley say, "and certainly greater than my interest in books. I am ashamed but honest enough to admit that. Darcy and I are quite different in that, as we are in many other ways."

“Mr Darcy is fond of books, I assume?” Mr Bennet asks.

“Very much so,” Bingley replies on my behalf. “He and Miss Elizabeth have been the only ones to use the Netherfield library.”

I feel all the blood suddenly drain from my face at such a statement that is truer than Bingley knows. Fortunately, Mr Bennet deems it of little importance.

“I am surprised that Lizzy inherited my passion for reading but not my dislike for the out of doors. Except for fishing, there is nothing else that gives me pleasure outside my library, while my Lizzy can find pleasure in anything out there.”

“It is admirable to see a young woman who is passionate about reading as well as nature,” I say. “My sister is the same. Except she is not as brave as Miss Elizabeth.”

“By brave you mean wild, I assume?” Mr Bennet challenges me.

“No indeed. By brave, I mean courageous, either when she is walking three miles to visit her ill sister or when she is debating a subject about which she is passionate.”

“Ah, yes. That would be wild, according to Mrs Bennet’s definition. I must say, Mr Darcy, that I am as surprised by your visit to us as I am by your positive statements about Lizzy. Delighted and honoured by both, but surprised nevertheless.”

“Any gentleman with a little reason and wisdom would appreciate what is worthy of appreciation,” I say, though I am worried that Mr Bennet’s perceptiveness is sharp enough to read what is behind my words.

“I am glad that your judgment and appreciation in daylight are different from in the candlelight of an assembly hall.”

Ah, here it is, the long-awaited rebuke. Mr Bennet seems to know about my ‘not tolerable enough’ reply, even though he was not there. The best defence is attack, so I respond, “I assume you refer to my unfortunate statement that offended Miss Elizabeth at the assembly last month. I have already apologised to her, and we have clarified the misunderstanding.”

“Oh, Darcy did not mean to offend Miss Elizabeth,” Bingley quickly interjects. “He just despises being in large gatherings among people he does not know and is never at his best on such occasions. And he rarely dances at all, at any ball.”

“I cannot fault you for that, Mr Darcy,” Mr Bennet answers. “It seems we have more in common than our partiality for books. Few things depress me more than being dragged to balls or parties. I am fortunate enough that getting old has saved me from the obligation to dance.”

I smile at him; Mr Bennet’s banter is entertaining, and it is clearly where Elizabeth inherited her wit from. What Mr Bennet is not aware of is that we also share a partiality for something — or rather someone — else. But this subject we cannot broach yet.

Bingley and I leave Longbourn about an hour later, and I am in excellent spirits. We continue our ride to Meryton, where Bingley wishes to call on Colonel Forster. I have met the colonel only once before, when we dined with the officers, but I have not conversed with him yet, so I shall take this opportunity. Now that Elizabeth is not at Netherfield any longer, any excuse to not be alone with Caroline Bingley should be grasped.

“I very much admire Miss Bennet,” Bingley suddenly says.

“Yes, it is quite obvious.”

“I admire her more than any other woman I have met.”

“That might be because she is serene and beautiful. But I hope you will examine your feelings carefully, Bingley, and be cautious not to show more than there is.”

“What do you mean, Darcy?”

“I did not mean to offend you, but I have seen you in love many times before. Your feelings always come and go easily. Miss Bennet seems to be a gentle, kind-hearted young woman, and your actions might create expectations that, if not fulfilled, could cause pain.”

“You might be right, Darcy. And I know about my propensity to be easily infatuated. But I also know I have never felt the way I feel now. You certainly do not understand my meaning, but please trust my words.”

“I do understand your meaning, Bingley. It is not for me to trust your words or not. It is for you to be sure not just how strongly you feel but exactly what it is that you feel. Is it a mere infatuation or something more profound? Do not forget that young ladies in London are accustomed to some degree of teasing and flirting. In such a small community, misconceptions could easily arise.”

Bingley looks thoughtful and a bit ruffled. In moments like these, I remember he is younger than me.

“I am only telling you this for your own good, Bingley.”

“Yes, I know. I shall consider your advice. But Darcy...do you think Miss Bennet has some feelings for me? You have seen us together more than once.”

“I am not the best situated to express an opinion on this matter, Bingley. My

observations have been scarce and superficial. But I believe these sorts of things are better felt than observed. For instance, Miss Bennet is kind and amiable and smiles at everyone. Just as you are kind and amiable and smile at everyone. Are your amiability and smiles towards her different from how they are towards the rest of us? Are her smiles and amiability towards you different from how they are towards others?"

Bingley is quiet, clearly trying to understand and interpret my words. If I were to consider my observations only, I would say he is infatuated with her and that she accepts his admiration with pleasure but not particular regard. But how can I trust my observations and my judgment when I tried so hard to disguise my own feelings for Elizabeth? Everybody else — including herself — believed I disliked her, when in truth, my heart was aching, longing for her. How can I guess what is in Jane Bennet's heart?

My sentiments for Elizabeth have taught me humbleness and precaution, and I shall not tell Bingley anything that may lead him in one direction or another. The decision must be his, as he will be the one suffering the consequences either way.

We arrive in Meryton and are received by the colonel and his wife. Colonel Forster is a man of probably my cousin Richard's age, and one can see he is an officer by choice. He married recently, he informs us, and he seems utterly charmed by his young wife. Speaking of judgment and presumptions, I would have expected Colonel Forster to marry a woman more of Miss Jane Bennet's disposition and manners, but he has instead chosen someone who resembles Miss Lydia Bennet, both in age and behaviour.

Indeed, one cannot know what is in another's heart and mind.

This evening, dinner at Netherfield is less tasty and less pleasant to me. Even in Elizabeth's absence, Miss Bingley continues to abuse her and her family, supported by Mrs Hurst.

"I feel sorry for Jane Bennet. She is truly a sweet, pretty girl, but with such connections, and such poor behaviour in her mother and sisters, added to her lack of dowry, I see no chance for her to marry well. I doubt any man of consequence would wish to be tied to the Bennets. And Eliza Bennet! Although I know there are some people who admire her fine eyes and bold manners, she has neither her sister's beauty nor pleasant disposition. I can safely predict she will end a spinster."

"You are undeservedly harsh about the entire Bennet family, Miss Bingley," I reply. "While your judgment might be correct from one point of view, I think other people are entitled to have different opinions. Happiness in marriage is not always a matter of dowry and connections, especially when one of the spouses already possesses fortune enough for a comfortable life. Otherwise, all rich, young heiresses, or young ladies from old, titled families, would enjoy blissful marriages. But we all know that is not true."

"I find Miss Jane Bennet admirable, beyond comparison with any other young woman I have met in society, and I declare Miss Elizabeth exceedingly charming and clever."

Miss Bingley is about to object to Bingley's statement, but I quickly reply, "As I said — different people, different opinions. I agree with Bingley on this subject."

This silences Miss Bingley for a while, which is a true blessing, and we can enjoy the rest of our dinner in peace.

Afterwards, Bingley, Hurst, and I remain in the dining room for drinks and cigars. Hurst's presence keeps the conversation on neutral subjects, and we all retire for the

night rather early.

The first night after Elizabeth's departure is, like those before, equally restless for me. Her image is so clear to all my senses that distance cannot diminish my yearning. Yearning — a strange word that I never thought I would use in regard to myself but which perfectly describes the reason for my unrest.

Another poor night's sleep does not prevent me from waking up with enough energy and a desire for exercise. I know it is too early for Elizabeth to leave her house, but I have no patience to wait; I need to do something. Even the stable boy is surprised to see me at this hour; it will soon become obvious to everyone that I am behaving like a lunatic.

Autumn is a lovely season, a mix of colours pleasant for the eyes, but I see little of the scenery. I forget to ask the stable boy for directions to Oakham Mount, so I ride along the road towards Longbourn. I do not expect anything, and I surely have no intention of calling at the house at that hour.

When Longbourn appears in sight, so does Elizabeth's silhouette. A fluttering begins in my stomach, and I feel silly again. Silly and overjoyed.

I hasten my horse towards her and dismount; I feel I am smiling before thinking to do so, and I am pleased to see the smile on her face.

“Miss Bennet!”

“Mr Darcy. You are an early rider, sir.”

“I am, and I am fortunate to have met an early walker. Someone who could, perhaps, show me the road to Oakham Mount?”

I am delighted to see her cheeks turn crimson.

“Gladly. In fact, I intended to walk there myself.”

“Then, may I join you?”

“Of course. But I planned to take paths where riding might be difficult.”

“I have no intention to ride at all but to enjoy the pleasure of walking.”

“Oh...very well,” she replies with a sudden shyness.

“I hope I am not imposing my presence on you, Miss Bennet.”

“Oh no, not at all.”

“Is your sister well? No fever...or anything?”

“No, nothing of the kind. I must tell you that my father was quite delighted with your visit and company, Mr Darcy. He spoke of you all day, which he rarely does, as he is seldom interested in new acquaintances.”

“The feeling was mutual. It seems your father and I share more than one common interest.”

“Indeed. Who would have thought? I was surprised by your intention to meet my father, Mr Darcy. Surprised but glad.”

“I hope to have the pleasure of another meeting with Mr Bennet soon.”

“You are welcome to call on him whenever you wish,” she answers and glances at me

for an instant, then returns her attention to the road. “And you will surely meet at the ball. Since you both hate dancing, you may keep each other company.”

Her tone is now teasing, but I find the notion quite agreeable.

“I intend to dance at least two sets,” I reply. One with her, of course; I hope she knows that. “But for the rest of the time, Mr Bennet’s company will surely be an excellent choice.”

She lets out a little laugh. “You may try to engage Miss Bingley in conversation too since she has declared her opposition to dancing at a ball.”

“That would be the worst choice ever,” I utter, and she laughs again.

“Is your horse following you freely?” she suddenly asks, somehow concerned.

“Yes. I hope you are not afraid of it?”

“A little. Strangely enough, I love horses, but I am not comfortable around them.”

“But your sister seems to enjoy the exercise.”

“She does. We learnt together, of course, but something happened that scared me.”

“May I ask when you last rode?”

“Oh...probably five years ago, or a bit longer.”

“I am sorry to hear that. There are few things as delightful as riding with the wind on your face. I might sound presumptuous, but I truly believe you would enjoy it exceedingly.”

“I shall not argue with you, sir. But we shall never know, as I have no intention of trying.”

I say nothing else on the subject, and we walk on together. At some point, the path narrows while becoming steeper and coils around the small hill. I hold the reins of my horse, for his safety. Eventually, the path widens again, and we soon reach the highest point. We are in a large, flat, open space, flanked by an impressive and likely old oak surrounded by three smaller ones. From the high ground, it is easy to admire the entire valley opened up in front of our eyes.

“There is Netherfield, and there is Longbourn,” she says, gazing out. Her profile is exquisite, with a few locks escaping from under her bonnet, her lips half parted and her cheeks red. She turns to me, and I can admire her eyes, brightened by the exercise.

“Beautiful,” I say.

“I know Pemberley probably offers stunning views, but I hope you have found the long walk here worth the while.”

“Very much so. As much as I love Pemberley, I have discovered there is a lot of beauty beyond it that is also worthy of being admired.”

Her expression changes slightly; does she understand the true meaning of my words?

“Now that I know the location, I plan to come here every day when the weather allows and when Bingley does not drag me to other appointments,” I say. “But it will likely be after breakfast.”

“I believe after breakfast would be a perfect time,” she replies. Should I take that as a promise for regular meetings? Do I dare?

“I must return home now, Mr Darcy,” she says.

“Yes. May I accompany you back to Longbourn?”

“Only as far as the crossroads to Netherfield. I assume you are expected for breakfast too.”

I accept her offer, and we walk back together. At the aforementioned point, we stop. Both of us seem to have something to say, but not many words come out, except, “Thank you for this lovely morning, Miss Bennet.”

“The pleasure was mine, Mr Darcy,” she replies.

I bow; she smiles and curtsies and walks away from me.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

I am eagerly waiting for Elizabeth, leaning against the old oak. We met yesterday and the day before, and we should meet again today. I feel as amazed and bewitched as a young boy who is just discovering the world, and I wonder at the intensity of feelings aroused in me with each and every interaction with Elizabeth.

Yesterday, we only talked. About anything and everything. I cannot remember ever being so at ease with anyone, including my closest family. I have no doubts that she enjoys my company too; I can see how the smile on her face changes every day, how her eyes sparkle when she laughs at me. Yesterday, as we walked back home, I offered her my arm, and she took it, although I knew she needed no support to walk.

For some reason, she seems pleased with the idea of me calling at Longbourn but not that I might accompany her home. I suspect she does not want to reveal our friendship to her family, and I wonder why.

“Mr Darcy?”

I step forwards to greet her. “Miss Bennet.”

“Forgive me for being late. Things are a little busy at home. We have received a visit from my father’s cousin, Mr Collins.”

“You are not late since we did not fix upon an hour to meet. Your presence is a joy and a privilege, regardless of the time.”

That might have come out too formally, but it is how I feel. I see her smile and blush, which I absolutely adore.

She stops near the oak and leans against it to rest, mirroring my earlier position. I look around quickly and see a stump a short distance away. I am much taller, so by sitting in this way, we are almost the same height.

“I assume the prospect of a walk is more pleasant than that of your guest?”

“Absolutely. Especially this walk,” she says, and I believe her simple words make me blush.

“Mr Collins is a...very peculiar sort of man,” she continues. “My father is exceedingly entertained and equally annoyed.”

“Ah, yes. I am well accustomed to such a mix of sentiments,” I say.

“I would be most curious to see your response to Mr Collins, but I cannot expose you to such torture,” she teases me.

“That is most considerate of you, Miss Bennet.”

We are both friendly, and our conversation is light, but there is an awkward tension between us. For my part, I know why. I wish nothing more than to touch her, hold her hand in mine, and take her in my arms and kiss her. I have been yearning for that for weeks now. Out of repressed frustration, I fidget.

“This stump is rather uncomfortable. Quite wet and slippery. It is either the dew from last night or there was a frost,” I mumble.

“A frost, I expect. But we might have a shower later today,” she replies. “The clouds are coming from the southwest, and that is usually an indication of rain.”

We speak of the weather, but all I can think of is that, because of it, we might not be

able to meet again tomorrow.

“I finished the book and loved it,” she declares. “I shall bring it to you tomorrow.”

So, she just arranged another meeting. I smile, relieved.

“If it rains, I shall visit Mr Bennet. You may return the book to me if you wish, but there is no rush.”

She smiles back. “I am in a rush to ask you to recommend another one.”

“Oh...I shall think about something and bring it to you tomorrow when we meet. Or at Longbourn, if it is raining.”

“Excellent. Thank you, sir.”

Suddenly, her closeness creates a warmth in me that I can hardly bear. I stand up and take a few steps forwards, for a better view over the valley, though everything I want to see is behind me.

She comes to stand next to me, and I feel my heart race. Silly heart.

“Does Mr Bingley still intend to go to London after the ball?” she asks.

“Yes. He has mentioned no change in that regard. I shall help him with his business so he is able to return within a week.”

“That is very kind of you. I know his sisters are not willing to return to Netherfield. Will he be here alone?”

Can she mean what I hope she does?

“He does not seem bothered by the notion of being alone at Netherfield since he does not feel lonely. But I might return to keep him company.”

“That would be lovely,” she says, glancing at me. “Though I am sure you wish to spend Christmas with your sister.”

“Yes, but our plans are not fixed yet.”

My plans depend entirely on her, but I do not dare say that.

“We should return home. I believe it will rain soon,” she says, and I reluctantly agree. Another lovely time spent together causes me equal delight and frustration because I wish for more but do not have the courage to ask. I am scared I might ruin what we already have, but I know I must take a further step soon. Perhaps I might move the conversation in that direction during our walk back to Longbourn.

I offer her my arm, and she takes it without hesitation, with more confidence than yesterday. I can think of nothing but her presence. I can feel her warmth, catch her scent, detect each movement of her body; I can hear her breathe, but even more, I can hear the beating of my own heart.

We take a few steps, and I am ready to speak. I am not sure what I should say, but twenty years of education with some of the best teachers in England must help me to sound reasonably articulate. Or at least not completely ridiculous.

“Miss Bennet, I...”

She lets out a loud cry, and I look at her, but suddenly something happens, and my feet are not on the ground any longer. I desperately try to keep my balance, but instead, I fall onto my back and feel a blow to my head. For a few moments, all is dark, then I realise I cannot breathe. When I finally open my eyes, my head feels

whole again and my senses recovered, and I discover the reason for my breathlessness. Elizabeth has fallen with me, her face only inches from mine, her body atop my own. My mind is still hazy, but my arms close around her instinctively. I still cannot breathe, a sharp pain is cutting at my head, but I care about nothing but the sweet burden that pins me to the ground. I feel her warm breath on my jaw and — although I am not sure whether it is real or not — I sense her lips touch my skin.

“Mr Darcy! Oh, dear Lord, I am such a fool! Mr Darcy, are you hurt?” I feel her trying to move away, but I shamelessly take advantage of the confusion and hold her tight a little longer.

“I am well,” I finally reply. “I have never felt better in my life. I am not sure whether it is real or not, as I have dreamt of this moment so many times.”

Now I can see her lifting her body and looking at me from only a few inches away. Her eyebrow is arched in challenge.

“I am glad you are well enough to tease me, sir. You have dreamt of losing your footing and falling in the mud?” I finally open my arms, and she struggles to lift herself onto her knees.

I do the same, but I still feel dizzy, and standing up is more difficult than I estimated. I glance around; my hat has been thrown in the grass, and my horse is a few steps away looking at me, pulling at his reins and neighing restlessly. Elizabeth stares at him, pressing her hand to her chest. She looks frightened, but before I have time to respond, she lets out another cry.

“You are injured! You are bleeding!” she exclaims and leans towards me. We are both now on our knees, and she stretches her hand out to me. She touches my temple, then glides her fingers into my hair.

“Let me see,” she says, moving even closer. In doing so, my head is close to the junction of her neck, and my cheek is almost touching hers.

I hold my breath again. Who needs air when her scent is so intoxicating? I feel blessed for any injury that has brought her so close to me and allowed me to be spoilt by her care.

“I need something to clean the dirt off,” she says and removes her gloves. “These are dirty too,” she mumbles with distress.

“Perhaps my neckcloth will do,” I whisper, attempting to untie it.

“Allow me. Your gloves are wet and muddy,” she claims decidedly. I allow her to do as she pleases. I would allow her everything...

My entire body is burning at the sensation of her fingers fumbling with my neckcloth, touching my chin, my jaw, and my neck. She finally succeeds and says, “Can you please send the horse away? I am sorry for being so silly, but it came nearer to us and...I did not realise, and it touched me on the shoulder. I startled and that is why we fell...”

I make a gesture to my horse but, since he is confused about what has happened, I need to stand up — with some difficulty — and order him again before he obeys. In the meantime, Elizabeth has moved to my back, and she asks me to stay still. I can feel her gently brushing her fingers through my hair, then across my temple and my nape.

“I am so sorry...” she whispers. “There is a small wound... When you fell, your head must have hit a rock under all this mud. It has bled a little. I shall press the cloth to it to stop the blood. Is it painful?”

“Do not worry. It is not painful... Please do not apologise. I am sure it is nothing and will pass soon. I certainly had worse when I was playing as a boy with my cousins.”

“I do worry, and I need to apologise,” she whispers again, mostly to herself. “Silly me...”

She is still pressing the fabric to my head, and I turn slowly. We are now facing each other, her hand on my face. She is not wearing gloves, and my lips are close to her wrist, brushing over it as I move.

“I was not teasing you,” I say. “It is I who should apologise if I make you uncomfortable, but I cannot take my words back. I have dreamt of such a moment many times. Not of falling over but of holding you in my arms. Being so close to you.”

Our eyes are locked, and I can see the surprise on her face. She blinks a few times, and her lips part as if trying to reply.

“I might sound like a rake to you, but the truth needed to be said. When we fell, I intentionally held my arms around you longer than I should have. I could claim I was feeling dizzy, and I was, but it was mostly from your nearness rather than from the fall.”

“Oh...” she whispers.

“And...since I am confessing everything...a few days ago, in the Netherfield library...I was asleep, but I woke up when I kissed your hand. It began as a dream, but I knew it was real.”

She blinks again as if trying to understand my words. Her face changes colour, and her eyes seem dazed by confused feelings. She rises to her feet, her hand still pressed

to my head, and I struggle to stand along with her.

“Please forgive me for being so blunt. I have been selfish and inconsiderate in saying so much without being certain that you wished to hear it. Please know that I value our friendship, and one word from you will silence me forever on this subject. We can pretend it was never mentioned.”

“I did not expect so many blunt confessions at this moment,” she finally responds in a trembling voice and with a little smile. “It was a surprise but certainly not one for which you must apologise. Quite the opposite.”

She moves her hand and says, “Let me see how serious your injury is.” She rises onto her toes for a better view, and I lean my head to the side.

“The bleeding has stopped,” she says, and we are facing each other again. “You should ask your servant to clean the blood out of the white cloth as soon as you arrive at Netherfield,” she continues. I take the fabric from her with my other hand, and in doing so, our fingers touch and entwine. I expect her to withdraw her hand, but she does not. I grab the cloth with my other hand and push it into my pocket. Looking at her carefully for a sign of opposition, I close my palm, capturing her fingers inside.

She remains still, her hand in mine.

“I do not wish you to be silenced on this subject, Mr Darcy...I believe we should discuss it at length in the next few days. Perhaps when we are sure that you are not injured or dizzy from the accident,” she whispers.

The joy I feel at her words makes my heart pound in my chest, and I am almost afraid to admit the meaning of her statement.

“I shall be grateful for any chance to speak again — today, tomorrow, whenever you

wish to, and only as much as you wish to..."

Our hands are still entwined and our gazes locked. I feel her fingers moving in my palm.

"I wondered whether you were truly asleep, that day in the library," she says.

"I was at first. When you put the blanket around me, I believed it was also a dream. Just like this one..."

"Do I cause you to fall in all your dreams, Mr Darcy? It certainly appears so," she teases me.

Her eyes are now sparkling with a smile that turns her lips up too. If only she knew what sort of dreams I had, she would likely never speak to me again. I might tell her one day if the future allows me to reveal to her the intensity of my love.

"Not in all my dreams, Miss Bennet. And while you remember the falls, I remember only the happiness of being close to you."

From an impulse that I cannot control, I open my hand, freeing hers, which remains in mine.

"But I am now fully awake," I say. Slowly, allowing her time to protest or to remove her hand, I lift it and place my lips upon her palm. I hear her gasp, but she makes no attempt to prevent my tender gesture. Our eyes still locked, I move my lips and press them to her wrist. I dare to taste her skin for only an instant. My lips linger there for another sweet moment.

"We should return home now, Mr Darcy. It will rain soon, and we have stayed longer than usual."

“Yes...my perception of time is different from reality,” I admit.

“So is mine,” she agrees.

“Come, let me escort you to Longbourn.” I put her hand on my arm, then place my other hand over it. Again, she does not oppose it.

“As always, we shall separate at the crossroads. We cannot allow anyone to see us in such a terrible state.”

This time I agree; anyone who saw us wet and covered in dirt would assume the worst.

“I feel so silly for being scared of your horse.”

“As selfish as it sounds, I am inordinately grateful for your fear of horses,” I confess.

“Strangely, I am too,” she agrees with laughing eyes.

“Bingley said he would call at Longbourn tomorrow. I would like to join him, so we might not have time to meet in the morning.”

“I shall be happy to see both you and Mr Bingley at Longbourn.”

We walk in silence until we reach the place where we had agreed to separate. I do not know what to do. I wish to do and to say so much more, but should I?

She withdraws her hand from my arm but still seems hesitant to leave.

“Sir, please promise me that you will ask your valet to examine your injury and send for Mr Jones if it bleeds or hurts again.”

“I promise.”

She is still hesitating, even though the sky has filled with clouds and rain is threatening.

“Mr Darcy, there is something I must reveal to you too. I am already ashamed of my words, and I shall deny that I ever said them.”

I am sure my surprise is obvious as I wait for her to continue.

“Earlier, when we were on the ground and you held me tight...I thought you would kiss me.”

My mouth is dry, and I feel my eyes widen in disbelief, while her cheeks colour crimson. Then, to my utter and complete amazement, she lifts up onto her toes and places a quick kiss on my right cheek. I move my head, and her mouth brushes over mine for a moment as short as the beat of a heart. Then with a last impish look, she turns and runs away from me.

Stunned, afraid of my own joy, I stand still, watching her until her silhouette disappears. Then I climb into the saddle and turn my horse — what a wonderful ally he proved to be! — towards Netherfield, indifferent to the rain that is now pouring down. I am quite sure that I have never enjoyed anything so exquisite and tasty as the flavour of Elizabeth’s lips, and whatever the future brings us, nothing will be more valuable than her first kiss, generously granted to me.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

I enter Netherfield in a hurry, hoping not to encounter anyone before I have arranged my appearance. Besides my fall, which has left me muddied literally from head to toe, I am wet through to the skin as I rode in the pouring rain, and now the disaster is complete. But even more, I need some privacy to think in peace about Elizabeth and our sweet moment of heartfelt tenderness. She welcomed my confession! She allowed my gestures of affection, and she kissed me! By herself, of her own free will! I know this sounds terrible, but I thank God and the fact that my horse scared her and I suffered an accident that opened the path towards this understanding between us. In truth, there is no formal understanding between us, as we did not speak about it, but no words could have been clearer than Elizabeth's little, brief, timid kiss.

“Darcy, where in the world have you been? The stable boy told me you went for a ride, but then the rain began and we were all worried. What happened to you? You are wet and dirty...and where is your neckcloth? Are you hurt?”

Bingley's voice is increasing in volume, and all his questions feel like sharp pointed arrows shot directly into my brain.

“I am well, just...as you see...wet and dirty. Allow me a little time to wash and change, and we may talk.”

“Of course. But, Darcy, someone is waiting for you. He arrived an hour ago.”

“Someone? For me?”

“Yes, a messenger from Lady Catherine de Bourgh. He said he was instructed not to return without your reply.”

“I can imagine. Lady Catherine always does that. I still need to wash and change before I can read a letter. Where is the man?”

“He is taken care of, and his horse as well.”

“Thank you.” I go to my room, wondering what Lady Catherine could possibly want so urgently. Nothing would surprise me; she invents all sorts of emergencies and schemes to lure me to Rosings. She usually claims she needs advice in regard to managing the estate, though her steward — whom I found and vouched for — is perfectly capable of doing a good job.

Ten years after my mother died, Lady Catherine is still trying to convince me that they had a secret arrangement, and to respect my mother’s wishes and legacy, I should marry Anne. Even if such an arrangement had existed, which I doubt, and even if my mother had mentioned it to me, which she did not, I would not agree to arrange my private life to suit the whims of others.

I would do anything in the world for my parents, except marry someone simply to please them.

After the morning I have had, a hot bath would suit me perfectly, but I have no patience to wait for the water, so I postpone it for later tonight and wash myself as best I can. My valet expresses his concern about my head injury, but it is not bleeding and not hurting so much any longer.

“Sir, if you do not mind, I shall send a note to the apothecary, explaining the nature of your wound and asking for some salve to put on it. If I send a man now, he might return from Meryton within the hour.”

“Yes, that will do. Please do so.”

Finally, I change my clothes and go downstairs, directly to the library, asking a servant to inform Bingley. The fire is burning but it is rather cold. Or maybe I am cold after being wet for so long. Outside the window, the sound of the rain has grown stronger.

I am thinking about which book I should recommend to Elizabeth next when Bingley enters, together with a man. I am shocked to recognise one of my own servants from my house in London.

“Sir, I have brought you a note from Lady Catherine de Bourgh and one from Miss Darcy.”

“I do not understand, Gilford. Where have you come from?”

“From London, sir.”

“Is Lady Catherine in London?”

“Yes, she arrived yesterday. Miss de Bourgh is ill. Lady Catherine wishes you to come home.”

I frown and open my sister’s letter first, reading it in haste.

Brother,

I trust I know you well enough to hope you have opened my note first. Do not worry, Mrs Annesley and I are well, and I would not have bothered you with this if I did not know that Lady Catherine had also sent you a letter, and by messenger no less.

She arrived unexpectedly yesterday with Cousin Anne, for some business that she did not detail or mention afterwards. She said her townhouse is not ready to receive them

— I do not understand why — and she has decided to stay here. She was quite upset that you were in Hertfordshire and said she needed you to assist her.

Cousin Anne seems to be unwell; I wish to send for Dr Hanscombe, but my aunt believes it is unnecessary. Uncle and Aunt Matlock have also been informed of the visit, and I am expecting them soon.

Please do not alter your plans; whatever is the matter, your presence is not required, and I am certain Uncle will resolve it.

Sweet, dear Georgiana. What a wonderful sister she is and what an exquisite character she possesses. I can feel her agitation behind the written words, and still, she tries to put me at ease.

I then open the other letter and read,

Darcy,

I arrived in London for some urgent business recommended by Lady Jersey. Not the one who is related to Almack's, but her mother-in-law, who has been my friend for many years.

Lady Jersey informs me that she has increased her income with some investments, and I intend to do the same, for Anne's benefit. I cannot rely on her making a good marriage, as the person in whom we put all our hopes and expectations seems determined to condemn us to disappointment. I trust that you will at least provide me with some advice on this affair before I make the final decision since you are at least seemingly very good at business.

We are at your townhouse, and Anne is ill; she has a fever. You are not here, and Georgiana is lost and unable to be the hostess my sister's house deserves. You have

spoilt her too much; she has little interest or knowledge in anything other than playing the pianoforte.

Your presence is urgently required.

After reading the letter, my state of irritation is beyond imagination. What on earth is wrong with the woman? Is she insane? She certainly behaves like she is! Why does she need to involve herself in risky investments? Rosings offers her and Anne more than enough for their lifetime and the next one. How dare she invade poor Georgiana! I can only imagine how she is behaving there; I am sure she is acting as though she is the mistress of the house and tormenting the entire household. And Anne has a fever? Why did she even bring Anne? She should have stayed at home with Mrs Jenkinson instead of travelling in this cold and wet weather.

Lady Catherine's nonsense and absurdities are out of control.

"Something wrong, Darcy?" Bingley asks.

"No...somewhat... Gilford, please wait outside." I dismiss the servant before I reply.

"There is some sort of commotion in my house. Caused by Lady Catherine, of course. She demands my immediate presence."

"What? Are you leaving?" Bingley asks, his tone laced with panic.

"A few minutes ago, I would have said that nothing would induce me to leave Hertfordshire now. But things are difficult. I am mostly considering Georgiana. She has always been intimidated by Lady Catherine, who shows no consideration or kindness to anyone. I cannot enjoy my peace here and leave my sister in such distress."

“So...what will you do?”

“Let me think for a moment...” I need more than that before I make a decision — a difficult and painful one.

“I shall leave today. I shall be home in a few hours and resolve the matter one way or another. My main goal — my only goal — is to make sure Georgiana is safe and comfortable in her own home. For this, I shall move my aunt either to the Matlocks’ or to her own townhouse.”

“Yes, I understand that...so you will miss the ball?”

“Hopefully not. My intention is to be back in three days, the day prior to the ball. And then, I shall return to London with you and settle the issues that remain unresolved.”

“I do not know what to say. I cannot find any reason to argue with you, so I wish you the best of luck.”

“Bingley, I have an important favour to ask you. I know you will call at Longbourn tomorrow.”

“Yes...”

“Please give Miss Elizabeth this book. And please tell her and Mr Bennet that I cannot join you because urgent business demands my presence in London immediately. Please inform them that I plan to return in a few days.”

“Of course I shall...but do you think Mr Bennet and Miss Elizabeth will have any concerns about your departure?”

“I am not sure...but I promised Miss Elizabeth another book, and Mr Bennet might

expect my visit. I do not wish them to believe my absence is due to my lack of consideration.”

“Very well...”

“And please apologise to your sisters. I shall leave immediately.”

Less than an hour later, I am sitting in my carriage, lost in my thoughts, trying to temper my anger towards my aunt and my pain at the thought I shall not see Elizabeth tomorrow. I am at least grateful that I had the chance to reveal my feelings to her. I hope she will miss me a little, as I am sure I shall long for her with every fibre of my being. Regardless of what is happening in London, I shall return before the ball. I shall not miss the chance to dance with Elizabeth, certainly not for Lady Catherine’s caprice.

For a moment, I consider calling at Longbourn to take my farewell, but it is raining heavily, and the hour is late. Time is of the essence, and I trust Bingley will convey my message clearly enough. Besides, I shall return in three days — it might be a long time when you miss someone but not long enough for anything bad to happen.

I am taking Elizabeth’s image and her sweet taste in my memory to keep me company for what I am certain will be a most vexatious journey.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

As silly as it might sound, I believe I should think of my life as before and after ‘the fall’.

Falling upon Mr Darcy? It is beyond imagination! I can hardly wait to tell someone! Jane? Probably. Aunt Gardiner? Certainly. But I have to wait for the proper time. Mama? She would die of nerves if she knew.

I am torn between laughing and doubting. Did it really happen? Mr Darcy said he was afflicted by the same doubt of things happening in reality or only in dreams. He said he had dreamt of me many times. My mind does not dare believe such a confession, but my heart trusts it. Why would such a man lie about such a thing? He certainly gains nothing from deceiving me.

His kisses — his kisses — on my palm and on my wrist were simply heart melting. I have never felt kisses before, but how can such a sensation be repeated? I am stunned by my boldness in kissing Mr Darcy. Did I truly do that?

Several hours have passed since, and the rain is still pouring. When I returned, with my clothes dirty and wet, I had the good fortune to only see Jane, who followed me into our room. I explained to her that I had lost my footing and fallen on the wet grass, and she was thankful that I had not hurt myself. I had not, but Mr Darcy had, and I am truly worried for his injury. When we meet tomorrow, I shall insist on finding out whether he asked for Mr Jones’s assistance.

“Lizzy, your clothes are as dirty as they were when you walked to Netherfield to take care of me,” Jane teases me.

I smile; Mr Darcy and I seem to have a secret ritual when we meet: he keeps falling, and I keep muddying my hems.

I think and wait with so much anticipation for his visit tomorrow, though I am not sure what I expect. He said he would come, but he said nothing particular about the reason for the visit. He said he had long wished to reveal his feelings for me. Some of his words indicated his desires for the future rather clearly, but still, I am slightly nervous thinking of what might come next. I know my desires too, and I am quite amazed by them.

Only a fortnight ago, Mr Darcy was the last man in the world whose company I could enjoy. Now, I feel with all my being that he would be perfectly suited to me, that we could complete each other, even though our dispositions are so different, that I have so much to learn from him to improve myself. I am not sure what I can offer him in return as I do not believe I excel at anything. But I know I would willingly give him my heart, my loyalty, my affection, and my indefectible support in anything that might require it.

Will it be enough? I fear to seek an answer to this question. There are so many young women who would apparently offer him much more. But it seems he has chosen me above all those other women. Then why am I even thinking of such competition? Perhaps because everything is so fresh yet that I need time to accustom myself to the notion. His arms around me, the touch of his lips — how can I think logically with such distractions?

Dinner is a tiresome affair; I would be amused by Mr Collins's formal ridiculousness were I not so distracted by my own thoughts. He has complimented the dishes, and now he is asking Mama which of us cooked them! Papa is amusing himself at his expense and glances at me from time to time. I know he is droll, but I cannot laugh.

Finally, the meal is over, and after a short while, we retire. Lying in my bed, I hear

Jane talking from her side of the room, but I pay little attention to her.

The sound of the rain is soporific, and my eyes slowly close. I am trying to sleep, but the sensation of Mr Darcy's arms around me and his lips on my skin is too strong and unsettling. If I think about it more deeply, I believe I can even sense his tongue touching my skin, as if he had tasted it. Of course, it may well be only my imagination; I cannot trust myself these days.

When I awaken, I find I have slept later than usual. Jane is already dressed and looking out of the window at the weather. I hurry, and shortly we go downstairs; it is already breakfast time.

In the morning parlour, we find Mama, talking animatedly to Mr Collins.

"Ah, Lizzy, Jane, we were talking about you," Mama says.

"Indeed we were," Mr Collins adds. "I was telling Mrs Bennet that my noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, to whom I owe my present excellent situation in life, has insisted on me finding a wife as soon as possible. I must set an example in my parish, and a happy marriage is of the utmost importance."

"Mr Collins is of the opinion that he should begin his search among his family and friends — an idea with which I cannot find any fault," Mrs Bennet says. "I have already informed him that Jane is expected to become engaged very soon."

"Mama!" Jane cries, her cheeks crimson.

"Oh hush, girl, we all know it is the truth. But for the rest of my girls, I have no knowledge of any gentlemen having an interest in any of them."

I already feel irritated that Mr Collins is directing his grin towards me.

“I am sure Lady Catherine recommended Mr Collins find a wife soon, but I doubt any reasonable person would expect anyone to become engaged in just a few days,” I say.

Mr Collins looks disconcerted, proving that his mind was no stranger to such a thought. I am smiling to myself, thinking of Mama’s response when she finds out about Mr Darcy’s interest in one of her daughters.

Breakfast passes in tiresome conversation, to which Lydia rolls her eyes more than once. It is still raining, and the wind is blowing; it is weather that would keep anyone inside. Just as Mr Darcy predicted yesterday.

Hours pass in dull conversation, and it is finally noon, so I become restless about the forthcoming visit and take myself to a chair by the window, looking out. I should be eager and happy; instead, for some strange reason, I am nervous and anxious.

Finally, I spot a carriage, and my heart is unsettled. I am tempted to run to the door, but of course I resist such a silly impulse.

John announces the guest, and I stand up, waiting. Mr Bingley enters with his usual bright, contagious smile, greeting all of us joyfully. I stare at the doorway, but nobody else appears behind him, and my smile and heart freeze. My first thought is that something bad has happened to Mr Darcy. But then why is Mr Bingley so cheerful?

Mama introduces Mr Collins to Mr Bingley, and the latter takes a chair near Jane, then addresses me.

“Miss Elizabeth, Mr Bennet, my friend Mr Darcy asked me to convey to you his apologies and regrets for not being able to call today. Some urgent business required

his presence in town immediately, and he had to leave yesterday. He gave me this book for Miss Elizabeth. She must know what it is about.”

I feel my hands trembling, and a snake of panic coils down my spine. He has left for London? Yesterday? How is this possible? I take the book from Mr Bingley without thinking, but I do not even read the title. My head is spinning; I feel the room is suddenly too warm, and I cannot breathe.

“How considerate of Mr Darcy to send his excuses,” Papa says. “Very thoughtful of him, although he was under no obligation. I enjoyed his company, and I hoped to see him again.”

“He said he would return in time for the ball,” Mr Bingley continues. “I hope he is able to conclude his business as quickly as he expects to.”

“I hope nothing unfortunate has happened,” Papa says.

“He only mentioned it was something in regard to his aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her daughter, Miss Anne de Bourgh. They are in London and requested Darcy’s presence.”

The details startle me, but I have no time to consider the information before Mama interjects.

“Lady Catherine de Bourgh? Can it be the same lady you mentioned earlier, Mr Collins? Your esteemed patroness?” she enquires.

“Indeed it is, my dear Mrs Bennet,” Mr Collins replies with much emphasis. “What an extraordinary coincidence that you are acquainted with Mr Darcy, her nephew and the most excellent gentleman, about whom Lady Catherine speaks so often! I have not met him in person yet, but I am told he is one of those young men blessed with all

the traits one could wish for — a large fortune, the best connections, an old, respectable, and influential family, as well as a remarkable education.”

“We have only met Mr Darcy a few times, so we have not had the chance to discover all his qualities,” Mama says in a tone that proves she does not agree with such a laudable description. I cannot blame her; a fortnight ago, I would not have agreed either.

Indeed, what a coincidence that the lady about whom Mr Collins speaks at length and with annoying reverence is Mr Darcy’s aunt. What could have happened to her to make him leave so urgently? Just yesterday, his only interest had seemed to be to call at Longbourn, yet all of a sudden, something had altered his determination.

I feel selfish and childish to think in such a manner. After all, there could be a hundred things more important than his visit to Longbourn. He did convey his apologies and send me a book. That is enough proof that he thought of me...he has not forgotten his promise to me. He also told Mr Bingley that he would return for the ball, and there can be only one reason for such haste, I know. He wishes to dance with me, as he declared several times. If I could use my wit, I would see there is no reason for distress. And yet, I have a feeling of dread and am already gloomily distressed.

Mr Bingley’s visit lasts almost an hour; the conversation is engaging, and everyone seems in good spirits. I remember nothing of it. As soon as he leaves, I return to my room with Mr Darcy’s book. Only then do I look at the title and realise it is another I have not heard of. *The Vision of Don Roderick* — again Mr Walter Scott and again a book published only weeks prior.

I begin to read it, but my mind is not composed enough for poetry. Claiming a headache, I remain in my room till dinner, when at last and without any inclination, I am forced to join the rest of my family, who are already gathered in the dining room.

“Mr Bingley is truly the most amiable gentleman I have ever met,” Mama is saying. “And he has admired Jane from the very beginning, which is no wonder. Everybody admires Jane the moment they meet her.”

“Mama!” Jane cries, blushing.

“Hush, Jane! You know you cannot contradict me!” She turns to Mr Collins. “We first met Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy at an assembly in Meryton. Mr Bingley danced two sets with Jane! Mr Darcy, however, was rather aloof and haughty, and he did not dance at all.”

“My dear Mrs Bennet, it pains me to contradict you, but you must know that we cannot compare Mr Darcy with the rest of us! He has graced balls at Almack’s and even at St James’s Palace with his presence. We cannot expect him to dance at a country assembly.”

“We can and we did, Mr Collins. I believe a gentleman should behave in a way appropriate to the place he happens to be,” Mama insists.

“Well, I have never been to either Almack’s or St James’s, and I still do not dance whenever I have the chance to avoid it,” Papa says.

“You did dance when you were young, before we married,” Mama retorts.

“Yes, like all silly young men who are in a hurry to find a wife,” Papa replies, his mouth turned up in a smile. “If Mr Darcy’s fortune is only half that we were led to believe, he does not need to dance to find ten wives if he does not wish to.”

The conversation, which would have amused me at any other time, is grating on my nerves. My agitation is now so strong that I feel sick, and I have no appetite. I am searching for an excuse to leave the table and return to my chamber.

“I shall tell you a secret that I am not supposed to disclose, but I believe it is safe to reveal it since we are family,” Mr Collins says, lowering his voice in a conspiratorial way. “Mr Darcy does not need to find a wife. He is engaged to Lady Catherine’s daughter, his cousin Miss Anne de Bourgh. When I last saw her, Lady Catherine told me that she intended to meet him in London soon to settle the affair.”

I look at Mr Collins, trying to understand his words. My heart has stopped, and I am struggling to breathe. I hear a loud noise, and I realise I have dropped my fork on my plate.

“Lizzy dear, are you unwell?” Jane asks me.

“I am perfectly well,” a strange voice replies, and I belatedly understand it is mine, as I am trying to speak around the lump in my throat. “I was just listening to Mr Collins. I confess I am surprised. I spoke to Mr Darcy many times at Netherfield, but he never mentioned being engaged.”

“Lady Catherine said their engagement is of a peculiar kind,” Mr Collins says in the same insinuating, secretive tone, leaning towards me. “It was decided when they were in their cradles, and it has remained a family matter until now. Lady Catherine says she expects Mr Darcy to propose soon.”

“Mr Darcy must be around thirty years old?” Papa asks.

“Yes. Miss de Bourgh is five-and-twenty, and Mr Darcy is three years older,” Mr Collins explains.

“Well, Mr Darcy is certainly taking his time if he has not yet proposed after a twenty-year engagement,” Papa jokes.

“My dear Mr Bennet, we cannot judge the reasoning of a gentleman like Mr Darcy,”

Mr Collins says gravely.

“I am not judging him. I am only reflecting on the situation. Is it not ironic that Lady Catherine de Bourgh sent you to find a wife in a few days, while her nephew needs over twenty years to marry one that was found by others?”

Papa’s tone reflects his amusement, and he looks at me with a grin I know only too well. At any other time I would share his entertainment, but now I cannot. My heart resumes its beating, which is now as fast as the spinning of my head.

“Lady Catherine’s requests are always commands to me, as I know they are meant for my benefit,” Mr Collins declares, seeming annoyed by my father’s mockery. “I pray that Mr Darcy will return to Hertfordshire before I leave. There is nothing I wish more than to express my admiration to him,” he concludes.

“Well, I cannot claim any expertise in the matter of marriage,” Papa answers, keeping his amused tone. “However, I dare advise you that, in order to comply with Lady Catherine’s demands, you would do better to express your admiration towards a lady while Mr Darcy is away. Otherwise, you may return without a betrothed and have to explain your failure to her ladyship.”

Mr Collins looks incapable of understanding the joke, and the words ‘failure’ and ‘Lady Catherine’ in the same sentence seem to panic him.

I cannot bear it any longer, so I claim a sudden headache and quickly excuse myself, hurrying to my room. I hear Mama blaming my habit of walking regardless of the weather and her assumption that I have certainly caught a cold.

Once in my room, I quickly change into my nightgown and climb into my bed, covering myself with the sheets. Jane arrives minutes later, and I beg her to let me sleep as I do not feel well. She obeys and leaves, and when she finally closes the

door, I stop fighting my tears, allowing them to fall freely, hoping they will wash away some of the turmoil that is torturing me.

Mr Darcy engaged? Can it be true? Surely it cannot be. It is just a mistake, a misunderstanding, a ridiculous claim of Mr Collins's, like many others.

I cannot believe that Mr Darcy has deceived me so ruthlessly. It is beyond logic and beyond common sense. Nobody forced him to say those words, to express his admiration for me, to kiss me, to embrace me. Nobody forced him to come every day to meet me at Oakham Mount. Nobody forced his confession or his tender gestures. What other reason than his feelings can have induced him to act in such a way?

I do not know how long such thoughts torment me, but I know I cry for a long while, longer than I remember ever doing before.

My senses, as well as my heart, attempt to teach me reason and tell me there must be some misunderstanding. I am aware that I am being unreasonable. But I was unreasonable when I fell in love with Mr Darcy too, so I cannot trust myself. Besides, the pain in my chest is too strong, too deep to allow any thorough consideration. If only this rain would stop. Its sound is maddening, and each drop feels like a blow to my head, which is already aching. My only wish is to sleep for a long, long time, perhaps till the day Mr Darcy returns and I can confront him with all the questions that I currently have to face by myself.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

Fortunately, the rain stopped this morning.

I feel like I am carrying a heavy burden in my stomach as well as in my chest every time I think of Mr Darcy — which means constantly. In the light of Mr Collins's disclosure regarding the peculiar engagement, Mr Darcy's sudden return to London at his aunt's request takes a meaning I do not care to contemplate.

My sleepless night has helped me draw some conclusions, which have provided me with some explanations but no relief of grief or pain.

Papa joked about Mr Collins's claim about the engagement. While I know Papa's inclination make fun of everything and everyone, this time it has made me think there might have been some sense in his teasing. If there is some sort of understanding, Mr Darcy is certainly not eager to accept it or act upon it. However, even if the arrangement is not to his liking, he has not broken it either, though he could have done before now. So he has allowed his cousin and his aunt to believe he will fulfil their expectations; therefore they expect him to propose at any time. His actions are deplorable, no matter from what perspective you look at them.

I am convinced that no other reason but admiration, and, yes, some sort of attraction, induced Mr Darcy to display those gestures of affection towards me. He told me as much, and the little reasoning I have left believes his confession. He must have some tender feelings for me; otherwise he would not have acted so affectionately towards me. But that does not negate the fact that he is bound to his cousin by an arrangement made with or without his consent that he has clearly not broken. And the fact that he did not mention it to me makes him deceptive and dishonest. I have never suspected him to lack honour, even when I despised his arrogance and conceit. But a man who

is engaged to a woman and expresses admiration and even love to another woman cannot claim honour and responsibility.

I must force my reason and wit to conquer the weakness of my heart. In this matter, I can see only two choices: either Mr Collins is speaking nonsense and has mistaken and misrepresented what he heard, or he is right and Mr Darcy is engaged to his cousin. If the latter is the case, I shall not allow a single improper word to be said between us when he returns; if he returns. Even if he is the most honest man and he truly fell in love with me and is ready to break his engagement to his cousin for me, I cannot accept that. I could not accept building my felicity on another woman's misery or causing a scandal that might ruin Mr Darcy's name and split his family apart.

Oh! I am torturing myself thinking of what could be worse: knowing his feelings for me are not true and honest or the grief of finding they are genuine but there can be no happy ending for such a love.

Two days ago, I was certain Mr Darcy was the one man in the world perfectly suited to me — my perfect match. Now, I understand that Mr Darcy is the last man in the world whom I could ever marry, even if he asks me, which is very unlikely.

Either he has deceived me or he has been honest with me but intended to hurt another. I have to stop turning these thoughts over in my mind, else I shall go mad.

“Kitty and I are going to Meryton to see Maria Lucas,” Lydia says during breakfast. “I wonder whether Mr Bingley has invited Denny and Sanderson to the ball! If he has not, I shall ask him to do it!”

“Lydia! You cannot ask Mr Bingley to invite someone against his will!” Jane says.

“Of course I can! Perhaps Mr Bingley forgot about it. How can we enjoy the ball if there are no pleasant men to dance with?”

“I shall certainly dance with all of my fair cousins,” Mr Collins declares, causing Lydia to roll her eyes. I could not care less who will attend the ball. I have no interest in dancing. If Mr Darcy returns on time and asks me to dance, I might agree, though. It would be an excellent moment to confront him.

I am well aware that my anger and frustration are childish. I am well aware that my entire response is unreasonable. What irritates me the most is the realisation that I was the one in the wrong more than him. I initiated or facilitated encounters and opportunities for careless behaviour. I caused the fall due to my unreasonable fear of a gentle horse’s touch on my back. Mr Darcy hit his head because of me; he kissed my hand and my wrist due to that fall. Had someone observed us, it would not be something so disgraceful or never heard of. I kissed him on the cheek, and I touched his lips. My gesture was more inappropriate than his, more shameless than his, more ruinous to our reputations than his. For my present perturbed state of mind, I have to blame myself as much as I blame him; perhaps more.

“Jane, Lizzy, will you come to Meryton with us?” Lydia asks.

“I shall go if Lizzy wishes to,” Jane answers. I am in no mood for company, but some fresh air would be welcome. Besides, Mama is already nagging me about being nice to Mr Collins, and I cringe hearing her. Surely she cannot imagine I would consider him or be the kind of wife that would please Mr Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

“If you are all going, you should join them, Mr Collins,” Mama says.

“That is an excellent idea,” Papa agrees, and I throw him a vexed look. He is so irritated by Mr Collins already that he is ready to sacrifice our comfort for his own.

When we are all ready to leave, Mary withdraws, claiming a sudden headache. I cannot say how genuine her headache is, but mine is real, and I am tempted to change my mind too and stay at home, but I cannot disappoint Jane.

We walk together, and Mr Collins makes his way to my side and talks pompous nonsense. I am determined to pay little attention to him, and poor sweet Jane is forced to politely address him from time to time, which is enough encouragement for him to keep talking.

“I wonder whether Lady Catherine will return to Rosings before or after I travel back to Kent.”

“Should you not return soon, so she can find you there? She might need you,” I suggest with some pique.

“How considerate of you, my dear cousin Elizabeth. Indeed, her ladyship might need me, but she herself allowed me to leave for a few days, longer if needed, but no longer than a fortnight, she said. Therefore, I am certain I shall not disappoint her even if I stay until after the ball. Especially considering—”

“Would her ladyship not disapprove of you attending a ball? Is it appropriate for a clergyman?” I interrupt him.

“I believe it is. Especially since I shall do my duty by you, dear cousins. And Mr Bingley is a gentleman who happens to be friends with Mr Darcy. It could not be a better arrangement.”

Sadly, I cannot argue with him, and I let him continue to talk, which he does until we enter Meryton. Lydia and Kitty immediately leave the rest of us behind and hurry to the window of the first shop, looking for something to purchase.

I call to them to wait for us, and they do, but then they are distracted by voices on the other side of the street. Suddenly they begin to wave towards a group of men in uniform. There are several officers, who wave back then walk towards us. I am in no disposition for any company, including that of officers, but I hope that, with more men in the group, Mr Collins will finally be silenced.

“Look,” Lydia cries, “that is Denny — he has finally returned from London! He went away for a few days, and I was afraid he would miss the ball.”

“But who is with him?” Kitty asks. “Lieutenant Pratt and someone else.”

“Lydia, Kitty, please keep your voices down,” Jane demands as they near us. I study the subject of my younger sisters’ interest; besides the two officers, my attention is caught by a third young man whom I have never seen before.

“Who is that?” Lydia whispers, giggling. “La, look how handsome he is! I hope they are coming to talk to us!”

The three gentlemen stop near us; it would be rude not to speak to them, since Kitty and Lydia have been pointing at them.

“Ladies, how wonderful to see you again,” Mr Denny addresses us directly.

We all curtsy, and Lydia responds, “We are happy to see you too! How was the trip to London?”

“Agreeable. We returned to Meryton yesterday. I shall take this opportunity to introduce to your acquaintance my friend Mr George Wickham, who has just accepted a commission in our corps.”

“So, you are an officer too? You will look so handsome in your uniform!” Lydia

declares, disregarding Jane's disapproving look.

"I am fortunate and grateful to be able to respond that I am an officer, indeed," the young man says. His voice is as pleasant as his handsome figure, and his smile is friendly and unaffected.

Jane introduces Mr Collins too, and a small conversation begins. Lydia and Kitty seem utterly charmed by the young men, especially by Mr Wickham. Soon enough, Maria and Charlotte Lucas approach us, and a new round of introductions is performed. I am still in low spirits, so I choose to watch from a few paces back.

Mr Wickham's appearance is greatly in his favour; he has all the best parts of a man's beauty: a fine countenance, a good figure, and a pleasing address. Immediately after the introductions, he shows a happy readiness for conversation, friendly and unassuming.

I hear Mr Collins mentioning Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and I cringe.

"Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings Park?" Mr Wickham asks, drawing my attention to him even more.

"Yes," Mr Collins answers, overjoyed as if he has won a prize. "Do you happen to know her ladyship?"

"Very slightly. I happened to meet her many years ago, but I am certain she will not remember me."

"Probably not. She is a woman of great consequence who has met many people in her life, but she only remembers a few," Mr Collins replies with a trace of stupid pride. I look at Mr Wickham and see him smiling.

The mere mention of that lady's name gives me shivers of distress, and I wonder whether we shall now be subjected to a duet of praises for the great Lady Catherine. However, Mr Wickham changes the subject, turning the discussion towards the condition of the roads and the weather in London compared with Meryton.

We are still standing and talking together very agreeably when the sound of horses draws our notice. Mr Bingley is approaching, together with his brother, Mr Hurst. The gentlemen obviously see us, and when they reach us, they dismount and begin the usual greetings. Mr Bingley stands near Jane, Mr Hurst a few steps behind. The introductions are performed, then Mr Bingley says, "Miss Bennet, we were on our way to Longbourn to enquire after you and to introduce Mr Hurst to your father."

"How kind of you, sir," Jane replies. "I am sure my father would be pleased to see you. We shall return to Longbourn soon."

"Oh...then may we accompany you?"

"Of course," Jane agrees with a becoming blush and a sweet smile. At least she and her Mr Bingley look happy. I am dying of curiosity to find out whether he has news about the man whom I should not think about. But of course, I shall not ask. Perhaps on our walk back to Longbourn there will be some mention of him.

"Mr Bingley, do you have news from Mr Darcy?" Mr Collins asks bluntly, and I feel incredibly grateful to him for a second. "I fervently hope that he will return in time for me to make his acquaintance before I leave Hertfordshire."

"Not yet, but I am expecting a letter from him today," Mr Bingley answers. "Unless something urgent alters his plans, he will keep his promise. He always does."

"Would this gentleman you are talking about be Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire?" Mr Wickham suddenly interjects. I look at him and notice a frown on

his face that was not there earlier. Also, his countenance has lost some colour, his smile has faded, and he looks around as if searching for someone.

“Yes,” Mr Bingley responds. “My friend, Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy. Are you acquainted with him, sir?”

“I am,” he answers briefly.

“What a pleasant coincidence!” Mr Bingley exclaims with his usual amiability.

“It is a coincidence, indeed,” Mr Wickham says in a low voice. “I would not have guessed in a hundred years that Darcy would be in Meryton.”

It might be my excessive interest in the subject that makes me notice Mr Wickham’s anxiety. I cannot guess the reason for it, but it is certainly related to Mr Darcy. Can I have found someone as disappointed in Mr Darcy as I am? Everyone else seems to worship him, so it would be a diverting change. Yes, I know I sound petty and resentful, even to my own mind.

“Mr Bingley, since we are all here, may I ask whether you have invited Mr Denny, Mr Pratt, and Mr Wickham to the ball?” Lydia asks before I have time to stop her. Poor Jane’s countenance is flushed, surely from embarrassment.

“Of course I have, Miss Lydia,” Mr Bingley assures her. “I presented Colonel Forster with an invitation for all the officers.”

“How wonderful and generous of you, Mr Bingley!” Lydia exclaims. “Mr Wickham, I hope you like to dance!”

“There are few things that give me more pleasure, Miss Lydia,” Mr Wickham says, his smile now returned.

The conversation continues for a few more minutes, then we are ready to return home, but Lydia and Kitty demand to stay longer with Maria Lucas. I am strongly opposed to it — I cannot even imagine what they could get up to, left by themselves, but my friend Charlotte assures me that I may leave them for another hour or so, as she is to accompany her sister Maria and will take care of them.

“In fact, my dear Eliza, we shall talk some more tomorrow, shall we not? We are hosting a small dinner party tomorrow evening, and I believe Mama has already sent an invitation for you all at Longbourn.”

“I do not see why not, dearest Charlotte,” I reply to my old friend. “I doubt Papa will join us, but Mama will surely be looking forward to the party.”

“And Mr Collins, you are included in the invitation too, of course.”

“Thank you, Miss Lucas. I shall be honoured to meet your family,” Mr Collins says.

“Mr Bingley,” Charlotte continues, “my father has written to you too. The presence of the Netherfield party would be greatly appreciated.”

“The pleasure will be mine — ours — I am sure,” Mr Bingley responds with a quick glance at Jane.

After that, Jane, Mr Collins, Mr Bingley, Mr Hurst, and I finally return to Longbourn, while Lydia and Kitty remain with Charlotte and Maria and the three officers. My sisters are too young to be left unattended, but there is little Jane and I can do if Mama and Papa permit them unrestricted liberty in their actions and manners.

While Jane walks with Mr Bingley and Mr Hurst, Mr Collins bothers me all the way back and continues in the same manner once we arrive home. Only later on, after Mr Bingley and Mr Hurst have departed, can I excuse myself and return to my room.

It is not a clever or particularly well-thought-out move, though, as, once I have escaped from Mr Collins's tedious conversation, my thoughts turn to Mr Darcy, and my conflicted feelings return and with them the tears, which I struggle to fight.

I descend to the drawing-room later on; happily, Mr Collins has withdrawn to his chamber to rest, which gives all of us some well-deserved respite from him.

Lydia and Kitty's return causes some commotion, as they relate to Mama all the details about the officers, their new acquaintance, and especially Mr Wickham's qualities.

"Mama, if you could only see how handsome he is! I hope he will call on us soon. I invited him and Denny and Pratt. But Mr Wickham is the best of all. You will see them tomorrow evening. They will attend Sir William's party too!"

"I look forward to meeting them, Lydia. There is nothing more pleasant for the eyes than a handsome man in uniform. I used to say that when I was your age," Mama almost titters.

"Oh, and I think Mr Wickham hates Mr Darcy, which is no wonder, as we all do, but we did not say anything because he is Mr Bingley's friend," Lydia continues.

"Lydia! Why would you say such a thing?" Jane cries.

"Oh, hush girl, it is the truth," Mama says. "We all feel uncomfortable when Mr Darcy comes, and we all know he despises us, so why would we not despise him too? Now tell me, Lydia, what about Mr Wickham?"

I feel offended on Mr Darcy's behalf, but perhaps he does deserve to be despised. But not by them, and not for some imagined reasons. My mother and sisters' ill feelings towards him affect me, though I know he does not deserve as much.

“I am not sure what happened, but Mr Wickham said Mr Darcy had been very cruel to him and did him a great injustice. He asked us not to tell Mr Collins or Mr Bingley because they would certainly favour Mr Darcy.”

“Yes,” Kitty interjects, “and we told Mr Wickham that Mr Darcy has been rude to our entire family, that he called Lizzy tolerable and refused to dance with her, and that everybody in Meryton hates him. And Mr Wickham was very happy to hear that and said this was exactly the behaviour he would have expected from him!”

“You should not have had such a conversation and disclosed such things to a stranger!” I finally interject angrily. “What sort of manners are these? You revealed details about your sisters to a man you just met? Have you no common sense? This is outrageous!”

“Come now, Lizzy, the girls said nothing bad about you but about Mr Darcy. I understand he offended you, but the whole of Meryton already knows about it,” Mama says conciliatorily. It sounds as if she is belittling the importance of that incident and insulting me, but I cannot tell her that, so I frown at Lydia, trying to convey all my ire.

“Mr Bingley would be very upset if he found out that we had gossiped about his best friend,” Jane adds.

“Do not worry, we shall be careful not to be heard, at least until he proposes to you,” Mama says, again with an ease that clearly mortifies Jane. I just pray that Mr Bingley is smitten enough with Jane to overlook the flaws of my family.

Even if Mr Darcy admires me, he will never overlook the constant display of ill behaviour from Mama, Lydia, and Kitty. Why did I allow myself to imagine that a man like Mr Darcy would admit such a complete lack of decorum anywhere near his house or his sister? How could I have been so silly?

After dinner, when I have resigned myself to another restless night, I finally reflect more upon Lydia's words in regard to Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham. So, my first guess was correct; Mr Wickham is well acquainted with Mr Darcy and not on friendly terms.

His claim that Mr Darcy has been cruel to him is intriguing, and I am curious to know more, but I shall certainly not enquire. I find it puzzling enough that an officer chose to mention something so important to a girl of fifteen he had only just been introduced to and who surely does not look wise or trustworthy.

I shall not deny that I am strongly tempted to appreciate Mr Wickham more than I should if only because Mr Darcy wronged him in one way or another. If he truly wronged him. I feel as resentful as Mr Darcy once claimed to be, and I have been so deeply hurt that I am willing to favour anyone who has been equally mistreated by the arrogant gentleman with no consideration for their feelings.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

The morning is as bleak as I feel. I long abandoned any expectation of finding some rest, so the night passed as restlessly as the previous ones. How could it have been better, when nothing good has happened?

This afternoon, we shall attend the little party at Lucas Lodge. Papa declined, but the rest of us will go, including Mr Collins. Oh joy!

The ball is planned for the day after tomorrow, and I cannot but count the days — the hours! — with increasing distress. Mr Darcy has been gone for three days now. Two and a half. Three mornings ago, we were at Oakham Mount, falling on the ground. And I foolishly kissed him. I never imagined a simple kiss could be so overwhelmingly pleasant, or its consequences so hurtful.

In fact, it is not the consequences of the kiss that were hurtful but the dishonest actions of someone to whom I granted my trust. A large part of me still feels that the trust was well deserved. A greater part of my heart still believes Mr Darcy's words were honest and his actions were true, still believes that all must be a huge misunderstanding. I realised the depth of my love for him when my heart still placed its confidence in him despite the evidence against him that painfully invaded my mind.

I am torn between wishing for him to return and explain, and dreading seeing him, confronting him, and discovering that my fears were justified.

If he never returns, at least I shall know his dishonesty and betrayal were real and I was a complete fool. It will be a lesson to learn and never repeat for the rest of my life.

But what if he does return and repeat his profession of love and express his desire to break the engagement with Miss de Bourgh? Of course, the real blessing would be to speak to Mr Darcy and discover that the engagement is not real. But can I allow such a hope to flourish inside me, only to risk being crushed by disappointment?

Were I a wise woman, I would keep my composure and treat the entire situation with calm and prudence. I should try to gather more information before allowing myself to fall from joy to despair, from happiness to grief. Why have I not done that? Why did I not at least ask Mr Bingley about Mr Darcy's engagement, or persuade Jane to ask the question?

The answer is easy: How can I explain my interest in Mr Darcy's private life? To everybody else, Mr Darcy and I are barely friends after being enemies at the beginning of our acquaintance. Can such a fresh and superficial friendship explain my enquiries about his marital situation?

My mind is a jumble of conflicted feelings and questions and no answers, and I cannot find what is left of my reason. I have no other choice but to ask for Jane's help. I cannot tell her all that occurred between Mr Darcy and me, but I can ask her for assistance in discovering the truth about his alleged engagement. After all, Miss Bingley strives to gain Mr Darcy's attention with obvious intentions. Would she do so if Mr Darcy were engaged? Could Mr Darcy have kept his engagement secret even from his closest friend?

With such reflections, I prepare for the party without saying anything to Jane yet. She is thrilled to be seeing Mr Bingley again, and I do not want to shadow her joy.

I shall see what happens at the party; perhaps Mr Bingley already has some news that might bring me some clarification.

After an uncomfortable yet very short ride in the crowded carriage, which makes me

long to have walked from Longbourn, we arrive at Lucas Lodge. Sir William and Charlotte come to greet us, while Lydia and Kitty immediately disappear with Maria.

The party is larger than usual. Besides the Lucases there is Aunt and Uncle Phillips, Mrs Long, the Grahams and their niece Mary King, as well as three other families from our usual circle. The additions consist of five officers as well as Colonel Forster and his wife.

The first part of the evening is spent with greetings, introductions, and small talk.

Soon after us, Mr Bingley arrives alone. He is greeted with much deference by our host, then he speaks to Colonel Forster for a few moments before finally approaching our group. Only several minutes are needed before Mr Bingley and Jane are engaged in conversation, their heads close and their partiality for each other apparent to everyone.

Mama is loudly telling Aunt Phillips that she expects Mr Bingley to propose soon, and I fervently hope that neither the gentleman nor Jane hear her; my mortification is enough for all of us. It does not last long, though, until I am even more embarrassed by Mama telling her sister that Mr Collins is searching for a wife and I might be his choice. I should not have come to this party. I have felt horrible all day; how can I bear hours of irritation and vexation?

I grab a cup of tea and move to a chair in a corner. Mary has begun to play the pianoforte, and I am not even sure whether she was asked to. Mr Collins is talking to Lady Lucas in a group with the officers too. I refuse to imagine what sort of silliness he is proclaiming to make a fool of himself.

Irked, I begin to notice Mr Wickham glancing at me repeatedly, and I wonder what interests him. He seems to be the centre of attention, and I can be objective enough to admit he is above all the other gentlemen present in figure, countenance, and air, and

that he possesses a charming, distinguished smile. He seems to be the happy man towards whom almost every female eye is turned. Why could he possibly be looking at me?

I shrug this off and watch Mr Collins talking to Mr Phillips now, as I assume irritably that he has already bored half of those in attendance. Having the officers as rivals, Mr Collins seems likely to sink into insignificance, but that does not make him less talkative. Sadly, the glasses of wine he has drunk have not helped his common sense. I wonder whether Lady Catherine approves of drinking so much.

My puzzlement increases when I notice Mr Wickham walking towards me wearing his charming smile. He asks for permission to sit and takes a chair, placing it near me. His gesture sends many enquiring glances our way, and probably as many whispers.

“Miss Elizabeth, I do not want to intrude on your privacy,” Mr Wickham says. “I shall not bother you for more than a few minutes if you will allow me.”

“We are at a party, sir, so privacy is difficult to expect,” I reply. “Please do not worry about bothering me. If I appear to be so, you are certainly not the reason. I am simply not agreeable company tonight.”

“I must disagree. We have barely exchanged a few words, and I am already delighted with your company,” he says brightly.

I look at him suspiciously. He is exceedingly handsome, his smile is enchanting, and his tone is perfectly amiable. Then why does his statement irritate me so? Perhaps it sounds too much like Mr Collins’s studied flatteries.

“How do you like Meryton, Mr Wickham? And the regiment?” I ask politely.

“More than I expected! I congratulate myself for joining the militia — it is the best

decision I have made in a long time. I just pray not to be forced to leave it.”

“Leave it? But I thought you liked it very much!”

“Yes...that is why I chose the word ‘forced’,” he says, and his tone changes. “I might be obliged to again give up a favourable situation that might improve my life due to another ungenerous intervention by someone who I hear offended you too.”

“Excuse me? I am afraid I fail to understand your meaning.”

“Forgive me if I sound presumptuous. Your young sisters told me how Darcy offended you. I hope you will not allow yourself to be affected by his rudeness. He is the sort of man with no respect for the feelings of others, especially if he considers them beneath him.”

His statement not only did sound presumptuous, it was also too forward and arrogant. How dare he console me! We have only just met, and he knows nothing about me. But how can I blame him, when all this knowledge came from my own sisters, who behave like spoilt hoydens with no manners?

“I would not have had the boldness to open such a subject with you if I had not known Darcy my entire life and did not know how many other people he has disregarded.”

This statement certainly catches my attention. I know I should end the conversation, but my curiosity is stronger than my better judgment.

“I admit I suspected you were acquainted based on your response when you heard his name. And Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s.”

“You are very perceptive, Miss Elizabeth. It is no wonder that everybody in Meryton

speaks so highly of you.”

“I doubt that, Mr Wickham. There is no one about whom everybody speaks highly. As for your response, it was rather easy to guess. I was only surprised that you were not acquainted with Mr Bingley, who is a close friend of Mr Darcy’s.”

“It might be a more recent friendship. Darcy and I have been fighting in recent years, and we avoid each other’s company.”

“Fighting?”

“Figurately speaking, of course.” He smiles. “Not a real fight — more of a disagreement. I only wish for what was rightfully left to me by the late Mr Darcy and his son refused to grant.”

“Mr Darcy did not honour his father’s will?” I ask in disbelief. “I know I have no right to enquire, but it seems a decision that is difficult to understand.”

“Forgive me. I should have explained better. The late Mr Darcy was my godfather, and he loved me like a parent. My father was in charge of managing the Darcys’ estate, Pemberley, and I grew up there. Mr Darcy was one of the best men that ever breathed, and he loved me like his own son, providing me with a gentleman’s education, which was not agreeable to everyone,” he says meaningfully.

I wait for him to continue; what can I say? My interest in the subject has increased, but the delicacy of it prevents further enquiry.

“Despite my present favourable assignment, military life is not what I was intended for, but circumstances have now made it necessary. The church ought to have been my profession. I was brought up for it, and I should at this time have been in possession of a most valuable living, had it pleased the gentleman we were speaking

of just now.”

“How can that be?”

“My godfather bequeathed me the next presentation of the best living in his gift. But when the living fell vacant, it was given elsewhere.”

“Good heavens! How could Mr Darcy disregard his father’s will?”

I am surprised indeed.

“There was just such an informality in the terms of the bequest as to leave it to the decision of the new master. And Darcy chose to pass me over for it.”

“But why? Why would he give the living to someone else and not according to his father’s recommendations?”

“I cannot understand either. It might have been out of jealousy, or perhaps my unguarded temper made me express my opinion of him, and to him, too freely. I can recall nothing so bad in our relationship as to cause Darcy to hate me, but he does. He accused me of extravagance, imprudence — in short, anything or nothing. I cannot accuse myself of having really done anything to deserve to lose the living.”

“This is astonishing!”

“Not to me, Miss Elizabeth. I hope you now understand my boldness in approaching you. As I said, nobody understands better how it feels to be hurt by Darcy.”

I feel a sharp claw grasping my chest. Mr Wickham knows nothing of how hurt I truly am. His story reveals other dark parts of Mr Darcy’s character and causes me to question everything I thought I knew about him. I certainly do not give full credit to

Mr Wickham's narration either. He is nothing but a stranger, too hasty in sharing the misfortunes of his life with me, just as he did with my sisters yesterday. But there must be some truth to the story. And mistrusting Mr Wickham does not make my doubts about Mr Darcy any less painful.

"Mr Wickham, I shall not deny that your story has stunned me. I never imagined Mr Darcy capable of disregarding his father's will. If he was still here, I would confront him."

"Oh no, please do not even think of that, Miss Elizabeth! Confronting Darcy would only cause more damage to me. And to many others," he continues somewhat ominously.

"Damage?"

"Yes. I can see your eldest sister is on friendly terms with Mr Bingley. If Darcy's resentment is aroused, he may well convince his friend to alter his plans. Darcy has a great power of persuasion, and he can be very pleasant when he chooses to be. People have often been deceived by his feigned friendliness only to be disappointed later. And Darcy always wishes to have his own way and almost always succeeds."

Mr Wickham's suggestion strikes me as very distasteful. He is implying that confronting Mr Darcy might cause a breach between Jane and Mr Bingley. But how does he even know about their relationship? He has been in Meryton for two days and has already been provided with the most intimate details by my two foolish sisters.

My head is now trapped in a web of new information that I can neither believe nor dismiss. I yearn for peace and silence. There is nothing of interest to me at the party, and my mind is too clouded to give Mr Wickham proper consideration. He had looked scared when I mentioned a confrontation with Mr Darcy, and I can guess the reasons.

“I have no interest in annoying Darcy, as another conflict would not be to my benefit,” Mr Wickham says. “I only wish to be allowed to carry out my duties as an officer and make a decent living in the best way I can.”

“That is a wise decision, Mr Wickham.”

“I wonder when Darcy will return. If he does return at all.”

“I have no knowledge of Mr Darcy’s plans.”

“I did not assume you had. I shall hope that he does not return soon. In this, I am in opposition to your cousin Mr Collins, who keeps repeating how much he wishes to meet Darcy. If he only knew that Darcy would most likely despise him.”

I know this much is true — though not for the reason he thinks — but I do not like his remark about my relative, as annoying as he is.

“Mr Collins seems to be on friendly terms with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mr Darcy’s aunt. That might be an indication Mr Collins does not deserve to be despised.”

“Darcy has no regard for anyone outside his circle of family and friends. That is why he is engaged to his cousin.”

My heart stops, and I hold my breath. I need a while to gather my composure and speak.

“Yes, Mr Collins mentioned something about Mr Darcy being engaged, but Mr Bingley did not seem aware of such an arrangement.”

“I am not sure whether the engagement has been made public. I have heard it

mentioned several times in the past, and I would have expected the wedding to have taken place by now. It would give Darcy the opportunity to increase his fortune even more, by acquiring Rosings Park, which must be impressive. There is nothing Darcy values more than his legacy, and he will do anything to give more consequence to the Darcy name.”

On this subject, Mr Wickham speaks with no emotion and no apparent grudge, which makes me doubt it less. I have proof that the engagement is well known among Mr Darcy’s family and friends; therefore it must be true.

I struggle to breathe; it is too warm and too crowded, and my head hurts so badly that I can barely keep my eyes open.

“Mr Wickham, I apologise, sir. I must search for Charlotte. I have been fighting a bad headache for the last few days, and the noise has made it worse.”

“I am very sorry to hear that, Miss Elizabeth. May I help you in any way?”

“No, thank you. I just need to find Charlotte.”

With that, I walk away from him, desperately trying to find a reason to go home immediately without causing panic or undue attention. But before I try to devise some complicated scheme to leave the party, I need a room where I can lie down and rest for a little while, in solitude. And cry out my grief over my shattered dreams.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

I cannot leave Lucas Lodge until Mama decides to leave. But after the conversation with Mr Wickham, I ask Charlotte to allow me to rest in the library. She joins me there and stays for a little while, asking me how she can help me.

“I shall be well, Charlotte. I just need a little bit of quiet. I have been plagued by a headache for several days now.”

“You do look out of sorts, Eliza. I noticed you looked a bit ill even when we met yesterday. I saw you talking to Mr Wickham earlier. I hoped his company would cheer you. Most of the ladies in the room envied you,” she says with a teasing smile.

“It is only a persistent headache, and no company, as pleasant as it might be, can cure it. If it was not so late, I would have walked back home.”

“I would not allow you to do that. I shall bring you some herbal tea. Mama uses it all the time.”

“Thank you. I shall rest a little longer if you do not mind. I do not wish to ruin everybody’s enjoyment with my poor disposition.”

“I am glad everybody is enjoying the party. Including Jane and Mr Bingley. And Mr Collins,” Charlotte says meaningfully.

“I am very happy for Jane. As for Mr Collins, please do not tell him where I am. My head will break into pieces if I have to hear another of his speeches.”

“I am sorry to hear that. I noticed his peculiar attention to you.”

“In this case, dear Charlotte, peculiar means annoying. He is a decent enough man, but he is insufferable. He claims his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, sent him to find a wife, and he is determined to choose one from Longbourn. I am sure you can imagine the rest. I tried to reject his attention as politely and gently as I could, as I did not wish to offend him, but my patience can only last so long.”

“Oh...” Charlotte says, and I am sure she understands me. After all, we have been close friends for more than ten years, and I trust her almost as much as I trust Jane or Aunt Gardiner.

“A single man in possession of a comfortable living must be in want of a wife,” Charlotte continues. “That he wishes to marry someone in your family, considering he will one day inherit Longbourn, I dare say is to his credit.”

“Certainly,” I reply. “But I cannot be that someone. I believe Mary admires him and would probably be happy with his attentions, but he has simply misdirected them.”

“Yes, Mama always says men must be pointed in the right direction or else they will get lost,” Charlotte replies, and I try to laugh. “Mr Bingley, however, seems quite decided.”

“We hope so. I am sure he and Jane would be a perfect match.”

I feel a tightness in my chest as I speak the words. Only three days have passed since I was convinced about another perfect match, yet I was proved wrong.

No; in fact, nothing has been proved. I shall have my proof in two days’ time, at the ball. Until then, I can only hope for some peace and quiet.

Charlotte fetches the herbal tea and leaves it with me, then returns to the party, for which I am grateful; I desire no company at all.

The tea is some help, and the silence allows me to put some order to my thoughts while I recollect Mr Wickham's story. In truth, I do not care much about his past dealings with Mr Darcy. There must have been some misunderstandings between them that induced Mr Darcy to withhold the living.

If the late Mr Darcy had been so convinced of his godson's worthiness, he would have expressed his wish in a clear way that allowed no arguments. If he had allowed the choice to be his son's decision, he must have had his reasons. I am well aware that men often have disputes that make no sense to women or to other people in general. And I am still uncomfortable with Mr Wickham's readiness to complain about his misfortune to women he has only just met. Furthermore, he seemed panicked by my suggestion to confront Mr Darcy, and that was clearly a reason to question the accuracy of his narration.

However, what I do care about and I do not doubt is Mr Wickham's confirmation of Mr Darcy's engagement. As an old acquaintance of the family, he knew about it like Mr Collins did — and he had only known Lady Catherine for a couple of years. It cannot be a mistake.

By the second cup of tea, I feel like a pathetic simpleton, sobbing over the loss of hopes and expectations that should never have existed. And I am determined to confront Mr Darcy about this as soon as he returns. If he does return. If he does not, no confrontation or conversation will be needed to know where I stand.

I do not leave the library till I am called for supper. Except for Jane, who asks me how I feel, nobody else shows any concern about my absence, which I find pleasing.

Mary is sitting near Mama and Mary King, while Lydia and Kitty sit near Mrs Forster, surrounded by several officers. Mr Wickham must have said something of great entertainment or levity, as several people — both women and men — are staring at him and laughing. Mr Collins is sitting next to Sir William, and next to

them are Charlotte and Lady Lucas.

I am pleased to see Mr Bingley and Jane whispering to each other, paying no attention to anyone else, having eyes only for each other.

When I wake the next morning, I find that, strangely enough, I have managed to sleep better than before. I am not sure whether I am more at peace or if my hope has just surrendered to disappointment, but I feel my struggle is diminished.

It is the day prior to the ball, and we have no plans, so I take a walk after breakfast, then settle down to read something. I cannot gather myself to begin the new book recommended by Mr Darcy. I put it aside as an object that I know will pain me; I am not yet ready to face it.

Mr Bingley calls, and Jane speaks of little else afterwards, confessing to me that he has already asked her for the first set and the supper set tomorrow evening, about which she is thrilled. While listening to my sister, I cannot help but remember Mr Darcy's subtle indication that he would ask me to dance, and my promise made in the Netherfield library that I should dance with him next time he asks me. That encounter in the middle of the night seems so long ago, although it has not even been two weeks.

My mother and my younger sisters speak only of the officers, much to Mr Collins's undisguised displeasure. Papa asks questions to make sport of them, but I cannot feel amused. Quite the opposite; I am anxious and restless again.

In the afternoon, I am surprised when Mr Wickham, Mr Denny, and Mr Pratt are announced. The faces of Mama, Lydia, and Kitty show they are not surprised in the slightest, so I assume they were aware the officers would call. Shortly after their

arrival, Mr Collins remembers Sir William has invited him for dinner, and he leaves us. I am relieved to be spared at least one reason for irritation.

The officers' visit lasts more than an hour; they accept tea and even some brandy when Papa comes out of his book room to greet them. He stays with us for a while, and I assume he is diverted or simply has nothing better to do.

While everybody is engaged in conversation, John announces another caller, which causes a response of utter amazement from all of us, though probably for different reasons.

"Mr Darcy to see Mr Bennet," John says, and my heart stops instantly. The conversation ceases, or maybe I cease to hear anything. I stand up, then retake my seat the next instant.

Papa rises to his feet too, to greet the guest. I stare at the door, determined to scrutinise his expression, but my heart is beating so wildly that I can hear it in my ears. I feel my hands trembling, and I clasp them together. Mr Darcy enters wearing a large smile, looking at me directly for a moment and saying cheerfully, "Good day to you. I am sorry to intrude. I just arrived from London, and I wished to..."

Then he stops, his countenance changes, a frown appears between his eyebrows, and I can see his posture tensing. From the direction of his gaze, I recognise the reason for his sudden alteration. Mr Wickham moves nervously on his chair but remains seated.

"Mr Darcy, what a pleasure to see you!" Papa says. "Please, come in. You have just arrived now? Have you not been to Netherfield yet?"

"Yes, I just arrived, and I only stopped for a moment to greet your family. I am sorry to disturb you. I am on my way to Netherfield."

“You are not disturbing us at all,” Papa insists. “We were just talking to these officers — I do not believe you have met them before.”

“I am acquainted with them,” Mr Darcy says coldly, greeting them with an icy, “Gentlemen.”

The three officers all bow to him, and he moves his head slightly, his troubled countenance altering even more.

“I shall leave you now. I wish you all the best and hope to see you again tomorrow.”

“We are glad you are returned to Hertfordshire safely, Mr Darcy,” Papa says.

“I am pleased to be back,” he replies. Then his eyes meet mine and arrest them for another instant, but I am still struggling to breathe. Then he bows again and leaves.

“Well, that was a little strange, even for Mr Darcy,” Mama says. “I wonder why he came if he refused to stay for even a few minutes. But one cannot understand these rich people who believe themselves above everybody else.”

“Mr Darcy showed consideration for us,” Papa says. “He called here even though he must be tired and hungry after the journey. I find his gesture laudable.”

“It was certainly a surprising gesture of politeness from Darcy,” Mr Wickham says. “He rarely behaves in such a friendly manner with strangers.”

“Well, that must be because we are not strangers,” Papa says.

“Forgive me, I meant mere acquaintances,” Mr Wickham continues. “And I dare say he left in such a hurry because of me. My presence was certainly surprising and unpleasant to him. And I shall not deny that it was no different to me. If he had

stayed, I would have left.”

“That would have been awful!” Lydia cries. “I hope Mr Darcy’s arrival will not make you distance yourself from us. And I hope you will come to the ball! We all want to dance with all of you!”

My youngest sister’s outburst increases my state of utter perturbation. Mr Darcy has returned — as he promised. His expression had displayed nothing but joy and friendliness, which I had not expected to see. Regardless of the nature of his affairs with his aunt, he had seemed content with the outcome and looked indeed pleased to be back. He had looked at me with the same intense gaze as he had worn during our private encounters. He had smiled at me in the same way. Are these the manners of a man who attempted to deceive a woman while he was engaged to another? I do not want to believe it, but I do not really know, and my doubts make the sharp claw manifest itself again in my chest. If only he had stayed a few more minutes. If only I had been able to read his expressions more clearly. If only I had asked him something before he charged out quicker than he charged in. If only...

His past dealings with Mr Wickham must be more significant and more disturbing than I assumed since the two men could not stand to be in the same room. But I have no interest in reflecting upon this subject at present. My only concern is to know what Mr Darcy is doing, what he is thinking regarding me, and what his intentions are. And I loathe Mr Wickham for causing him to leave.

“And Miss Elizabeth, I hope you will do me the honour of dancing a set with me tomorrow night,” I hear Mr Wickham ask, then Mr Denny and Mr Pratt ask the same question.

Before I know it, I find myself engaged to dance with the officers for the second, third, and fourth sets. I deliberately keep the first set and the supper set available, for a silly reason that I do not dare admit to myself. I already fear I shall face another

disappointment, and I shall probably be without a partner for those two important sets. But perhaps the disappointment will be easier to bear if I am anticipating it.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

When I left Hertfordshire to see Lady Catherine, I had expected an unpleasant meeting, but the reality meets my worst imaginings. Lady Catherine has claimed control over my entire London household, and the tears of joy and relief in Georgiana's eyes prove that my decision to come was well grounded.

It is after dinner when I arrive home — a dinner that Lady Catherine always takes according to country hours even when in town, meaning very early. I find Georgiana in her rooms with Mrs Annesley, and I spend some time with her, requesting a dinner tray be brought to me. She repeats to me that I should not have ruined my plans and come to London so hastily, but her distressed voice reveals the opposite. After she has calmed down slightly, she asks me about Hertfordshire, and I cannot help mentioning Elizabeth a few times. I feel so much better simply remembering her and the things we shared and speaking about them. With Lady Catherine, I only exchange a few words, letting her know that I am home, then I withdraw to my chambers, but as expected, I sleep little and poorly. My only comfort is that most of the night I think of Elizabeth; the memory of her lips and the taste of her skin are enough to build outrageously sweet, tender dreams about her.

In the morning, even before breakfast and despite my aunt's opposition, I send for Dr Hanscombe, who has served our family while in town since I was an infant. He is well acquainted with Lady Catherine and Anne — whose illness is known to him. As on several other previous occasions, he suggests that Anne should remain under his care for a longer period of time so he can supervise her treatment and observe her improvement. This is nothing new. Dr Hanscombe has been suggesting as much for at least seven years, but Lady Catherine always refuses obstinately, while Anne obediently agrees with her.

This time, I am less inclined to be patient with Lady Catherine and sympathetic to Anne than in the past due to my eagerness to resolve the situation, make certain Georgiana is well, and return to Netherfield. To Elizabeth. Therefore, when the quarrel resumes, due to my insistence they should remain in London under Dr Hanscombe's observation, and Lady Catherine replies viciously that I have no say over Anne's health until I marry her, I lose my temper. My self-control, which I have exercised for years and prided myself in, abandons me.

Under usual circumstances, I would never shout in front of guests or in the hearing of servants.

Unfortunately, these are not usual circumstances as I miss Elizabeth exceedingly, I am already vexed, tired, and anxious, and I resent Lady Catherine for forcing me to leave Hertfordshire at such a moment. So I do; I shout in a manner that stuns the doctor, silences my aunt, makes Anne cower, and is probably heard throughout the house. I shout, "How many times do I have to tell you I shall never marry Anne before you finally understand it and cease deluding yourself?"

In the next moment, I regret my outburst, and I try to carry on a reasonable conversation, pointing out what is in Anne's best interest. My aunt has never known the meaning of the word reasonable, so she replies with accusations that I have disrespected my family, my name, my beloved mother's wishes, and so on, with no regard to the doctor's presence. Fortunately, Dr Hanscombe has heard and seen Lady Catherine at her worst over the decades.

I am not aware that Georgiana has sent Mrs Annesley to fetch Lord Matlock until my uncle enters in the middle of my row with Lady Catherine.

From that moment on, things worsen; we are all blood relations, and we share the same bad traits. Consequently, none of us is wise enough to end the conflict, for which I take the greatest share of blame. Lady Catherine and Anne leave the house an

hour later — and I am not sure whether they will return to Kent or remain in London. I am not sure I care either. I later find out it is the former, and I have some regrets in regard to Anne. If she is truly more ill than usual, my quarrel with her mother and their subsequent sudden departure could put Anne's life in more danger. But she is as stubborn in obeying Lady Catherine as she is weak in opposing her.

Lady Catherine has always tried to dominate everyone, from her brother, her husband, and her daughter to her household and everybody else over whom she wields some power. I do not remember Mama ever arguing with her sister, probably because my mother always felt safe under my father's protection. But with Lord Matlock — her own brother — and his entire family, Lady Catherine is often in violent opposition, as happened this time.

For years, I have tried to keep the peace between our families, especially after Sir Lewis de Bourgh's will granted me significant responsibilities in regard to Rosings Park. As soon as Anne came of age, I informed her she was the heir to Sir Lewis's entire fortune and, therefore, was free to make her own decisions. Still, Anne has no strength, no knowledge, and no desire to disagree with her mother; nor does she allow me or the Fitzwilliams to help her claim some independence.

Since she was old enough to understand, she has lived under the presumption of an engagement between the two of us, even though I never agreed to it. When Anne turned eighteen, I had a serious conversation with her on the subject, both in private, during a stroll in Rosings Park, and in the presence of Lady Catherine and my father. Almost six years have passed since then, and Lady Catherine still has not abandoned the idea. Somehow, she assumes that, since I am not engaged to anyone else, in the end, I shall settle for marrying Anne. I was appalled when she even suggested to me that I could marry according to everyone's expectations and take my pleasure elsewhere, discreetly, as most gentlemen did. That was at Easter, when I last visited Rosings. I was so stunned and mortified that I only replied that the conversation was disgusting and absurd and we should never ever mention it again.

And still, Lady Catherine is neither discouraged by my decision nor willing to accept it. This latest meeting, latest quarrel, will hopefully force her to accept a reality that she has wilfully denied for so long. Regardless, if my prayers are listened to and my hopes are to be fulfilled, very soon I shall announce my engagement, which will clarify any misunderstandings and put an end to any other speculation and expectations.

Three days later, there are still many details to be discussed and settled regarding my responsibilities in managing Rosings Park and Anne's fortune. They were granted to me by Sir Lewis, in his will, and they are lawfully mine. To settle them, I shall have to meet with Sir Lewis' solicitors and my own. But I decide that will have to wait until the next time I am in London. I have concluded my business for this short visit. Georgiana is safe and comfortable, the house has been restored to peace, and Lady Catherine is back in Kent. It is time to return to Hertfordshire, before the ball. If not for the short notice, I would ask Georgiana to come with me. Bingley and his sisters would be happy to host her, and I would be happy to introduce her to Elizabeth. But I cannot impose on my sister to prepare for travel in such a short time. And I cannot be delayed. No obstacle will keep me away from Elizabeth and from the chance of dancing with her. I have already broken my promise to visit her after our meeting at Oakham Mount — after she fell onto me and I felt her sweet lips on mine. Now I plan to compensate for my sudden absence. I selfishly hope she has missed me and will be happy to see me.

Despite my haste, I leave London around noon, and I know I shall arrive late in the afternoon. My first stop will be at Longbourn, even if only for a few minutes. I am already anticipating the moment I shall see Elizabeth's dear countenance, tell her I have returned, witness her surprise, and rejoice in the gaze of her sparkling eyes. I would like nothing more than to speak to Mr Bennet directly and tell him of my intentions towards Elizabeth. But I feel I need to talk to her first and secure her agreement, to reach a clear understanding between us. There will be little chance — if any — to meet at Oakham Mount on the morning of the ball. It would be a sweet,

tender dream, but unlikely. I know ladies need a long time to prepare for such an event, and I am sure Bingley will require my presence too.

But I shall be with her at the ball. I wish to engage her for the first and the supper sets. Or the first and the last. The rest of the time, I plan to talk to Mr Bennet — as we already agreed. He is an interesting and witty fellow, and I enjoy his kind of humour. However, I know I must dance a couple of other sets too; I cannot single Elizabeth out and cause embarrassing rumours. And I should do my duty towards my hosts and ask Bingley's sisters to stand up with me. Maybe Jane Bennet too. I believe that will do. These are my thoughts as I ride into Hertfordshire.

I am so captivated by my own thoughts and plans that I hardly notice the time pass, and I find myself entering Meryton. It feels like the journey back is half as long in time and distance as the ride to London three days earlier.

When the carriage stops in front of Longbourn, my heart is pounding and my stomach churning. I feel as silly as a schoolboy. As I enter, I hear voices and laughter, and I assume Bingley is calling on the Bennets. That would be fortunate since it will give me the opportunity to stay longer. When the door to the drawing room opens, my heart is laughing with joy, and I am smiling. Indeed, the first thing I notice is Elizabeth's beautiful face and her clear astonishment.

It takes me only an instant to be thrown from the loveliest dream into the most dreadful one, seeing George Wickham sitting nonchalantly on the sofa, joyful as ever. George Wickham, the last man in the world I ever wish to see again, apparently occupies a place of friendship and respect at Longbourn, sitting only inches away from my Elizabeth.

Yes, I notice the scoundrel is stunned too, but I wish I could wipe that smirk from his face with my fist. He deserves no better. What he is doing here, how such awful rotten luck could have brought him to the town during the three days of my absence,

is impossible to understand, especially in my perturbed state of mind. Engaging in conversation in the presence of that scoundrel is unbearable to even contemplate. Simply being in the same room as him without being able to throw him out is inconceivable. There is nothing left for me to do but greet the family with the remnants of civility I still have and then resume my ride to Netherfield, hoping Bingley will have some details to enlighten me and help me plan my next step.

It pains me to leave Elizabeth in that villain's company even for an evening, but I have no other choice. I shall explain it to her, and she will understand.

"Darcy, I cannot tell you how pleased I am that you have returned," Bingley says later, as we are having dinner at Netherfield.

I have already asked him about Wickham, and I was stunned to hear that the scoundrel had joined the militia regiment two days ago. He had come from London while I was away. What sort of sordid coincidence can this be? How did it happen? Where did he find the money for a commission? What bad luck that he happened to join this precise regiment. Are the fates mocking me?

My anxiety has only increased since I left Longbourn; I cannot stop thinking of Wickham, and I must fight against the temptation to go back there and settle the matter.

"You have told me, Bingley. Several times. I thank you for your enthusiasm."

"We were worried about your sudden departure, Mr Darcy," Miss Bingley says. "Especially since you declared your intention of staying for this silly ball."

"It is hard to believe that you made the trip to London and back in four days," Hurst

says. "You must have had a good reason to leave and to return so quickly."

"I did. But I confess I am quite tired, so I shall retire soon."

"You should sleep as much as you want tomorrow morning," Bingley says.

"I intend to do so, if I can. If not, I shall go for a ride," I say.

"Oh, if you do, I shall come with you," Bingley immediately says. This is not what I planned.

"It might rain, though," I answer. "We shall see."

Soon afterwards, I withdraw to my chamber and prepare for the night. My mind keeps returning to Wickham and Elizabeth. Has he spoken to her? He certainly will not have overlooked the opportunity to besmirch my name as soon as he learnt of my presence in the neighbourhood. What has he said to her, of all the miserable lies he usually spreads about me? And if he has told her something, what will she think of me? Most people believe Wickham at first. Did Elizabeth too? And if he only arrived in Meryton several days ago, how is he already so friendly with the Bennets? Anxiety keeps me awake, despite the wine I drank during dinner. I wish — I need! — to speak to Elizabeth, but very likely there will be no time before the ball.

I hear the rain falling, and the noise increases my irritation.

I am not sure how the night passes, but it is certainly one of the worst I have experienced in a long time. The rain keeps pouring, and it still has not stopped by morning. I go downstairs at an hour too early for breakfast, so I ask for some coffee, which, of course, brings back more recollections of Elizabeth and the coffee we shared.

“Darcy, why are you awake so early?” Bingley says, entering the room.

“I slept badly, and there was no use in staying in bed longer. This pouring rain is terribly annoying.”

“I am sorry to hear that. I can see you are in a poor disposition. So, you stopped at Longbourn yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“I was there too, but yesterday morning. I believe the Bennet family will be here a little earlier than the other guests this evening. Mrs Bennet promised me so.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes...and I have already asked Miss Bennet to open the ball with me. I mean, the first set. And I asked for the supper set as well.”

I smile; for once, Bingley and I are thinking the same.

“Darcy, there is something very important that I wish to tell you. I am considering proposing to Miss Bennet.” I can sense the hesitation in his voice; he probably wishes for my approval.

“If that is your decision, I wish you all the best, Bingley.” What else can I say? I cannot say I am surprised. “May I ask when you intend to propose? Today?”

“Oh no, of course not! After the ball, before I leave for London.”

“I wish you the best of luck with your decision, Bingley, and all the happiness you seek.”

“Thank you. I have reflected quite a lot on what you told me. I am absolutely certain that I love Miss Bennet. I am not just infatuated — I truly love her. And I trust her feelings are no different.”

“Congratulations, then.”

“Thank you! I feel so much better to know you have no objections. I know Jane is without fault, but there are some issues with her family... Their behaviour...um...their connections... I know, of course, it is an important matter.”

“If you have already examined the situation carefully, I have no other objections to raise. Only you can see whether your affections are returned, and that is the most important consideration. I trust your judgment, as it is your own marital felicity at stake.”

“This is such a relief! And a joy! I look forward to finding the right moment to speak to her...to propose. I was tempted to go this morning, but I know they are all busy, and I am busy, and there is also that cousin of theirs who is quite annoying and always present.”

This last piece of information draws my attention. Who?

“Cousin?”

“Oh, did you not meet him yesterday?”

“No. Nobody mentioned him. What cousin?”

“Mr Bennet’s cousin, a Mr Collins. The one to whom Longbourn is entailed.”

“I see...”

“But wait, be prepared for a big surprise. Apparently, Mr Collins is a clergyman, and he was recently granted the living of the parish of Hunsford! By Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who is his noble patroness, as he calls her.”

“You must be joking, Bingley!”

“Not at all. The man expressed a strong desire to meet you, and he already seems to adore you. He kept asking when you would return, to be certain he meets you before he leaves the county.”

Irritation has already caused me a headache as I wonder why the fates are being so cruel to me. What sort of dreadful jokes are these?

“Oh, and there is more — I am happy I can share it and laugh about it with someone, as I did not dare tell my sisters. This Mr Collins came with a clear purpose established by your aunt, whom he seems to worship — to find a wife!”

Bingley is exceedingly amused, but to me, it is more vexing.

“He came fifty miles to find a wife?”

“Yes. He seemingly wishes to propose to one of his cousins. I believe he was told about my admiration for Jane, so he seems determined to court Miss Elizabeth. The poor man follows her like a puppy, I am certain she wishes to slap him, from what I have seen.”

My disposition, which was already poor, is now foul, and I stand up with my head aching fiercely. Bingley is laughing, so it must be some sort of poor joke. Another one.

“How can you suspect his intentions? Has he told anyone that he wants to court

E...Miss Elizabeth?"

I feel suddenly panicked, remembering that the expression on Elizabeth's face had not been the one I had expected at our reunion. Do I have a reason for concern, other than Wickham?

"Jane implied it more than said it directly. I called at Longbourn yesterday, and while I spoke to Jane, I observed the man. I assume he has spoken to Mrs Bennet, who probably encouraged him. I am sorry to say so, but Mrs Bennet always seems to be chasing husbands for her daughters."

I am growing angrier by the second. Perhaps this is the right path after all — and the shortest one. I should simply go and talk to Mrs Bennet and confess my feelings for Elizabeth. Although I know the matron dislikes me, she would likely force a wedding in a fortnight.

"Poor Mr Collins has not enough wit to realise that a clever woman like Miss Elizabeth would eat him alive. I only warned you to be prepared for tonight. I dare say Mr Collins will share his adoration between you and Miss Elizabeth. It should be fun to watch."

"I doubt that very much, Bingley," I reply with a harshness that contrasts with his light tone. "If Miss Elizabeth does not welcome his attentions, she must be embarrassed, and that is no reason to laugh for a gentleman."

And if she does welcome that man's attentions, I shall never laugh again for the rest of my life. I shall have to wait and see what fate has prepared for me. Between Wickham and Mr Collins, with all the uncertainty about Elizabeth, it will be one of the worst balls I have ever attended. I can only hope the joy of dancing with her will compensate for all the tumult I find myself in.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

I cannot remember ever waiting for a ball with such a mixture of anxiety and eagerness. Or for any other event in my life. I am counting the hours; I cannot rest or read or do anything, especially with the rain still pouring. And I have very little patience with Miss Bingley and her endless protests, which are grating on my last nerve.

“I cannot understand why you invited the Bennet family earlier than the others!” Miss Bingley says to her brother. “I am shaking with distress only imagining the seven people invading the little peace we have before all of Hertfordshire descends upon us. And all the noise and shrieks from the mother and the younger daughters.”

“They will not be seven but eight people, Caroline. You forgot to count their cousin Mr Collins,” Bingley responds with a calmness rarely seen before. Now that the decision is made, the forthcoming marriage proposal has given him an inner strength that suits him very well.

“I assume you will ask Jane Bennet for the first set?” Mrs Hurst enquires.

“Of course. Indeed, I have already done so.”

“Well, you have few choices, in any case. If we were in a larger society and had many young accomplished ladies to choose from, the situation would be different.”

“Louisa, I would have asked Jane Bennet for the first set had I been at Almack’s or at St James’s Palace.”

“Charles, I hope you will not do anything hasty and foolish,” Mrs Hurst continues. “I

am looking forward to returning to town. We shall have plenty of time to discuss important matters at length, and I am sure Mr Darcy will help us with meaningful advice. Will you not, sir?"

"I shall gladly help when I am able to and when my opinion is required, Mrs Hurst."

I know too well what she wants, just as I know that, for once, her opinion or mine matter little to Bingley.

"Rest assured I shall not do anything hasty or foolish, Louisa. All my decisions are well and carefully thought out. Let us get through this day and night first. I am thrilled about it, but I admit it will not be easy to entertain and please so many people."

"And you, Mr Darcy?" Miss Bingley asks coyly. "Will you dance?"

"I intend to. It depends on my disposition. But if I do, I shall certainly ask for the favour of a set from both of you ladies. Now please excuse me, I must write to Georgiana and my cousin before the ball." I remove myself from their company before she has time to mention a particular set. My entire disposition and plans for the night depend on Elizabeth, but I shall not mention this aloud. I have learnt my lesson.

I finish preparing for the evening and go in search of Bingley. Thankfully, the rain seems to have stopped, and my mood has slightly improved. Knowing Elizabeth's family will arrive sooner than the rest of the guests gives me hope that I might catch a few minutes of private conversation with her and secure my set. Or sets, depending.

The ballroom looks elegant and inviting; the musicians have already arrived and tuned their instruments. The servants are speeding around seeing to the last-minute arrangements in the dining room, where several additional tables have been brought in to accommodate all the guests. If not for Elizabeth, I would probably withdraw to

my chamber with a good book and avoid the bustle.

As it is, I am employing my time pacing the entrance hall and clenching my jaw, until finally I spot the Bennets' carriage. Bingley hurries to the door, and I follow him at a slower pace.

"Mrs Bennet, Mr Bennet, welcome, all of you," Bingley says as the servants are taking their coats. Pleasantries and compliments are exchanged, but my only concern is Elizabeth, who seems unusually occupied with removing her pelisse and determined to avoid my eyes.

I greet the Bennets, and Bingley offers his arm to his favourite miss. Mrs Bennet and her youngest daughters are already inside, admiring the arrangements.

"Mr Darcy, allow me to introduce my cousin, Mr Collins," Mr Bennet says. I look at the man who is bowing to me so deeply that I can hardly see his face.

"My Darcy, I cannot express how grateful I am for the extraordinary moment that has offered me the chance to be introduced to you. From the moment I heard about your unexpected presence in Hertfordshire, in my cousin's proximity, I wished for nothing else but to make your acquaintance. It is truly one of the most exalted days of my life, almost the same as the day I met your aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Life-changing, indeed."

I glance at Elizabeth, and her embarrassment is as discernible as Mr Bennet's amusement. Bingley and Miss Bennet are talking to each other, paying no attention to us. In order to put Elizabeth at ease, I smile and use a friendly voice when I reply, "Mr Collins, I am glad to meet you, sir. There is no need for such formality, I assure you. I am told you are a clergyman, the parson of Hunsford parish, near Rosings. A lovely village with lovely people."

“You are very kind and generous, Mr Darcy! I cannot thank you enough,” the man repeats. “Yes, yes, I have had the good fortune to be the beneficiary of your aunt’s generosity. She bestowed upon me the honour of the living in Hunsford.”

“I congratulate you on the living, Mr Collins. But let us not use such big words at a ball. There is nothing life-changing about a party and certainly nothing to thank me for.”

“We should go inside where it is warmer,” Bingley suggests, with Miss Bennet clinging to his arm and smiling charmingly.

“Yes, we should,” Mr Bennet agrees. “I shall take advantage of my early arrival and find the best spot on a comfortable chair in the far corner with a good view of the room.”

Our little group is moving, so I boldly address the object of all my torments directly.

“Miss Elizabeth, may I accompany you inside?”

She finally looks at me, and her eyes seemed clouded, with no trace of joy, as I remember seeing them not long ago. She does take my arm, tentatively, barely touching, not putting any weight on it, as she did at the beginning of our relationship at Netherfield. Her fingers timidly lie on my arm; it is far from the touch I know too well and I crave. I cannot bear it any longer.

“Miss Elizabeth, there is something I have to ask you, if you do not mind. You received the book I sent you, I hope?”

Her eyes rise to my face, and I notice a glimpse of surprise and interest.

“I did. I still need to return the one I have finished,” she whispers.

Mr Bennet is a few steps away, behind Bingley and Miss Bennet, and Mr Collins is still moving around me and Elizabeth. I hear the voices of Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst, as well as of the other Bennet ladies, and I know I only have a couple of minutes left if I want to speak to her. Despair pushes me towards bold actions.

“Mr Collins, would you mind allowing me a minute to talk to Miss Elizabeth? We shall be with you in a moment.”

The man looks dumbfounded, and he mumbles something and glances at me, then at Mr Bennet, so I insist, “Will you do so now?” The last word seems to convince him, and he walks a few steps away. Maybe he senses my despair. Or it is my master’s voice. Whatever it is, it works. Only then do I stop and look at Elizabeth.

“I beg your forgiveness if I sounded rude. And if you would like me to, I shall apologise to Mr Collins later. I only wished to ask you for the favour of a set...if you are still desirous to dance with me. In fact, I was hoping for the first set, if it is not too much to ask and you are not otherwise engaged.”

She averts her gaze, then returns it to me. “I am engaged for several sets...” she says, and I hold my breath. “But not for the first one. And I did promise to dance with you the next time you asked me. I do not make false promises.”

There is reproach in her acceptance, and I cannot help frowning.

“I thank you for the honour, Miss Elizabeth. I never suspected that you might not keep your promise or that anything you say might be false.”

“Neither did I suspect that about you, Mr Darcy,” she replies, increasing my confusion. Now I know with certainty she is upset; I remember her tone, her avoidance of my eyes, her lips pressed together, from our last misunderstanding in the Netherfield library.

“Lizzy, is something wrong?” I hear Jane Bennet asking.

“No, all is well, Jane. I was talking to Mr Darcy,” she replies. Then she looks at me again; her countenance is different from a few minutes earlier, but nothing reminds me of the sweet tenderness that I savoured when we last met.

“I shall dance the first set with you, Mr Darcy,” she repeats as though she is doing me a favour. So I push my luck with the daring of a desperate man.

“And perhaps the supper set too? Or the last?”

Surprise widens her eyes, a slight frown marring the perfection of her countenance.

“Mr Collins has already asked for the supper set,” she answers hesitantly. “Would it be wise to dance two sets?” she then enquires, puzzling me even further.

“Do you doubt the wisdom of my request, Miss Elizabeth? The only valid question is whether the request would give you as much pleasure as it would give me. As I have told you on previous occasions, the decision is entirely yours, and your desire is what matters.”

“I remember you saying that, Mr Darcy, but I have reason to believe your statement was not entirely accurate. My decision and my desire might have some importance, but there are certainly many other aspects that matter more at present.”

“Miss Elizabeth, I fail to understand your meaning. I can see you are upset with me, and I am lost as to why. However, this is neither the place nor the time for such a conversation.”

“I agree, Mr Darcy. And to end this discussion, yes, I shall dance the first and the last set with you, as you requested. Now we should enter. I am sure we are expected.”

We resume walking, and my mind briefly notices that, despite the perplexing exchange and her apparent anger towards me, she has not withdrawn her hand from my arm. Strangely enough, I feel her grasp growing firmer, more confident.

Once we join the others, Elizabeth leaves my side and goes to her sisters and her mother. Bingley is there too, and I stand near Mr Bennet. As I feared, Mr Collins stands next to me and continues to speak, while I hardly listen.

Hurst enters too, bows to us, and immediately serves himself a glass of brandy; Bingley's sisters are nowhere in sight, and I assume they are trying to avoid the Bennets after the perfunctory greetings.

With Mr Collins's annoying chatter, I can hardly hear myself think. Then, the first guests arrive, followed by another small group, and soon there is a large gathering and an unbearable din. I keep looking at Elizabeth, and she glances at me at times, still refusing to meet my eyes. My head is aching as I try to understand why she is upset with me.

Of course, my first guess is Wickham. He must have told her something about me; I cannot deny I am disappointed that, regardless of what he has told her, Elizabeth would so easily believe a claim against me without even discussing it with me first.

She might have feelings for me, but her opinion of me must still be very poor and her trust in me very low. This is a deeply hurtful blow.

Among the last of the guests, the very subject of my angry musings arrives. Wickham is here, together with his fellow officers and his disgraceful impertinence. His audacity to appear here enrages me. He even dares to nod at me while the group of officers make their entrance. I shall not ruin Bingley's ball by causing a scandal with Wickham, but I feel at the edge of my tolerance with this reprobate. There he is, talking and laughing carelessly, with all the women tittering at his stupid, witless

jokes. Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty Bennet are really silly girls, but Colonel Forster's wife? What is she doing so close to Wickham and touching his arm as she laughs? The colonel is far away in a corner, paying no attention to the scene. How can he be so ignorant of the danger of such a rake near his new wife? What quality does Wickham possess to allow him to deceive so many people so easily and trick them effortlessly into trusting him?

I am relieved that Elizabeth is not in the group around Wickham. She is standing with her sisters Jane and Mary, as well as with Miss Lucas. I am a little annoyed when Sir William approaches us, and while he talks to Mr Bennet, I go to fill my glass with brandy.

"Mr Darcy, there is something of great importance that I would like to discuss with you, if you would kindly grant me the benefit of your opinion," I hear Mr Collins whine. He really is following me like a puppy, except that a puppy would be pleasant company.

"Of great importance, Mr Collins? What could it be? We have only just met, so I doubt my opinion on any subject could have such value to you."

"Oh no, I beg to differ, sir. The matter I am referring to is also related to Lady Catherine, your estimable aunt. I am about to make a choice, and I wish to be sure it will please her ladyship and will meet with her approval. That is why your opinion is of the greatest importance."

I have a slight suspicion about what this poor pathetic man wishes to ask my opinion on, and I need more time to prepare for such a ridiculous conversation.

"Mr Collins, the music is about to begin, and I must collect my partner for the first set. However, I am not engaged for the second set, so we might find a moment to speak then if that is agreeable to you."

The delay is reasonable, as the musicians have picked up their instruments already. Mr Collins looks satisfied with my answer; his face shows so much joy that I cannot but pity him. But then he repeatedly bows to me, which turns my pity into vexation.

This is the man who wishes to marry Elizabeth? Who believes himself worthy of her?

I do not have much time for reflection, as the music begins in earnest and the pairs take their places on the floor. I approach Elizabeth with a strange emotion, realising it is our first dance together. One we shall remember, one way or another. She waits, looking at me. I stretch my hand out to her, and she places her palm in mine, a sensation I know too well and I vividly recollect, even if now both our hands are gloved.

We take our places in the set, next to Bingley and his partner. I notice some people's curious gazes upon us — including those of Mr Collins and Mrs Bennet. I turn my full attention towards Elizabeth and say, rather loudly, "I am glad you find me tolerable enough to dance with, Miss Bennet." For the first time since my return, I see a glimpse of mirth in her eyes. A moment later, the dance requires us to move, but even in motion, our eyes remain locked until we begin to speak.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

We dance the first part of the set in silence, or as much silence as there can be in a room filled with voices and music. She looks at me; her gaze has turned into a sharp scrutiny, and I feel she wishes to say something but is reluctant to begin.

“Mr Bingley is indeed hosting a ball for the entire neighbourhood,” she finally remarks.

“Indeed, it is a large gathering for a private country ball.”

“It must be difficult for you. I know you despise large crowds of people you are unacquainted with.”

“Not as much as I used to. As I previously stated, it depends on the company. But you, Miss Bennet, seem to be enjoying this particular ball rather less than the last one.”

“If you are referring to the assembly, I doubt you looked at me closely enough to notice the degree of my enjoyment. And dancing with you is a novelty I had not anticipated at that time.”

“Your apparent displeasure is due to the fact that you are dancing with me, then?”

I notice a shadow on her face. “That is a very far-fetched conclusion, Mr Darcy. Far from the truth also.”

“Is it? I have never been so pleased to be wrong, Miss Bennet.”

There is a short pause as the dance moves us apart. From the corner of my eye, I notice Wickham dancing with a young woman whose name I cannot remember.

In another corner, Mr Collins is talking animatedly to Mrs Bennet and Lady Lucas, and I assume I know the subject of their conversation.

“What a coincidence that our cousin Mr Collins is so closely connected to your aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” Elizabeth says, following my gaze.

“True. There has been more than one peculiar coincidence since I left Hertfordshire.”

“Did your aunt not mention anything about Mr Collins?” she enquires. “Mr Bingley told us your trip to London was related to Lady Catherine and her daughter.”

“No, she did not mention anything about your cousin. We had other matters, more pressing and more urgent, to resolve in a very short period of time.”

“And were those matters settled to your satisfaction? I assume they were urgent indeed since they required your immediate presence.”

“Not entirely to my satisfaction, but it was all I could do in order to return here, as I promised. There are still some long-lasting disagreements between me and my aunt that will require further negotiations.”

“A man can only keep so many promises,” she says, puzzling me even more. “I hear Lady Catherine speaks very highly of you, so I am surprised to hear of any quarrels between you. They must be on matters of great importance to your family.”

“They are. My aunt always wishes to have her own way, and I am stubborn too, especially when her demands affect my life or my sister’s.”

My answer causes another shadow in her eyes and a new frown. “Miss Bennet, I hope we can discuss this matter at length at another time. Perhaps we could...if the weather allows...tomorrow after breakfast I shall take a ride to Oakham Mount. It would be the perfect place for any sort of conversation.”

She pauses and takes a few more steps as the set requires. “Are you sure such a meeting would be appropriate, from the perspective of your aunt’s requests?”

Now I am completely baffled as to why my aunt has been mentioned and why Elizabeth should care about her. “Certainly not. Each of my rides to Oakham Mount would surely anger and appal my aunt, but it will not affect me.”

I had attempted to make a joke, but her countenance does not brighten in the slightest.

“My only concern is your opinion about the place I mentioned, Miss Bennet. I believed I knew it, but I am afraid I might have been wrong, or it has changed in the last five days.”

“My opinion does not change as easily as you imply. Sometimes the reason is strong enough though. But Oakham Mount is my favourite safe place, and it will remain so. I have not been there in the last few days, as neither the weather nor my disposition have been favourable to long walks.”

Her words increase my worry, but at least I am relieved that she has accepted the private meeting tomorrow. Regardless of the reason that is causing her state of distress, it cannot be well grounded, and it will surely be easily clarified.

“I am sorry to hear that. When we last met before my departure, your disposition seemed excellent. It is sad that something or someone has upset you. If it is something related to me, I hope you will proceed with your usual honesty and tell me what it is.”

“I have always been honest and never presented half the truth and conveniently concealed the other half. I shall certainly not begin now.”

“I am more and more troubled by your words, Miss Bennet, and I am lost as to your meaning other than to understand that you accuse me of concealing something from you. But I suspect that in my absence you acquired some information that, presented in a certain manner by certain people, might cast a shadow on my character. Is my assumption wrong?”

A new frown and a new shadow tell me my guess is accurate.

“Your assumption is correct. Which indicates to me that you are not ignorant of what that particular information might pertain to.”

“I would be a fool to be ignorant of such important matters that could affect my name and my family.”

Her face is now dimmed with distress, as I have only seen it once before. This discussion during the first set is causing more harm than good, and I am sure it will ruin the ball entirely for both of us.

“Even if the information is only half true, considering the gravity of the matter you just admitted, it is still enough to make me alter some of my previous opinions. Would you not agree, Mr Darcy?”

“I would hope I deserve to express my side of the story before you allow it to alter your opinions, Miss Bennet. Especially considering your brief acquaintance with the source of your information.”

“You are correct. These last days I have been eagerly waiting for the opportunity to hear your side of the story before I make any further decisions.”

I watch her intently. What could she possibly mean? Surely she cannot be so upset with me as to accept a proposal from her ridiculous cousin? Surely she cannot be so silly as to act in the rage of a moment and ruin her entire life?

“I appreciate your frankness, Miss Bennet,” I reply with a sharp irony in my voice. My attention is drawn by Wickham again; his partner is smiling at him, looking enchanted. He looks at me with a smirk of satisfaction, which grates on my nerves and irritates me. As always, he knows he has caused trouble and rejoices in his success. What the idiot does not know is that this time he has crossed a sensitive line for which he will not go unpunished.

“May I assume we shall remain silent till the end of the set?” Elizabeth enquires.

“As you wish, Miss Bennet. I would gladly carry on the conversation on any subject you find agreeable.”

“It would look odd to be entirely silent after we spoke so animatedly. But people must find it odd that you asked me for the first set in any case.”

“Probably. I can see your cousin is one of those people. He shows great interest in our dance.”

I see her blush, so I continue, though I know it is selfish of me to pursue a subject that makes her uncomfortable.

“Am I wrong to assume Mr Collins generally shows a great interest in you?”

She hesitates to answer and averts her eyes. “You are not wrong. I have also noticed you show a peculiar interest in Mr Wickham, with whom I heard you are long acquainted.”

“May I ask, who is the young woman he is dancing with?”

“Miss Mary King. She came to live with her uncle and aunt recently.”

“I see...”

“Mr Wickham seems to be an amiable, friendly gentleman and very fond of dancing. He has asked me for the second set, and I assume he will dance with many of the ladies here.”

“How very civil of him. Mr Wickham is blessed with such happy manners that help him make friends easily. Whether he is capable of retaining them is less certain.”

I know my tone is far from composed, and I am certain Elizabeth notices too.

“I heard he has been so unlucky as to lose your friendship,” she replies with some emphasis, “and in a manner that he is likely to suffer from all his life.”

My patience is lost now.

“Unluckiness and suffering are certainly not the words that best describe Wickham’s life. I am sure he complained about the things he should have had and did not receive, but forgot to mention the reason for the denial of his bequest, nor all the things he did receive.”

There is another pause, and I notice her glancing at Wickham; my irritation increases even more. Sadly, the music stops, and I realise our set, which I had anticipated with such pleasure, has ended. I lead her off the floor, but she stops near a wall, continuing, “One may not realise the depth of another’s suffering, especially if one is blinded by other feelings, good or bad. I am not talking about Mr Wickham alone.”

“I look forward with interest to learning what are you talking about, besides Wickham. I hoped, Miss Bennet — nay, in fact, I trusted! — that you would ask for proof before believing a stranger’s claim against an older acquaintance whom at times you called a friend. It pains me to see how easily you granted your sympathy and pity where it is undeserved.”

She now looks at me with her usual intensity, and her eyes capture mine.

“You are mistaken, sir, in assuming I have any feelings for a stranger like Mr Wickham, either of pity or sympathy. He is a mere acquaintance whose company I found agreeable but never missed. I hope to be wiser than to believe a stranger over a friend, even if the friend conveniently forgot to mention past dealings that greatly affect the present.”

“I would have certainly revealed anything if I believed it would affect you, Miss Bennet. And I am ready to answer any of your questions at our next meeting, about my past dealings with Wickham or any other subject of your interest.”

“I shall thoroughly prepare my questions, Mr Darcy.”

“Please do so. As for Wickham, I would warn any honourable young woman not to trust him or the charms he so skilfully uses.”

She blushes, and her eyes narrow.

“Your warning, though probably well meant, is offensive, Mr Darcy. I shall certainly not trust the charms — skilful or not — of anyone I have only just met.”

I do not doubt her words, and I feel stupid for suspecting otherwise.

“I apologise. My warning was meant especially for your younger sisters. I shall speak

to your father about this subject too since Wickham has already insinuated himself within your family, and, as you already surmised, he is not someone you can trust. He has deceived others, older and wiser, who granted him their trust and affection. I shall provide you with all the details about our past dealings.”

“I assume you refer to your father who, I heard, was his godfather. Mr Darcy, although we have spoken at length about Mr Wickham, please rest assured that your past dealings with him are of little interest to me. As I have already told him, your affairs are not my business.”

“I am glad to hear that, Miss Bennet. I feel like some of his claims have aroused your apparent disapproval of me since I returned.”

Her answer is delayed again.

“Some of his claims affected me, indeed,” she says. “Especially since they confirmed what I learnt from Mr Collins. This is why I am content that you agreed to have an enlightening discussion tomorrow.”

“Lizzy, do not bore Mr Darcy any longer,” I hear Mrs Bennet say, and Elizabeth’s cheeks colour with mortification. The woman continues, while I hardly know whether I should laugh or be angry on Elizabeth’s behalf. “Mr Darcy, I thank you for asking Lizzy for the first set. I know you assumed she would be slighted and without a partner as she was at the assembly, but Mr Collins would have danced with her.”

“I assure you it was my pleasure to dance with Miss Elizabeth, madam. And if neither you nor she would mind, I hope to have this pleasure again later.” My anger has won out, especially as I hear the matron again.

“Oh, how kind of you, sir! I can tell your gracious gestures are due to your friendship with Mr Bingley and Mr Bennet. Thank Mr Darcy, Lizzy!”

“Mama!”

“I am the one who should thank Miss Elizabeth for bearing my clumsiness in dancing and my tedious conversation,” I answer.

Just in time, Bingley arrives and interrupts the awkward scene.

As Elizabeth walks away with her mother, my mind is drowning in confusion. My discussion with Elizabeth barely made any sense at all. She is apparently upset about something she has discovered and believes I kept secret from her. And yet she does not seem too impressed by Wickham’s charms and claims. Or perhaps she has given importance to his revelations but not to the man himself?

As for that silly Mr Collins, all she told me was that the man spoke highly of me. What could be the problem there? I am more and more confident it is all a misunderstanding that will be explained thoroughly tomorrow.

I watch Mrs Bennet pushing Elizabeth towards Mr Collins, and something tightens in my chest. If that man is determined to propose to her, I fear he might enter into some sort of arrangement with Mrs Bennet and try to force Elizabeth against her will. The concern, as I see it, is only slight. I am more than ready to propose to Elizabeth officially; I am relying on Mr Bennet not accepting his cousin’s suit, and I trust Mrs Bennet will be impressed enough with my income to take my side against the clergyman, despite him being the heir to Longbourn.

However, as amusing as it might sound to be in competition with Mr Collins, I certainly wish to avoid any scandal that could further distress Elizabeth. Therefore, our meeting tomorrow will be of crucial importance.

The music for the second set is about to begin, and I decide to do my duty by my host, Miss Caroline Bingley, and be done with it.

I watch Mr Collins talking to Elizabeth, then Wickham approaching and taking her hand, leading her to the floor while Mr Collins does the same for Miss Lucas.

I am irritated, vexed, and yes, jealous. What angers me exceedingly is that the person I most deeply resent has ruined my first dance with Elizabeth. And that is something I shall not easily forget or forgive.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

This second set of the ball on November 26th will remain in my memory as one of the most excruciating half hours I have had to bear. As I dance with Caroline Bingley, Elizabeth dances with Wickham.

Miss Bingley keeps asking and teasing me about my previous dance with Elizabeth, then points out to me how wildly Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty Bennet are behaving, laughing and talking loudly and even calling out to the officers in the middle of the set. I cannot deny those two girls need a proper scolding and some good discipline. The youngest is Georgiana's age, and my sister will not even consider being out. Seeing Lydia Bennet with the officers, my heart aches again as I remember how easily Wickham deceived Georgiana and almost convinced her to elope with him. Almost. My dear sister's affection for me was strong enough to induce her to think more of not hurting me than of pleasing Wickham.

Despite my struggle, I cannot keep my eyes away from Elizabeth. She seems engaged in the dance and conversation, and she smiles pleasantly at her partner, but she is acting differently from other women who have tried to catch the scoundrel's attention. I have no reason to doubt what she already told me: even if she is indeed upset with me for some strange reason, she certainly is not charmed by Wickham. However, I have every intention of taking proper measures so that the villain will not try his usual schemes and turn the people of Meryton into innocent victims of his deceptions.

Miss Bingley keeps talking, while I notice Mr Collins bowing his head to me. I roll my eyes inwardly, all along cringing at the prospect of the postponed conversation. Yes, this is all I need. And I must prepare for worse, as I know he will come and talk to me soon.

The tortuous set finally comes to an end, and when the music stops, I breathe in relief.

I move towards Mr Bennet, taking a drink from a servant on my way. Fortunately, I notice Mr Collins talking to Sir William, and I gulp from my glass, enjoying a few moments of peace.

On the other side of the room, Lydia Bennet is laughing, accompanied by Mrs Forster and some other young women. Wickham and a few of the other young officers are near them.

“I imagine,” Mr Bennet suddenly says, not looking at me but towards the dancers, “how much you disapprove of my youngest daughters’ behaviour. Please do not deny it. I am ashamed to admit that I disapprove of them too, but I am too indolent to take proper measures.”

I can find nothing appropriate to say in response; I cannot pretend to disagree.

“Perhaps indolent is too harsh a word,” I say.

“Harsh but well deserved. I find pleasure in few things, and neither raising five daughters nor managing an estate is one of them. I left the responsibility to educate the girls to my wife and Longbourn’s management to chance.”

Again I smile and sip from my glass.

“I wonder, how do you do it, Mr Darcy? From a very young age, you were forced to manage an estate ten times larger than Longbourn and had to raise your sister. And you enjoy books as much as I do and probably many other things. You are either better than other men, or I am less than I should be.”

“You are too severe on yourself, Mr Bennet, and too generous with me. I do have many responsibilities, but also many resources and people to help me. As for my sister, I have simply been fortunate and blessed. I can take no credit for her accomplishments or her good character.”

“I could say the same about Jane and Lizzy. I am fortunate and blessed with what they have become — and with so little effort on my part. They inherited few of my wife’s unguarded manners.”

“Indeed, anyone who knows Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth can find nothing wanting in them,” I say in all honesty.

“And I cannot complain much about Mary either. But Lydia and Kitty are quite the opposite. Both resemble their mother when she was young, in beauty and liveliness as well as in behaviour. A good father should have corrected their flaws, but I have been content to overlook them.”

A sharp cry draws my attention, and several people — including Elizabeth — hurry across the room. A small group has already gathered, and I cannot see what has happened until I recognise Lydia Bennet’s cries of pain.

I move towards the group on impulse, and I stop near Elizabeth, but she is kneeling on the floor, and at that moment, I see Miss Lydia on the floor, holding her foot and sobbing.

“I am sure I have broken my ankle! Oh no, do not touch it! Oh, it hurts so much! Oh, I shall die of pain!”

Mr and Mrs Bennet approach too, as well as everyone else. Mrs Bennet is wailing along with her daughter, while Elizabeth and Miss Bennet are kneeling next to her, and Bingley and Mr Bennet seemed lost and rather useless.

“We should give Miss Lydia some space to breathe!” I hear myself demanding loudly. “Let us all take a step back!”

There is some agitation, so I repeat my request, and there is some acquiescence, but Miss Lydia continues to sob.

There is a real commotion now, and I notice Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley rolling their eyes and whispering to each other.

In that din of voices, I need to raise mine to be heard.

“We should take Miss Lydia somewhere to rest. And the apothecary must be fetched immediately. A sprained ankle can be healed in two days or can become something more serious if not taken care of.”

“Yes!” Bingley interjects. “We shall place Miss Lydia in the room where Miss Bennet stayed when she was ill. And I shall send someone to fetch Mr Jones!”

Elizabeth and her eldest sister, together with Bingley, help Miss Lydia up and place her on a chair. She continues to cry, and a lot of people make sympathetic noises around her. Two male servants arrive, and I need to interject again.

“I believe the best choice to protect the injured foot would be to carry Miss Lydia in the chair. She cannot put her foot down, nor should she try to.”

Elizabeth looks at me, and for the first time since my return, her gaze is soft and tender.

“Darcy is right. Let us carry her in the chair,” Bingley suggests.

“I am sure it is nothing to worry about — only a trifling sprain,” Miss Bingley

interjects. “Nobody dies from such a silly accident, only the ball is ruined.”

“I am sorry for the inconvenience, but the ball must not be ruined,” I hear Elizabeth answer. “I shall go with my sister and take care of her until Mr Jones arrives.”

“Yes, yes, Lizzy, go with her,” Mrs Bennet intervenes. “You have little business at the ball in any case. I shall come with you, but Jane can stay.”

Elizabeth looks at me again, and her distress mixed with embarrassment is touching. I wish I could help and reassure her more, but I have no right. There are still many misconceptions to clarify before I can claim any.

Still sobbing and whining that she will not be able to dance again, Lydia Bennet is carried away, with Elizabeth and Mrs Bennet following her.

“That was the last drop in the glass of my shame,” Mr Bennet says. “I must refill it with some brandy. Again, you have been more useful than me in regard to my daughter, Mr Darcy.”

“I wonder what happened?” I ask.

“Miss Lydia was chasing Mr Denny, and her foot slipped and she fell,” Mr Collins explains. “Lady Catherine always says how important it is for young women to act with regard for decorum. Her ladyship despises running, especially indoors.”

“Yes, thank you for the explanation, Mr Collins. Please excuse me, I must speak to Bingley.”

It takes less than half an hour for the ball to continue as if nothing has happened. The music resumes, the pairs return to the floor, and conversation, drinking, and laughter fill the ballroom again.

Mrs Bennet returns, telling everyone how hurt her younger daughter is and crying about her misfortune. I am once again standing next to Mr Bennet, sharing his mortification concealed under apparent amusement while his wife speaks loudly enough to be clearly heard despite the music.

“Poor Lydia, she was so sad she could not dance with the rest of the officers. Her foot looks so ugly and swollen! I hope she will be able to walk again. But I am glad it did not ruin the ball. Mr Bingley took so much trouble with it! And my Jane looks so pretty and so happy! Lizzy will stay with Lydia. She did not seem willing to return. I know Mr Collins would like to dance with her, but he has plenty of time to talk to her tomorrow.”

I cannot help frowning. The woman is difficult to bear, and while wondering how Mr Bennet chose his wife, I understand why he prefers to spend most of his time in the library.

An hour later, shortly before supper, Mr Jones arrives and goes to the room upstairs to examine the disobedient patient. Mr Bennet waits in the hall, and I join him. Mrs Bennet, Miss Bennet, and Bingley also come to wait for news.

“Miss Lydia’s ankle is sprained. Her foot is now blue and swollen. I have instructed Miss Lizzy how to bandage it and have left her with some medicine. The ankle must not be moved for a few days. If she wishes for complete healing and a return to her usual self, Miss Lydia must not put any weight on the foot until I allow it.”

“So, we should take her home and confine her to bed for a few days, and it will heal,” Mr Bennet repeats.

“Yes. But if you move her now, you must take a lot of precautions. She might be sleepy too — I gave her something to help her bear the pain.”

“Mr Bennet, Mrs Bennet, there is no need to move Miss Lydia tonight,” Bingley says. “She may stay here, and she will be attended in the best possible way.”

“Oh, my dear Mr Bingley, how kind and generous of you! This is beyond words! It would be perfect if Lydia could stay here until she recovers. And Jane may stay here to take care of her!”

Jane Bennet turns white, then red, and Bingley seems bewildered.

“That would be the best choice indeed,” Mr Jones approves.

“Then we shall take advantage of Mr Bingley’s generosity,” Mr Bennet agrees. “But, as much as I trust Mr Bingley and admire his integrity, I cannot allow Jane to remain here. It might cause gossip and rumours. However, Lizzy may remain. There is no such danger in her case.”

I almost choke, and it causes me to cough, while Mr Bennet and Bingley agree on the arrangement. Mr Jones bids us farewell, with a promise to return the following day. Bingley tries to insist he stay, but he claims his years of balls and parties has long passed.

We all return to the ballroom. Mrs Bennet hurries to spread the news to her friends, followed by Miss Bennet. Bingley goes to speak to his sisters, and I am left alone with Mr Bennet again.

“Well, this is unexpected,” he says. “My eldest daughter recovered from her illness at Netherfield, and in the process, Mr Bingley promised to host a ball at the insistence of my youngest daughter. Now, my youngest daughter sprains her ankle at that very ball. These coincidences require a drink.”

“I could not agree more,” I say, grabbing two full glasses from a tray. Guilt and

remorse overwhelm me. There are many more coincidences of which Mr Bennet is not aware, and I wonder what he will say when he finds out. And, more than anything, I wonder how he will respond when he realises he was wrong in choosing which daughter should remain to take care of Miss Lydia.

The rest of the ball passes rather quickly. A few times, I escape from the ballroom and savour a drink with Mr Bennet in the silence of the library, into which the gentleman has moved and found his sanctuary. I skilfully manage to evade Mr Collins, and Mr Bennet helps me in that endeavour in at least two instances. I am lucky that he dances a few more sets and seemingly has some interesting subjects of conversation with Sir William.

For my part, I do not dance again, but I observe Wickham dancing every set. Bingley also dances another one with Miss Bennet, and the signs indicate to me that he is ready to propose very soon.

I am eager to withdraw to my room, to think of Elizabeth. A twist of fate has brought her under the same roof as me again. And she is angry with me again, just as she was when she came to take care of her elder sister. I clearly remember when I met her after she jumped the fence, with her petticoat six inches deep in mud.

I might be arrogant, but I am confident enough that, if I succeeded in gaining her good opinion back then — when she had a very good reason to despise me — I shall do it again. I have the advantage of having held her in my arms and tasted her skin on my lips.

It is amusing that we planned to meet at Oakham Mount in the morning if the weather allows. I plan to wake up very early and order a fresh pot of coffee in the library, just in case. Perhaps she will look for another book to read. Who knows? Stranger things have happened lately.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

After the bustle of the ball and the torment of the disagreement with Elizabeth, the silence of my room is a blessing. I feel suddenly cold and put more wood on the fire before finally climbing into bed. I have slept poorly for more than two months now, but the last two nights provided me with no rest at all. I am exhausted and have drunk enough brandy to send me into a deep sleep. If only. The sound of the wind rattling the windows and the crackling of the fire are disturbingly loud to my anxious mind. I shall clearly not be able to sleep until I can speak to Elizabeth. Again, I try to guess the reason for her distress. It must be something that Mr Collins or Wickham said. What could both idiots know and have revealed to her to make her so upset?

I struggle with my cloudy mind for a while, until the revelation strikes my spinning head. It must be my supposed engagement to Anne! That is the only reasonable explanation. Lady Catherine must have mentioned it to her protégée, and certainly Wickham had the opportunity to hear about it years ago. This was the kind of information that the scoundrel did not forget but kept in a drawer of his mind, ready to use when needed. How can Wickham have spoken to Elizabeth about my supposed engagement? I need to find out. But that is the most reasonable explanation.

My heart is now wild with joy as I realise it was Elizabeth's jealousy that caused her anger; I know it is selfish, but I cannot help it.

With a slight feeling of relief, I lie in bed and feel a large smile spread across my face. My poor dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! After our encounter filled with tenderness, after my promise to visit her father that very day, I ran away to London, and Bingley told them I had gone to resolve a matter with my aunt and my cousin. And then, those two fools arrived in Meryton and passed on the news that I was engaged to be married soon!

My initial joy turns into distress thinking about what she has been through. If her feelings are half as intense as mine, she must have suffered deeply for what looked like my betrayal. I am jealous and hurt only imagining that the clergyman intends to court her. He is a young man, handsome enough and with a decent situation in life. If he were less ridiculous, I would be tormented with worry to have a rival.

I am sorry that I did not work it out sooner. What a stupid fool I am! If I had guessed earlier, I might have insinuated something during our dance to assuage her worry, to let her know she has nothing to fear. I shall find a way to talk to her privately in the morning, at Oakham Mount, here in the house, or anywhere else, but I shall not prolong this torment.

I wish to sleep, but I cannot, and lying in bed is uncomfortable. I turn over and change the position of the pillow then my own position several times. Eventually, I give up and leave the bed in a more tangled state than if I had slept for a whole night. I stand up and pace from the window to the fireplace and back. There are already glimpses of the dawn on the horizon, but the entire house is in deep silence. I wonder whether Elizabeth is asleep. What luck Lydia Bennet's accident was!

Instead of dizzy and sleepy, my head becomes clearer by the minute. My reasoning, however, is still wanting, and this is why I put on my robe and step out into the hall, walking to the door behind which I know Elizabeth is sleeping. It is the same room as last time. I stop, listening at the door. I must be out of my mind to act so foolishly. I press my ear to the door trying to detect a sound, a breath, a movement. There is no sound from inside, so I step away and then return. I briefly consider placing a note under her door — another silly and scandalous idea that I quickly dismiss, pushing myself to return to my chamber. A few steps later, I hear a sound that freezes my feet and my heart. I hardly manage to turn and see Elizabeth, staring at me. She looks very much like earlier when she stood opposite me in the dance, still dressed in the same gown, but her hair, loose on her shoulders, makes me think of our nighttime encounter in the library. Her eyes widen in wonder.

She says nothing, staring at me, and I move closer, searching for something to say, then whisper, “I beg your forgiveness. Did I wake you? I did not mean to. I could not sleep, and I thought... Forgive me...I shall be in the library, reading.” I am mumbling like an idiot, and I depart in a hurry, allowing her no time to reply. It would not do to be seen by anyone at her door, at that hour, in my nightclothes.

Indeed, I walk to the library via the kitchens. There are already two maids awake, stoking the fire and heating water, so I ask them for a pot of coffee in the library.

“Please knock when you bring it up. The door might be locked.”

“Of course, Mr Darcy. I shall bring it shortly,” one of them answers, and I nod my thanks.

I do not even know why I said that they should knock. Do I really assume Elizabeth will come? It is presumptuous, wishful thinking, and equally dangerous. If she does not come, it will prove she possesses more wisdom than I.

I have been alone in the library for a while, waiting. It was cold when I arrived, and I have stirred the fire back into life. There is still no sign of either Elizabeth or the coffee, and I desperately need both. My agitation increases, and irritating thoughts are spinning in my head again.

If I am right and the reports Elizabeth received were those I presume, it is vexing — alarming even! — that she gave them credit without asking me. Could she consider me so dishonourable as to be engaged to my cousin yet express my admiration for her and promise to go to her father? What intentions does she accuse me of? I am pained for her distress but also for my own. I do not doubt her feelings for me — she would not have kissed me otherwise, even if the kiss was so soft that it did seem unreal. A gossamer touch of something magical... Should I be more pleased with her affection or concerned about her lack of trust in my sense of honour? It was a bitter discussion

that needs immediate attention. I wonder how she might feel if I pretend to be upset that I have heard of her future engagement to her cousin. Based on the rumours and on her own mother's statements, I could have easily assumed that she had trifled with me too.

So entranced am I with my conjecture that I do not hear the door, only my racing heart indicates that Elizabeth has arrived.

She is still wearing her gown from last night, only her hair has been woven into a simple plait and tied with a ribbon, without any pins. She looks tired and hesitant, her hands clasped in front of her, her shoulders lowered.

"Miss Elizabeth! Please come in. You should sit on this armchair, near the fire. I just added a log, but it is still rather cold."

I am torn between the desire to embrace and comfort her and a wish to confront her about her behaviour towards me.

"Thank you...I should not be here, but since neither of us could sleep, I believe it is better to talk about the present situation as soon as possible. I have been torturing myself long enough."

She seems so dejected, and my first impulse is to comfort her when I notice she spoke only of her torment.

"And may I enquire about the nature of your torment? It is certainly related to me, but I am still at a loss as to what I am accused of."

"I accuse you of nothing, sir. In fact, I blame my naivety. It pains me to know that you did not explain to me the true circumstances before we spoke of feelings that should not have been mentioned."

Now I am sure I am right in my assumption.

“I am still confused about your meaning, Miss Bennet, and I beg you to be more specific.”

“Come now, sir, let us not feign ignorance. I am obviously talking about your engagement to Miss de Bourgh, for which you must allow me to congratulate you. Or perhaps I should congratulate you on a forthcoming wedding? I assume that was the reason for your hasty journey to London.”

I gaze at her; she is on the verge of tears. I am willing to put an end to this charade immediately, but she continues.

“I do not doubt the truth of your confession, sir. I know your claimed admiration and affection for me are probably true. And I imagine that you, like all other men of the world, believe you may enter into a marriage of convenience while making other arrangements based on affection. As hurt and offended as I am, I cannot put the entire blame on you. I should have known better than to assume more than a man like you could offer.”

Her statement brings me from the edge of tenderness to rage. What is she saying? Surely she cannot mean something so abominable!

“Pardon?” I almost shout. “Am I correct that you are accusing me of lack of honour and deception of the worst kind? Should I be content that you at least put some endeavour of civility into your outrageous accusation?”

She stands up, staring back at me with bewilderment.

“Perhaps you believe that since you are being insincere, I am too? Perhaps you speak of arranged marriages since you yourself are considering one.” I know I am being

unfair, but I am too angry and tired to mind my words.

“Excuse me?” she replies. “You make no sense, Mr Darcy!”

“And you do, Miss Bennet? I may well congratulate you on your forthcoming marriage to your cousin Mr Collins! I received the report the day I returned, and I could see with my own eyes his partiality towards you.”

“But...this is absurd...” she whispers.

“Is it? Why would the rumours about my supposed engagement to my cousin be less absurd than the rumours about your engagement to your cousin? Why would my aunt’s desire to see my marriage to my cousin settled be more ridiculous than your mother’s desire to see you married to your cousin?”

She keeps staring at me, her countenance flitting between a succession of troubling expressions, from anger to disbelief and bewilderment. She is breathing irregularly, frowning; her lips are parted and her eyes narrowed.

A knock on the door allows me a little time to cool my anger induced by my hurt feelings and offended heart, of which I have lost control.

I ask Elizabeth to remain silent, and I slowly open the door to the maid bearing a tray of coffee and biscuits.

“Thank you, I shall take it,” I say. “That will be all.”

The maid leaves, and I lock the door. Elizabeth watches me silently as I place the tray on the table then return to her.

“Mr Darcy, there must be a huge misunderstanding,” she whispers.

“Of course there is, Miss Bennet. It took me a while before I guessed the reason for your sudden disapproval of me. You were told that I am engaged to my cousin, and you readily gave full credit to the report. Even worse, you assumed that I had intentionally deceived you with the purpose of drawing you into some sort of sordid arrangement. Can you deny that this was your estimation?”

“I do not wish to deny it. Indeed, I believed that...” she admits in a low voice.

“And this is your opinion of me! That I am a rake who seduced and deceived you while I was preparing for my marriage to another woman. This is the estimation in which you hold me! I thank you for explaining it so fully. My faults, according to this calculation, are heavy indeed, and yet I foolishly believed you returned my affection and admiration! I cannot but wonder whether I was not the one deceived into believing more than there was!”

“Mr Darcy, you cannot truly believe that...”

“Why not, Miss Bennet, since you did?”

“Sir, I am sorry you feel like this. Truly sorry. I certainly did not wish to provoke your pain, but I cannot deny that I myself was deeply pained and hurt.”

She retakes her seat on the armchair, but I am still too disquieted, so I remain on my feet. The smell of the coffee is intoxicating, and my head aches, probably because of the brandy I drank during the ball and the accumulated tiredness.

“Perhaps I was wrong to come here at this hour,” she whispers after a brief pause. “We are obviously too tired and too agitated to carry on a reasonable conversation. There has been too much distress and too little sleep.”

Her voice is weak, and I can see how she is fighting tears. Her lower lip is quivering,

and from time to time she is worrying it with her teeth. Her hands are clasped in her lap, and she rubs them, staring at them. My anger slowly dissipates in front of her dejection, so I pull up a chair in front of her and sit.

“Miss Bennet, I am sorry for walking to your room and disturbing you...I apologise. I should have known that my hurt feelings would overcome my good judgment. But I could not believe...I cannot understand still...what I have done, what I have said to induce you to think so poorly of me.”

“You are mistaken, Mr Darcy, if you believe that your words or your actions caused my doubts and suspicions. If you are not engaged to Miss de Bourgh and I allowed myself to be set against you on the basis of falsehoods, it is not your character at fault but mine.”

“I am not engaged, nor bound to anyone either by honour or affection. If I were, I could have never expressed my admiration for you aloud, even if I felt it.”

She nods, then averts her eyes.

I continue, “I do feel offended that your trust in me was so lacking and you were ready to assume the worst. Since the rumours came from two people of whom you cannot have a high opinion, the only conclusion can be that your opinion of me is poor. But if I am reasonable enough to examine the situation fully, I would admit that the error was understandable. I cannot even blame the two sources of your misinformation.”

“What do you mean? You said you are not engaged.” She finally turns her eyes to me with more curiosity than distress.

“Lady Catherine has claimed for years that there was a secret arrangement between her and my mother that Anne and I would marry when we were of age. I am not sure

whether there truly was or under what circumstances. It was often mentioned, but my mother and father never spoke to me seriously about it. I assumed it must have been a discussion between sisters when Anne was born, three years after me.”

“I see...”

“My aunt took it in earnest and carried it with her over the years. When I turned eighteen, I specifically spoke to my father about it, and he told me there was no promise and no bond in regard to my choice of a wife. In truth, even if there had been, I doubt I would accept being captive to others’ arrangements for my future. We even had a discussion at that time — a rather sharp one — with Lady Catherine too.”

“So, why...?”

“Why? Because my aunt does not listen to reason. I have had too many discussions with her to remember, but she will not accept reality, especially since I have never shown any particular interest in a woman before.”

“Oh...she still insists, then...”

“Yes. It is highly possible that Wickham heard it mentioned over the years, and she has very likely told this fabricated story to Collins too. Miss Bennet, in regard to Wickham—”

“No, please no,” she interrupts me, placing her hand on my arm. “I do not wish to waste time talking about Mr Wickham now. I was wondering... Besides the expectations of her mother, Miss de Bourgh...does she not await...anticipate...expect, maybe even hope for this engagement? She must be suffering from a disappointment...”

“Anne has known my opinion since she was fifteen years of age. She has no

particular regard for me either, except as a cousin and as the man who manages her estate. She inherited Rosings from her father and is the mistress of the entire de Bourgh estate. She could easily do whatever she pleases and marry whomever she wants.”

“I see... And may I ask what happened that required your return to town so suddenly?” she asks timidly. She looks at me and attempts a smile — one that I recognise.

“When I returned to Netherfield that day, muddled, bloodied, but blissfully happy, I found two letters, one from Georgiana and one from my aunt, who was — for a reason nobody knew — in London, in my own house. She claimed Anne was ill and my presence was needed. The main reason for my departure was my worry for my sister. She has always been intimidated by Lady Catherine’s presence, and I knew my aunt would claim control over the entire household.”

“And is Miss de Bourgh well now?”

“She is, I hope. She did not wish to stay and recover under our doctor’s supervision, despite my insistence, and chose to return to Rosings along with her mother. The main reason for my aunt’s journey to town was another attempt to discuss my marriage to Anne. She even...” I pause before I say too much.

“What is it? Please tell me. It concerns me.”

“It does not. My aunt suggested that I should marry Anne and then live a life of pleasure outside the marriage. My patience was quickly worn out, and we had a terrible quarrel that will not be easily forgotten. That is why I responded so strongly when I heard that you too thought me capable of duplicity. I beg your forgiveness for raising my voice in such an ungentlemanlike manner.”

“Oh...” she says, blushing and not daring to look me in the eye. “I deserve not an apology but a rebuke. My foolishness made me think the same as Lady Catherine. I am such a simpleton. I do not know what happened to me. I was so happy that day, and then the next one I heard from Mr Collins the whole narrative of your forthcoming nuptials. And I tried to dismiss it, but then Mr Wickham arrived. And he said the same... I doubted you, and I do not know why...”

Some tears finally escape from her eyes, and she wipes them with her free hand.

“I think I was frightened by so much happiness,” she says. “Everything I felt that day and the hopes for what would come seemed too good to be true. I feared I was assuming too much, that I had allowed my dreams to create what was not explicitly said. Since there was no agreement between us, I was scared that...”

Without much consideration, I bring her hand to my lips, and I kiss the back of it, my eyes locked with hers. Then I caress her fingers with my other hand. It might be too soon, too hasty, too unprepared. But waiting only brought us distress, so why wait longer?

“Now that we both agree the reason for the misunderstanding is elucidated, let us remedy it quickly, as we might be interrupted soon. If there was no agreement between us before, I beg you to settle it now. If I have not said enough, please let me do so.”

I pause for an instant before finding the words to offer my soul to her.

“My dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, you must allow me to tell you how ardently I love and admire you. Since almost the beginning of our acquaintance, I was charmed, enchanted, and captured by you, as I never imagined might happen. My feelings for you are beyond what I believed love to be. I am holding your hand, and I hope you will allow me to hold it from now on, for the rest of our lives together and beyond.”

She stares at me, disbelief and adoration both apparent on her countenance. The smile blooming on her lips makes her eyes sparkle, and her free hand raises to touch my face too.

“In case there is still some misunderstanding, I am asking you to marry me, Miss Bennet. My beloved Elizabeth,” I add, and she begins to laugh tearfully.

I kiss her hand again, and — to my shock and happiness — she brings our joined hands to her lips and places a soft kiss on the back of mine, just as I did to hers a moment earlier. My heart melts with bliss, and I hastily move us both to her armchair and sit with her in my arms.

The space is too narrow for both of us, allowing, nay compelling, our bodies to embrace breathlessly. She lifts her head to look at me, and her lips part. I lean closer, inch by inch, in anticipation of what I shall feel when the kiss finally occurs. The waves of pleasure spread throughout my entire being as our lips join, proving how poor my imagination truly is.

I am lost to everything but the reality of having Elizabeth in my arms, her body brushing over mine, my thirst for her less quelled with every kiss and every caress that follows, one after another.

Eventually, I am not sure after how long, she puts a bit of distance between our mouths and, with her face only inches away, says, “In case there is still some misunderstanding, I happily agree to marry you, my beloved...?” She stops with an impish expression and a raised eyebrow, asking me to confirm my given name, which she has heard from Mr Collins.

When I hear it whispered by her lips, I can do nothing else but claim them again.

A while later, we realise that daylight has broken through the curtains, and we finally

separate to hurry back to our respective rooms. Elizabeth leaves the library first, and, before I follow her, I notice the pot of coffee abandoned on the table. Apparently we did not need coffee to clear our minds and speak our hearts, but it will certainly be welcome later on, at breakfast.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

I am engaged. I am engaged to Mr Darcy. To Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy. My Fitzwilliam. My Mr Darcy.

I am still marvelling at all that came to pass. I am torn between crying and laughing. I close my chamber door behind me and stand there, still, as I am afraid that moving will awaken me from the dream. I have moved, though — I have already run up the stairs, from the library to the chamber I am sharing with Lydia.

So it cannot be a dream, but reality cannot possibly be filled with so much happiness. My life seems to have been carried by a storm that has thrown me from one place to another, dropping me into the deepest abyss of sorrow and soaring me to the highest bliss. The pain I have suffered in the last few days has left marks within me. I know now it was all due to my foolishness, and I am grateful that he forgave me so easily. In fact, he did retaliate, turning the tables on me and telling me that I too deceived him when in fact I was set to marry Mr Collins. That was harsh but well deserved, considering how I had hurt and offended him with my doubts. How could I have been so...so...foolish?

I have not been myself lately. Since I first heard of his love and admiration for me. And since I discovered this strange, overwhelming, beautiful, tormenting feeling growing inside me. Like a velvety rose with thorns — beautiful, alluring, inviting you in with its intoxicating scent yet so hurtful at times. I have lost my heart to Mr Darcy and my mind and my wit to everything around me. Oh, how Papa would laugh at me if he knew the entire story! Papa! Poor Papa; he will be stunned when he hears the truth. Fitzwilliam will go and talk to him today. And I must ask for Mr Jones's approval to take Lydia home. I cannot stay here once Papa gives us his blessing. I know he admires Mr Darcy, and I am sure he will readily approve of the engagement,

but I believe he will be disappointed and even a bit upset that I hid everything from him. Jane will be amazed, and Mama — good Lord, I hope Fitzwilliam will not be there when Mama hears the truth.

“Lizzy, where have you been? I want to sleep more. I am so tired. And hungry! I cannot wait to eat something! And then I shall rest some more.”

“Here, I have brought you some biscuits, and if you wish, you may have some tea. Then go back to sleep. It is still very early. How is your ankle? Are you still in much pain?”

“It still hurts a little... And Lizzy, you should—”

“Hush. I shall give you some more medicine so you can rest.”

Half an hour later, after I have nurtured Lydia and she has fallen asleep anew, my restlessness returns. I should sleep too, I know. Fitzwilliam said we both need rest, and he was right, of course. But I cannot possibly lie in bed knowing I have just taken the first step to happiness. I am speaking like a novel! I should laugh at myself, but I cannot help it, and in any case, no book has ever described how I felt or how I feel now.

Or maybe there is one...

“Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame.”

Less than four hours has passed since the ball ended, and I assume the family will sleep for a long time. I need something to clear my mind and to relieve the sudden heat within my body. On an impulse, I hastily put on my coat over my gown — and

before talking myself out of it, pull on my bonnet, my gloves, and my slippers —and creep out of the sleeping manor. Nobody seems to be awake in the house except some servants I can hear downstairs. How good would a cup of coffee be now? Fitzwilliam had a full pot in the library, and neither of us drank any. I am humming already, imagining the aroma — which will probably be gone by now — and the flavour of it when I taste it... I shall, as soon as I return. For now, I am just happy to be out of doors.

It is cold, as cold as a late November early morning should be. There is some mist rising, and the ground is slippery from the frost, more slippery than I expected it to be, and I realise this is further proof that I have completely lost my senses! I am still wearing my evening gown — for a trunk for me and Lydia will only be sent before breakfast if Jane wakes up earlier than the rest of my family — but also my dance slippers since they were the only shoes I had with me.

I walk for a little while, careful not to slip, with the wind brushing my face, thinking of my turmoil from the day before. My mistrust, besides hurting Fitzwilliam, also ruined our first dance together and what could have been a wonderful memory. Headstrong, foolish girl!

I am walking along what I know to be the path to Oakham Mount, although I cannot yet see the hill and have no intention of going there. It is also the shortest route to Longbourn, which I took when I came to take care of Jane. Now, here I am again, taking care of Lydia. Fate seems to know how to push me onto the right path.

I do not walk any farther. Just beyond the edge of Netherfield's formal gardens, I stop and sit on a stump. Everything is still and utterly silent around me except for the sound of the wind, and I close my eyes, breathing deeply for a few seconds, enjoying the calmness and the fresh, cold air. I startle when I hear steps, and my heart bursts with joy when I feel, rather than see, that it is him, the very man who has stirred my whole existence.

“What are you doing here? Why are you not sleeping?” I ask, standing up. He closes his arms around me.

“I could ask you the same, Miss Bennet,” he replies, his voice raspy, his lips brushing over my ear. I quiver, even though I feel so warm in his arms.

“I am too anxious to sleep. But you must be more tired than I am. How did you find me? And where have you come from? You did not follow me, did you?”

“No, I avoided following you, for discretion, but I came down that path, there. I planned to meet you as soon as I was certain we could not be seen from the house.”

I laugh, caressing his face.

“You seem to have learnt the little secrets of Netherfield, Mr Darcy, and how to use them to your benefit.”

“I accept the charge, Miss Bennet,” he says, but I cannot reply as I feel my lips captured by his.

He takes us both to the stump where I was sitting, but there is no room for both of us, so he places me in his lap. I am sitting on his right thigh, while his hands hold me tight, and I put my arms round his neck.

“I shall send for Mr Jones after breakfast,” I whisper between kisses. “I hope we shall return home today.”

“Should I wait and talk to your father after you return to Longbourn?”

“Let us wait for Mr Jones’s conclusion. But I think you should speak to Papa today, regardless. He will be stunned...you must be prepared that he might make it hard for

you.”

“I am prepared for anything, my love,” he whispers back. His lips abandon mine at times, and I feel them travelling over my face, then lower, to my jaw, my throat, wherever he can find a spot not covered, while his hands caress my body, burning my skin through the thick fabric of my coat. How can a touch through my coat be so powerful, so delightful?

I shiver when I feel a trace of heat on my neck, then lower, and I realise the first buttons of my coat have been opened — which I shamelessly love. His kisses stop at the edge of my dress, and there, I feel his tongue tasting my skin. I grasp him with my arms, as I am certain I shall faint.

“My love, we should return now, before you catch your death. Your coat is not warm enough, and do not think I have not observed your slippers,” he suddenly says in a teasing but breathless voice, putting some distance between us. I am still in his arms, on his lap, but I feel cold and shamelessly disappointed.

“Of course,” I whisper.

He stands — we both do — and he gently cups my face with his strong palms. Only then do I notice he is not wearing any gloves.

“Let me repair this for you since I caused the damage,” he whispers as he arranges my bonnet and buttons my coat. “I shall wait here until you return to the house. I shall walk towards the stables and enter from there, to avoid any indiscretion.”

I only smile and nod.

“Elizabeth? Have you considered a wedding date? Your father might ask me.”

“Oh...I have not... Everything is so new and I... Have you?”

He laughs at me, and his gaze darkens.

“I have! Many, many times. For me, as soon as possible would not be too soon. I could purchase a licence, and we could be married in a se’nnight,” he teases me.

I look at him, and my cheeks are burning.

“As soon as possible would be perfect, Mr Darcy,” I say, then turn my back to him and walk away so he cannot read on my burning face my mortifying thoughts when I imagine our wedding night being in only a few days.

I return to Netherfield, and before I do anything else, I ask a maid to send up some food for Lydia since she will not be able to attend breakfast. I also ask for coffee, smiling at the very word.

When I enter the room, Lydia is still asleep, and I take off my coat and bonnet, absently placing them on a chair. As I undress, I notice that my shoes have left dirty marks on the carpet, and I cringe at what Miss Bingley might say should she see them. I take my slippers off as well, placing by the fire to dry and wiggling my stockinged toes to warm them a bit, looking at my beautiful gown with its hem dirty from the mud — though it is not quite six inches this time. I grin to myself as I sit down in an armchair and tuck my cold feet under my petticoats. I squirm a bit and hug myself, wearing, I am certain, a dreamy and silly smile on my reddened lips.

I do not have much time for sweet reflections, though, as a servant knocks lightly and enters with a tray, and the smell of freshly cooked food, more than the noise, awakens Lydia.

“Miss Bennet, Mr Bingley told me to inform you that breakfast will be served

downstairs in half an hour,” the maid says to me.

“Oh...so soon? Excellent.”

“Yes, miss. And he told me to tell you that he has sent for Mr Jones.”

“Even better. I shall thank him in person.”

The maid leaves, and Lydia begins to eat, pouting from time to time over her bad luck at the ball.

“At least you had the chance to dance with Wickham, but I could not! It is not fair! And I had every set engaged! It is not fair at all! I must ask Mr Bingley for another ball. Perhaps he will marry Jane, and then I shall ask him to have balls every month!”

My sister keeps chattering, but I hardly answer her as I am busy preparing myself.

My appearance is rather poor; I have no choice but to wear the gown I wore to the ball, which is now dirty, to breakfast. But I can do nothing else but smile about it.

It will have to do. The dress’s wrinkles are impossible to smooth, no matter how many times I run my hands over them. The bodice of my gown is tolerable, I suppose, even to the most observant eye, and I have no doubt I shall be under scrutiny from Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst. They surely need new ammunition against me. Good Lord, I cannot wait to see their faces when Mr Darcy announces our engagement. Yes, I know I am being mischievous, but I grin to myself once again.

There is no time to do anything about my hair; the wind has loosened it from its pins. I can certainly understand now the utility of such an elaborate headdress as Miss Bingley usually displays — it allows one to overlook the hair underneath and covers every gauche coiffure!

Unfortunately, I cannot procure one even if I want it, and there is no time for a maid to come either, so I must content myself with a simpler arrangement, which suits me well enough. My only interest is to know he enjoys my appearance, and I trust he will.

“You look lovely, Lizzy! I cannot believe you went for a walk today. You have ruined your gown, and Mama will be too upset to purchase you another one.”

“Perhaps. But I am quite certain Mama will forgive me.”

“I doubt it! Lizzy, but what are those red patches on your neck?”

My face is burning, and I hurry to the mirror.

“Oh, it is nothing. It might be from the wind, or from my coat. I shall put my shawl on.”

There are indeed some pink blotches on the upper sides of my breasts, as the mirror shows me, matching those on my cheeks, although those are becoming redder by the second!

There is more damage than I realised, and I need some time to cover myself with my parsley patterned gold shawl, which was appropriate for the ball but not for breakfast.

But it will have to do for now, I repeat to myself as I leave the room and walk downstairs with my heart racing.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

“Miss Bennet, how is your sister?” Mr Bingley asks me, reminding me of a similar greeting just two weeks before.

“She seems well. I thank you for calling Mr Jones. I hope his report will be favourable and he will change his mind about not moving Lydia. We should return home today.”

“It must be uncomfortable still wearing your gown from the ball,” Miss Bingley says.

“It is, but I trust nobody will hold it against me, since it is not my choice,” I answer. Fitzwilliam looks at me, and I wonder whether he will reply. He does not, and I am relieved.

However, his eyes seem fixed on my shawl, and his little mischievous smirk reveals to me that he has guessed what is under it. The recollection of his lips on that particular place is still so clear that I feel exceedingly heated.

“Of course not, Miss Bennet,” Mr Bingley says, but I barely hear him. “If you wish, I can send a servant to fetch a trunk from Longbourn for you and Miss Lydia.”

“You are very kind, sir, but I would rather wait for Mr Jones. I am also certain my sister Jane has already thought to prepare one, waiting only for a word from us. Perhaps we shall be lucky enough not to need it after all.”

“I cannot imagine how Miss Lydia sprained her ankle. I have never witnessed or heard of such an accident at a ball before. But of course, I have rarely attended country balls,” Miss Bingley says.

“I rarely attend balls,” Fitzwilliam interjects, “but I have heard of such accidents, even at Almack’s.”

His reply silences Miss Bingley, and I try to conceal my smile. I almost pity her for the shock she will suffer soon, so I choose to disregard her challenge.

Mr Jones arrives after breakfast, and his examination is brief.

“I am pleased with the improvement — it looks just as I expected. I have no objection to Miss Lydia returning home, but she needs to be carried. I forbid her to put any weight on the ankle for at least two more days.”

“This is wonderful!” I exclaim. “We shall follow your instructions faithfully.”

“Very well. I shall come tomorrow to see her at Longbourn. Until then, give her the herbal tea, massage her ankle with the salve, and keep it bound and bandaged. That should be all that is needed. She is young and, in a fortnight, it will be completely healed.”

With such a positive conclusion, I ask Mr Bingley to help me transport Lydia. The joy of seeing me leave must be so great for Miss Bingley that she insists on her brother providing us with servants to place Lydia in the carriage and lift her down at Longbourn. I thank her kindly; it is diverting to feign ignorance.

An hour later, we are at Longbourn; I am glad to see my sister comfortably placed in her bed with the family around her, making a fuss. But even more, I am overjoyed and nervous for selfish reasons.

I know Fitzwilliam will come soon. He mentioned no particular hour, and I had no chance to talk to him again before I left Netherfield, but he will certainly come at the proper time for calling. This time, I have no doubt.

I take my time to clean and refresh myself, and I put on my favourite day gown, carefully arranging a shawl over my shoulders and chest. The bruises from this morning are still there — less visible but still noticeable.

Mr Collins is not at home, and I wisely choose not to enquire after him.

“Lizzy, you must be more attentive to Mr Collins!” Mama says when I think I have escaped the danger. “A few days ago, he was talking about you all the time and showed you particular attention every day. But you were nothing but indifferent, even rude to him, and since yesterday, I have hardly heard him mention you! I am worried that you may lose your only chance to marry reasonably well.”

A day prior, I would have brushed Mama’s concerns impatiently and probably angrily away. Now, I can afford to smile and embrace her, saying, “Mama, I promise that if by tonight you still wish me to marry Mr Collins, I shall make every effort to regain his interest.”

I cannot remember the last time Mama threw me such a glance of complete bewilderment. We rarely embrace in such a manner, and I am rarely obedient or accommodating to her, so her confusion is understandable. Even Jane gives me a doubtful look and keeps glancing at me every so often with puzzlement, to which I only reply with a smile.

As we are all tired after the ball, we all go to rest. Installed comfortably in our room, Jane is telling me about Mr Bingley’s attentions. Her enthusiasm adds to my own happiness, and I wish to be able to share it with her, but I choose to wait a little longer, until Papa has given his consent.

An hour later, we are startled by a sudden knock on the door, and Kitty enters.

“Jane, Mama wants you to come down immediately. Mr Bingley is here! She says

you should make yourself pretty and come down at once. Mr Darcy has gone to speak to Papa in his book room, but Mr Bingley is waiting for you. Make haste!”

My heart races, and I glance at my image in the mirror, then help Jane with her hair. I know Mama is expecting a marriage proposal today. She might have two, but of one I am certain, just as I am certain of the shock it will cause.

As we enter, Mr Bingley stands to greet us; he and Mama have been talking about the ball, and we continue the conversation — or rather Mama talks and Mr Bingley nods from time to time, gazing at Jane. I pay little attention to anything, looking repeatedly at the door and willing it to open.

“We were indeed surprised to see Mr Collins at Netherfield,” Mr Bingley says, drawing my attention.

“Mr Collins?” I repeat.

“Yes. He came to speak to Darcy just after you left.”

“What could Mr Collins possibly have to discuss with Mr Darcy?” Mama asks. “I wondered where he had gone so early, but he only said he had some business. Do you happen to know where he is now?”

“I do not know. He mentioned something about going into Meryton, I believe. I am not aware of the subject of their discussion either.”

“Well, it does not matter. We are happy to have you here, Mr Bingley,” Mama says.

“I am very happy to be here,” he replies, and Jane blushes.

A little while later, Fitzwilliam returns. He greets me and Jane, then says, “Miss

Elizabeth, your father is waiting for you in the library.”

I stand, my knees barely supporting me, while Mama and the others pay me no attention. I have entered Papa’s sanctuary so many times that it is my favourite room in the house. Even when Papa demands solitude, I am still allowed in. Now, I need a moment to compose myself at the door before I finally enter.

I find my father sitting in his chair, his spectacles on the desk, staring at the fire, holding a glass of brandy; his eyes do not turn to me when I enter.

“To say that I am stunned would be an understatement,” he says. “I might wonder whether you or Mr Darcy — or both — are not by any chance playing tricks on me.”

“Papa...” I take a chair and sit in front of him, but he holds a hand up, stopping me.

“So, let me summarise for you, Lizzy, in case I am just an old, witless fool. My two eldest — and wisest — daughters went to an assembly a while ago in the company of their mother and sisters. One of them danced with and charmed a gentleman. The other was rejected and offended by another gentleman. Over the next few days, I only heard of how amiable and handsome and rich and generally flawless the first gentleman was and how unpleasant and disagreeable and arrogant the second one was, despite him being also richer and even more handsome. Then one of my daughters fell ill at Netherfield, and the other one went to nurture her. Several days later, both gentlemen — the pleasant one and the arrogant one — came to visit me. Strangely enough, as much as I enjoyed the first gentleman’s company, I liked the second one even better.”

He pauses, sips from his glass, and finally looks at me.

“Now, here comes my confusion. I was well aware of the first gentleman’s partiality to one of my daughters and even expected a marriage proposal. Well, in fact, your

mother did more than I. But, more to the point, a few minutes ago, I was anticipating a pleasant time with the second gentleman, who seems to prefer my company to that of the ladies, unlike his friend. Imagine my shock when the visit proved to be not a friendly call but a private one! The second gentleman came to ask my permission to marry my second daughter, the one he had offended during their first meeting and for whom he claimed to now possess a deep admiration and affection. Of which I was completely ignorant. Can you see my conundrum, Lizzy, and my suspicions of being mocked?"

"Papa, if you will allow me, I shall explain it to you."

"Please do so! Perhaps my summary was incorrect, after all!"

"Your summary was correct, but there are many details missing. It is not quite so complicated, really."

"Is it not? Do enlighten me — how come? A gentleman worth ten thousand a year wishes to marry my daughter who has no dowry, no connections, nothing to offer. A man who disregarded you entirely not six weeks ago is now willing to marry you? Somebody must be out of their senses in this story!"

"Nobody is, Papa," I reply; his distress, almost panic, pains me, but I cannot help smiling. "Can you please tell me what you told Mr Darcy?"

"What could I tell him, Lizzy, except that I am shocked and honoured by his request? Indeed, he is such a man to whom I would not dare refuse anything he might ask of me. But I am exceedingly distressed, Lizzy. I fear this is a huge mistake. Is there...did something happen between you that forced him to propose?"

"Papa! How can you ask that? Of course not!"

“Then I cannot explain it in any other way than to believe his statement about his affection for you. Either he is deeply in love with you, or he is completely out of his mind.”

“I assure you it is not the latter, Papa,” I reply tenderly.

“It might be or not. But Lizzy, my deepest concern is for you. He is rich, to be sure. You will have a situation beyond everything I hoped for. And he is clever and educated. Handsome too. But will you be able to love him? Did you accept him for his fortune? Or perhaps you are afraid your mother will force you to marry Mr Collins?”

My father’s worry is genuine, but his mistrust hurts me, and I feel tears burning my eyes.

“Papa, I am glad your opinion of Mr Darcy is so high, but it pains me to know you think so little of me as to question my reasons for marrying him. I fell in love with Mr Darcy long before I imagined he would propose to me, and before Mr Collins even came to Longbourn. And not for a second did I take into consideration his fortune, his estate, his connections, or his situation. His intellect and education, yes. And I might not have a dowry or connections, but I am proud to have that something that Mr Darcy finds worthy of love and admiration.”

My father wipes his own tearful eyes, then kisses my hands.

“Forgive me, my child. I have always trusted you, and I value you more than anyone else I know. But I was shocked by the news. And precisely because I know your value. I know how painful it would be for you to enter into a marriage without affection.”

“I understand that, Papa. And please know that you have nothing to worry about in

that regard!”

With that, I embrace him; we are both tearful, and his kiss on my forehead is the blessing I need.

We return to the others together; Fitzwilliam looks concerned when he sees the tears in my eyes, and I smile at him, pleased to see his face relax. After some pleasantries exchanged with my father, the gentlemen finally take their leave, and as soon as they depart, Mama loudly expresses her disappointment.

“I was so sure Mr Bingley would propose today, but he did not! He certainly needs more encouragement! And more privacy! Next time he comes, you will take him for a stroll in the garden, Jane, and you should—”

“Mama!” interrupts my sweet sister, shock written on her face.

“No ‘Mama’, girl! You know he will return to London soon. He cannot possibly leave before you are engaged! I shall take care of that.”

“Mama!”

“And Mr Collins, where is he? I must have a serious discussion with him tonight!”

“My dear Mrs Bennet, you should calm yourself. Your nerves will not appreciate this agitation,” Papa says conciliatorily. “I understand you are determined to see Mr Bingley engaged to Jane.”

“Of course!”

“What about Mr Collins, then? What do you wish to discuss with him?”

“You know that too well, Mr Bennet, but you like to torture my poor nerves! Very well, I shall explain again. Mr Collins told me very clearly that he intended to propose to Lizzy, and I shall insist on him doing so — and on Lizzy accepting him!”

My father takes a sip from his glass, then places it on the nearest table.

“I am very sorry to hear that, Mrs Bennet. If I knew you would insist so much on Lizzy marrying Mr Collins, I would have refused Mr Darcy when he asked for my consent and her hand in marriage earlier.”

Mama stares at him, mouth agape, perfectly still. Then she stares at me, then back at him.

“You understand I am very angry with you, Mr Bennet, for mocking me. I do not want to be the subject of your jokes...or yours, Miss Lizzy!”

“Indeed, I believed the same, my dear. I even said so to Lizzy — you may ask her. I thought Mr Darcy was mocking me, but he insisted on telling me about his affection and his admiration for Lizzy and his wish to marry soon.”

“I do not understand,” Mama says. “What do you mean?”

“What do you mean, what do I mean? I mean that Mr Darcy asked for Lizzy’s hand in marriage, and I gave him my consent. But if you disapprove, I shall send him a note and say I have changed my mind.”

Mama stands up, her mouth covered with her fist, looking at him, searching for the smallest clue that he is indeed in jest. Jane, Kitty, and Mary also look stunned and speechless.

“Is this a joke? Surely this is a joke,” Mama repeats. “It cannot be true! Lizzy, are

you doing this to upset me?"

"Mama, please! I assure you it is true, indeed! Mr Darcy proposed to me this morning, and I accepted him. Then he came to ask for Papa's consent. We are engaged, and we shall be married soon."

"No, no, no! This cannot be. Can it? Mr Darcy? Mr Darcy? Lizzy, how is this possible? Why would Mr Darcy marry you? Will he? If he does, who cares what the reason is? But is it true, really true? Good gracious! Lord bless me! And he was here, and I said nothing to him? This is not possible!"

"Dear Mama, yes, Mr Darcy is in love with me, and I am in love with him. He proposed, and we shall marry soon. It is true and beyond any doubt."

The more reassurance I give Mama, the more her agitation increases. Hill comes in with the smelling salts, as we are afraid she might faint — which she does not.

She keeps crying, laughing, asking, doubting, in a tumult so loudly expressed that I am grateful Fitzwilliam is not here to witness it.

"May I conclude, my dear, that you are not very disappointed that Lizzy will not marry Mr Collins?" Papa enquires.

"Mr Collins? Who cares about him? Oh, how sly you are, Lizzy! You are in love with Mr Darcy! That is why you refused Mr Collins! How clever of you! My dear girl, you are the cleverest girl of all! Dear me. Mr Darcy, of all men! As rich as an earl, and so tall and handsome!"

She pauses for a moment to catch her breath, then bursts out again, "Dear Lord! But why did Mr Collins go to speak to Mr Darcy? Did he know something? What if he was jealous? What if he called Mr Darcy out and they will duel? What if he hurts Mr

Darcy?”

“Mama!” I laugh, amused at how her mind jumps and imagines every impossible outcome. “I assure you we have no reason to worry. I cannot imagine Mr Collins’s reason to call on Mr Darcy, but I would wager he does not suspect my engagement, and I would double this wager on the fact that he has no intention at all of fighting Mr Darcy.”

I need more time and energy to calm her before dinner, but my success is not complete until Mr Collins arrives home, informing us he has some news and requesting a formal discussion.

“My dear Mr and Mrs Bennet, my dear cousins. After long deliberation, I am pained to inform you that, based on Lady Catherine’s specific requests, I have decided upon the most suitable partner for me and the one who will entirely meet her ladyship’s expectations. I even asked Mr Darcy’s opinion this morning, and he supported my decision. Therefore, I am happy to inform you that as of an hour ago, I am engaged to be married to Miss Charlotte Lucas!”

His announcement takes us by surprise for many reasons, but it is a day of surprises, after all. I am about to congratulate him when Mama says bluntly, “You are engaged to Charlotte Lucas? We should congratulate you indeed, as that is an excellent choice. Lizzy would have refused you in any case. By the by, Lizzy will marry Mr Darcy! He proposed today! Lady Catherine will have double the reasons to be happy!”

Page 23

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

Chapter 23

The wave of shock caused by the announcement of my engagement continues to shake Longbourn. Mr Collins cannot recover, and he declines to join us for dinner; the upset has not affected his hunger or thirst, though, so he still requires that food and drink be taken to his chamber.

Hill and the servants congratulate me, while Mama asks Mary to write urgent notes to be sent to the Gardiners in London and to the Phillipses in Meryton.

My sisters are still stunned — as expected when we broke the news to Lydia; the scenario is difficult to believe even for me. My tumult of emotions is so strong that I know more than feel my felicity.

“But Lizzy, how can you marry Mr Darcy after he treated poor Wickham so cruelly?” Lydia enquires. I have no time to reply before Mama does so.

“What are you saying, child? Stop this nonsense! Never say that again! Why do we care about Mr Wickham? I am sure Mr Darcy did nothing wrong, and it is not for us to judge his actions. Mind your words, or I shall send you back to the schoolroom every time Mr Darcy is here! The same goes for you too, Kitty!”

“But Mama! I did not say a word!”

“No, ‘Mama’, my girl! A single word to upset Mr Darcy, and you are gone! Do you not realise what this marriage means for our family when your father dies? A day ago, I believed the best choice for your sister would be to marry Mr Collins, and now

she is engaged to Mr Darcy! You should feed his horse if needed!”

My mother’s scolding vexes Lydia, and I feel offended on my and Fitzwilliam’s behalf. But I know Mama means no harm; she just does not understand me. Instead, I choose to overlook it. There is nothing to be done with her, regardless. I only hope she will adjust her manners the next time she sees Fitzwilliam, but I know the chances are unlikely.

“Oh, I cannot wait to laugh at Lady Lucas. She must have been so proud that Mr Collins proposed to her daughter instead of mine. What a sly person that Charlotte is. Lizzy’s friend, indeed! All this time she has been trying to seduce Mr Collins — that is why they kept inviting him there. What a shock it will be for her to hear whom Lizzy is marrying! I shall visit her tomorrow — I cannot wait to see her face!”

“Mama, please listen to me,” I say in an attempt to temper her. “Mr Darcy is a very private man. He does not like to have his business discussed in public.”

“But this is not business, Lizzy, this is the news of your engagement. I am sure it will be in the newspapers. Gracious me! You must marry by special licence, Lizzy! I should have known something was happening when he danced the first set with you. And yet I suspected nothing. Foolish me!”

Mama continues in the same way till late into the evening, and I give up any attempt to reason with her. Papa looks at me intently, more often than usual. I know he still has some doubts, which, I trust, will disappear soon.

Jane is the most silent of all; I can see her distraction, and when she congratulated me and said she was happy for me, I saw little happiness on her face.

“Dear Jane, please tell me what you really think,” I ask her later that night when we are finally ready for bed. “I imagine you were surprised, but I can see you are

concerned. Do you disapprove of my engagement?"

"Disapprove? Oh no, Lizzy! I never disapprove of anything that makes you happy — and you do look happy, Lizzy. But I admit I was astonished. I never suspected such partiality on either part. May I ask when it happened?"

"I am not sure when it began exactly. When we stayed at Netherfield, Mr Darcy and I had the chance to better know each other. And to clear up some of our past misunderstandings."

"You kept the secret very well, Lizzy."

"Forgive me, dearest Jane. I was not certain of anything until yesterday. As you may remember, Mr Collins said Mr Darcy was engaged to his cousin, and I did not know what to believe. I did not dare tell you something when I did not dare trust a happy conclusion myself."

"I understand that, Lizzy."

"Is that why you looked so troubled?"

"No...I am truly happy for you, Lizzy. But..."

"Yes?"

"Mr Darcy never betrayed his admiration for you, and yet he proposed... He seems to be a decided man who knows to act when he acknowledges his desires."

"He is, indeed. May I assume you expected the same from Mr Bingley?"

"I know I have no right to expect anything, Lizzy. And yet...at the ball he let me

believe...I thought...I know he will go to London soon..."

"I do not know Mr Bingley's intentions, but his admiration for you is beyond doubt. He might only need some privacy to speak to you. I was fortunate to find a moment alone with Mr Darcy yesterday morning, and we had the chance to speak."

"Perhaps... Forgive me for being so selfish. I am indeed happy for you, dearest Lizzy."

Her distress pains me, and I embrace her for comfort; I wish I could encourage her, and I hope Mr Bingley will follow his heart, but I cannot offer any promises. My joy is so complete, though, that nothing can ruin it. Minutes later, Jane is asleep, and I am lying in bed, so happy that I know I shall not sleep. But it does not signify; I can very well spend the night just thinking of my betrothed. My Fitzwilliam. My Mr Darcy.

I must have been exhausted, because not only do I not know when I fell asleep, I also oversleep. I wake up only when Jane calls my name repeatedly, insisting that breakfast is ready and Mama is waiting for us.

"Lizzy, my love, sit, sit down. I have not slept a moment the entire night. I cannot believe you are engaged to Mr Darcy! Will he call today? If not, your father must send him a note, inviting him to dine here tonight. You must tell me what his favourite dishes are, so I can ask Cook to make them."

"I am sure he will call, Mama," I answer, avoiding the question of his favourite dishes. I am ashamed to admit that I have not paid enough attention to my betrothed to know his tastes.

"There is no need for me to send any note, my dear. Mr Darcy has sent one already

and says he and Mr Bingley will call later,” Papa interjects, causing Mama to cry out with joy.

“Oh, Mr Bennet, how you do like to tease! I shall insist they stay for dinner today. Surely, he cannot refuse the mother of his betrothed. I must go and speak to Cook. We need to have at least some beef. And fish!”

“Mama, you trouble yourself too much.” I try to put her at ease — and fail.

We are ready to eat when Mr Collins appears; he is carrying his luggage.

“Mr Bennet, Mrs Bennet, dear cousins. I am sorry to inform you that I must return to Kent today. I cannot stay longer. Unfortunately, I cannot join you for breakfast either. I am in quite a hurry.”

“We are sad to hear of your sudden departure, Mr Collins,” Papa answers in earnest. “But we shall try to bear the disappointment as best we can. We wish you a safe journey, and please convey our best regards to Lady Catherine.”

He bows solemnly, then leaves without another word.

“Well, thank God he has gone!” Mama huffs. “How rude of him not to congratulate Lizzy on her engagement! Such a horrible man. I could not stand him! I think he has gone to have breakfast at Lucas Lodge. I could not care less! I cannot wait for Lizzy to visit Lady Catherine with Mr Darcy and for Mr Collins to die of envy!”

“I doubt that will happen soon, Mama,” I reply. I am quite certain that Mr Collins will suffer harsh treatment from Lady Catherine and that their cordial relationship will be broken when she hears of my engagement to her nephew.

“My dear Mrs Bennet,” Papa says. “I am tempted to remind you that only yesterday

you were eager to force Lizzy to marry that horrible man, as you call him. But I shall refrain from my impulse. Let us eat, so I can return to my library.”

Breakfast is served, and Mama continues to question me about Mr Darcy with increasing enthusiasm, which amuses and worries me at the same time.

Around noon, Aunt and Uncle Phillips call, seemingly to confirm the incredible news conveyed in Mama’s note. They stay about an hour, mentioning that the whole of Meryton is aware of Mr Collins’s engagement to Charlotte Lucas.

“Mr Collins and Charlotte are nothing compared to Lizzy and Mr Darcy!” Mama says. “Mr Collins may take Longbourn after Mr Bennet dies. I am sure Mr Darcy will provide us all with a good home!”

“But are you sure, Sister? Are you absolutely sure that Mr Darcy will marry Lizzy?”

“I am! I hope so. Lizzy?” Mama asks me for the tenth time.

More than one repetition of assurance is needed, and my success is still limited. I feel offended by their disbelief, but happiness turns my discomfort into amusement.

The visitors leave, and we all go to rest. Despite sleeping for so long last night, I still feel tired after all the agitation, and a little bit of peace and quiet is welcome. With my eyes closed, I imagine myself alone with him, in London or at Pemberley.

The red marks on my chest are not visible any longer, but the trace of his lips on my skin and his caresses exploring my body will be forever clear in my mind. First kisses, first caresses. So improper, so enchanting, so alluring, so maddening. What will the next ones be like? When? He and I — alone — is a dream ready to turn into reality, but there are still so many small details about which I do not dare think. Where shall we sleep? Shall we share an apartment? The image of me sleeping in his

arms stirs all my senses, and a wave of heat takes me by surprise, leaving me hot and breathless. I do not indulge myself with more such reflections.

Later, we gather in the drawing room, awaiting our callers while occupying ourselves calmly. Papa is still in the library and has asked only to be informed when our guests arrive, and Lydia is upstairs, still forbidden to put her foot to the floor. Mama's anxiety is growing, and she keeps glancing towards the window.

"Mama, they are coming! Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley!" Kitty finally exclaims, and Mama panics, paces the room a few times, then finally resumes her place.

My heart smiles before my lips do as Fitzwilliam enters the room, followed by Mr Bingley.

They greet us, beginning by paying their respects to Mama, but she jumps to her feet, hurrying to my betrothed.

"Mr Darcy, I cannot describe how honoured we all are by your visit! We have been waiting for you. I have barely slept at all since I heard the news about your engagement to Lizzy. I am speechless! Please come in, come and sit. I shall fetch Mr Bennet. Mr Bingley, you are welcome too, of course."

"Mrs Bennet, I thank you for your welcome. I am honoured to be here," Fitzwilliam replies with composure, and I notice his smile, which brings dimples to his cheeks. "I am also honoured that Miss Elizabeth accepted my proposal and glad to have your blessing."

"My blessing? Of course, of course you have it! I am overjoyed too!"

For several minutes, nobody can speak over Mama. Papa appears from the library and calms her down slightly, but her agitation is still visible.

The invitation to remain at Longbourn for dinner is made enthusiastically and is readily and happily accepted by the two gentlemen. Unlike previous times, Fitzwilliam is more talkative than his friend and even smiles more.

“Mr Darcy, may I say that you look exceedingly handsome when you smile?” Mama says as if guessing my thoughts. “I mean, you have always been tall and handsome, but smiling suits you very well!”

He looks at me, surprised and somehow uncomfortable, then says, “Thank you, madam. I cannot take credit for being tall, but I shall try to smile more.”

“Well, well, I did not expect this! Teasing suits you too, Mr Darcy,” Papa says. “I suspect Lizzy taught you a bit of that.”

“She did,” Fitzwilliam says with another glance at me.

“Mr Darcy, will you purchase a licence for the wedding?” Mama asks.

“Mama, please!” I try to interject. “Let us not bother Mr Darcy.”

“Such a question does not bother me, I assure you,” he answers. “Yes, I plan to do that. Bingley and I shall go to London the day after tomorrow, and I shall complete all my business there. Obtaining a common licence is part of that.”

“Oh...will you stay long in London?” Jane asks.

“No,” Mr Bingley responds. “A few days, I believe. Our plans are not fixed yet.”

“But we intend to return as soon as possible,” Fitzwilliam adds.

There is a little bit more conversation, then my beloved betrothed says, “Mrs Bennet, Mr Bennet, would you mind if I ask Miss Elizabeth and Miss Bennet to join me for a stroll in the garden? I feel a little exercise would be beneficial before dinner.”

“We do not mind at all, Mr Darcy,” Mama responds. “You may do whatever you please, sir. We would never mind.”

My cheeks heat with embarrassment, while Papa rolls his eyes and Fitzwilliam smiles.

“I thank you for your generosity, madam,” he replies, then looks to me for acceptance.

“A little exercise would be perfect! I was about to suggest it too,” Mr Bingley interjects.

“Jane and I shall be ready shortly,” I assure them, hoping I understand their little plot correctly.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

A few minutes later, all four of us are walking briskly towards the back of the house, in the direction of the little spot of wilderness on the side of our lawn, which is not only pretty but also slightly protected from the view from the windows. I take my betrothed's arm, without waiting for him to offer it, with a familiarity and nonchalance that I cannot account for but feels natural, while Jane and Mr Bingley walk behind us. I am not wearing my gloves — for a good reason. Fitzwilliam is not wearing his either.

“Miss Bennet, do you mind if I speak to your sister for a few moments?” Fitzwilliam asks Jane.

“No, of course not,” she responds. We take a few steps aside, letting Jane and Mr Bingley pass us, and Fitzwilliam puts his hand over mine resting on his arm. Our fingers entwine, and he stops, then turns a bit so we can look into each other's eyes without him letting go of my hand.

“How are you, my love?” he enquires in a voice loaded with emotion and love.

“I am happy,” I reply, gazing at him. That is the pure truth. I cannot speak anything other than the truth while looking into his eyes, seeing all his heart in them. He slowly brings my hand to his lips and places a soft kiss in my palm and then one on the inside of my wrist. I expect it, yet still I quiver.

“And you, Fitzwilliam? How are you bearing the chaos in my house and Mama's adoration?”

“Reasonably well,” he admits, smiling at me and showing again a glimpse of those

dimples. I am certain they are part of Mama's newly acquired affection for my betrothed, besides his ten thousand a year and large estate. "It is nothing compared to the chaos at Netherfield."

"Oh, tell me about it. How was it yesterday after our departure?"

"Beyond chaos, beginning with your cousin's visit."

"Yes, I have been told about that. What did he want?"

"My approval to propose to Miss Lucas instead of you. Apparently, my aunt recommended he marry one of his cousin's daughters, and he had chosen you, but he found you not obedient and respectful and appreciative enough to be a clergyman's wife, especially one blessed with the patronage of my noble aunt. His words exactly. Miss Lucas seems to have displayed all those qualities in a convincing manner."

"I cannot believe Charlotte would bind herself to such a foolish, ridiculous man only to secure a husband! She has been my friend all my life, and I have always admired her wisdom and judgment."

"My love, perhaps her wisdom and judgment were her advisers in making this decision. While I agree that Mr Collins is somewhat ridiculous, his situation in life is not bad, and I believe he will be a better husband than many others."

"You are correct, of course. But I would have never agreed to marry him. Considering my family's situation, that might be deemed a lack of wisdom and judgment, and it would have been selfish of me, but nothing and nobody would have induced me to accept him."

"I believe that," he says with a smile in his voice. "I am quite certain that you would have refused me too, had I proposed at the wrong time."

“I might have, if my feelings for you were not appropriate to ensure our mutual happiness in marriage. Fortunately, you proposed at the perfect time,” I tease him.

“I aim to always do things at the perfect time, if possible,” he teases me back.

“Undoubtedly. That is why you suggested this... timely stroll? For a little exercise?”

He lets out a small laugh.

“Poor Bingley, he was stunned when I gave him the news yesterday. I think he stopped breathing, and he stared at me without blinking for a long moment. Then he burst out, asking how it was possible that I advised him to be cautious and examine his feelings carefully before he proposed to Miss Bennet, only to disregard my own counsel and propose to you all of a sudden.”

“He does have a point.”

“He might have one, based on what he knew. But I had long ago examined my feelings thoroughly, and I was certain of their nature when I proposed to you. I was cautious, too, until I was sure. I only give him advice that I follow myself.”

“So...is he proposing now?”

“I hope so. I cannot bear to hear him complaining about his misfortune for another day. If he does, and supposing he is successful, would you mind having a double wedding?”

I stop, looking at him; he is smiling so charmingly that my heart melts. Unwisely and recklessly, I slide my hands up to embrace him, and I lift my face to his, rising up onto my toes. He hesitates for a very brief moment before his lips touch mine fleetingly.

“Speaking of wisdom, your mother gave me permission to do whatever I wanted, but I would rather not overstep my boundaries. I do not wish to upset your father. He was reluctant enough to give me his blessing.”

“I trust his reluctance is gone now. Have you informed your family?” I ask when we resume walking.

“I have only written to Georgiana. I could not wait to share the happy news with her. I shall inform the others in person. I also wrote to Lady Catherine, but I suspect Mr Collins will tell her regardless.”

“Will she be furious?”

“Furious? Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst were shocked and furious. Miss Bingley even dared to demand an explanation from me for proposing to you! Lady Catherine will be well beyond furious. I expect the worst from her. She has never seen reason if it goes against her own plans and desires. You know, it just crossed my mind how much alike Lady Catherine and Caroline Bingley are,” he attempts to jest.

“I could not care less about Miss Bingley. But I am sorry to cause problems in your family, my love. Some of your friends will probably disapprove of your choice of a wife too, especially if Lady Catherine makes her opinion public. Not to mention the other members of the family.”

“They might, although I do not have that many close friends. The friendly acquaintances, perhaps, but I believe most of them, while they will gossip and speculate for a while, will generally have too much sense to join in the scorn. The family...the only ones that matter to me are Georgiana and my cousin Richard. I also hope the Matlocks will act decently, even if they do not immediately approve.”

“I hope the same. I know how important your family is to you. The only thing that

matters to me is your happiness, Fitzwilliam.”

He stops walking and turns to face me.

“My beloved, as your husband, I am sure I shall have such extraordinary sources of happiness and delight that, regardless of anyone’s opinion, I shall have no cause to repine.”

This time he puts his arms around me, and I caress his face, brushing my thumb over his lips.

“I shall, by no means, suspend any pleasure of yours, my love.”

His eyes and his lips smile all his warmth at me as he places a kiss on my hand, then they turn mischievous.

“This is a promise I shall insist on you keeping later , my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth.”

Mr Bingley took advantage and did propose during that stroll, and at dinner, my mother had the privilege of having two future sons-in-law at her table, a joy that stretched her nerves more than anything else has ever done. Papa told her that she looked happier than me and Jane, which Mama did not even deny. Fortunately, she bore the situation reasonably well and managed to keep a fair balance of affection, hugs, and embarrassment between the two gentlemen.

Fitzwilliam and Charles left for London as planned, causing Mama an entire week of further turmoil, as she still feared my betrothed might change his mind and run away.

As for me, I had reasons for distress too, sadly better justified. Before his departure, Fitzwilliam handed me a letter. He said there was a matter of great importance that I must know, but he had not found the time to discuss it at length as he did not want to mar our moments together. The letter contained the disturbing truth about his real dealings with Mr Wickham, as well as that man's attempt to persuade Miss Darcy to elope. The reading of it left me tearful and angry with the scoundrel, who had claimed to be a victim and dared to insinuate himself into our family. Now I could easily understand Fitzwilliam's poor disposition when he first arrived in Hertfordshire, as well as his concern about his sister's well-being that induced him to hastily leave for London. And it made me conscious, again, of my own foolishness and selfishness in doubting him while he was away.

The same letter contained his intention to reveal Mr Wickham's true character to Colonel Forster and, upon further advice from him and my father, to the people in Meryton. However, he had no time to do that, as just days later, a huge scandal burst out when Mr Wickham was caught in a ruinous situation with Mary King. Mary's uncle rejected any attempt at an understanding upon learning the circumstances and accused the officer of spreading fabricated rumours and deception, then he removed his entire family from Meryton.

By the time Fitzwilliam returned, some arrangements had been made between him and Colonel Forster to move Mr Wickham's commission to another regiment in the North. I find this arrangement too generous for that despicable creature; if it had been down to me, he would have been moved to the most northerly part of the world, somewhere in the wild and cold wilderness where he could not bother anyone.

Papa also received a letter, from Mr Collins, which I also read. Mr Collins expressed her ladyship's utter disapproval of my marriage to Mr Darcy, which she called outrageous and claimed it would pollute the shades of Pemberley. There were many other offences that Mr Collins diligently conveyed and which filled two pages, but they did not touch me at all. I had known what to expect, and there might be worse to

come down the road.

Papa, however, was happy to reply,

Mr Collins,

I am sorry that Lady Catherine disapproves of her nephew's choice of a wife.

Mr Darcy seems exceedingly happy with the engagement and eager for the forthcoming wedding. I trust his judgment, and I fully support him. I see no choice for you but to comfort Lady Catherine as best you can.

Please be advised that I intend to share this letter with Mr Darcy, and he might be equally displeased with his aunt's displeasure.

I wish you a happy life and the best of luck in your marriage. Hopefully, Lady Catherine will at least approve of this particular one.

Yours sincerely, etc

A week after their departure for town, Fitzwilliam returned with Charles and two licences; the double wedding is planned for a week's time.

With Christmas fast approaching, we are all anxious to put aside the agitation and begin our new lives. Aunt and Uncle Gardiner have arrived for the wedding, and I am pleased how easily they are bonding with Fitzwilliam. My aunt's connections to Derbyshire and my uncle's knowledge of business are subjects of conversation that have eased their interactions.

Mr Bingley's sisters do not plan to attend the wedding — they claim a nasty cold that prevents travelling and have conveyed the most insincere congratulations. We have

all expressed our sincere understanding and our best wishes for a hasty recovery. As Fitzwilliam confessed to me, his friend is rather happy with the prospect of being alone at Netherfield with his new wife.

I can easily understand that. Fitzwilliam and I plan to leave for London after the wedding, and no insistence from Mama will change our plans. Our brief engagement has been a time of sweet, tender delights that we have shared in a few moments of stolen privacy. The more time I spend with my Fitzwilliam, the more I want. I have spent nights imagining his kisses and caresses, and my mind often scolds my heart and my body for their responses when he is close to me. That is not even true — my responses are equally improper when I merely think of him, even if he is not near.

Finally, the day of our double wedding has arrived. Despite it being a cold and cloudy winter day, curiosity has brought together many people from Meryton, gathered in front of the church. From Fitzwilliam's family, only Colonel Fitzwilliam has come, and I understand his sister's absence; Mr Wickham is still in the area, preparing to leave for his new commission, and the risk of an encounter is significant. Besides, it would not be worth the effort for her to travel to Hertfordshire since we shall be in London and will see her later today.

I look forward to meeting my new sister, and, considering the strong bond of affection between her and Fitzwilliam, I am sure I shall love her dearly.

My sister Jane is standing next to me, sharing the same wedding ceremony and happiness, like in the dream we had when we were young girls; it is almost too beautiful to be real. And yet, it is, for I can feel Fitzwilliam's arm slightly brushing over mine, and I can barely attend to the words of the service, which end with a choir of congratulations.

I hold Fitzwilliam's arm till we are outside the church, but there, we separate again, as we have to take our farewells from our family and friends.

In the middle of the crowd, Charles is laughing, and Fitzwilliam is only smiling. They are the opposite of me and Jane. There are still people who consider Fitzwilliam and I are completely different, too different to be a good match. And they are right — we are not a good match; we are a perfect one! We are not similar in nature or manners, but we complete each other.

Eventually, all the goodbyes have been said. My family has been invited to come to London for Christmas, but Papa and Mama have declined and instead agreed to come to Pemberley in the summer.

As much as I love my family, I am relieved to be in the carriage and to wave to them as we begin our journey.

I am finally alone with him; his arms surround me the moment we leave Meryton. We do not speak much; the time for words has passed.

In a few hours, we shall be in our home, in the privacy of our chambers. The master and mistress's suite. By the end of the day, I shall be his wife — in all possible ways.

I shall need some time to become accustomed to all that it means to be Mrs Darcy. But I am willing to learn everything he will teach me and to work hard to ease the burden of his responsibilities. To find my place as Mrs Darcy, as his wife, and, God willing, as the mother of his children.

For now, I have already found my place in his arms, my heart beating next to his, and I know we shall be the happiest couple in the world; as long as we are close, no obstacle can be too difficult to overcome.

THE END

Page 25

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

Tea with Mr Darcy – and a short session of Q and A with the Master of Pemberley

If the opportunity arose, would you take the chance to have tea in a quiet spot in Pemberley's gardens in the company of its master, Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy, a man of considerable fortune and intellect, known for his reserved demeanour yet profound sense of honour, who would also agree to answer your questions?

I know I would! And...did!

Here is the result! Enjoy!

* * * * *

“Thank you for agreeing to see me, Mr Darcy. I am in awe of your wonderful estate almost as much as I am in awe of you, but I am not to be deterred! I have a mission, and as a man of duty yourself, I am persuaded you understand I have a duty too. I owe it to my readers to ask: Who are you, Mr Darcy?”

“I am Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley. I am a man shaped by my upbringing and my circumstances—a gentleman by birth yet striving for virtue through self-reflection and growth.”

“We know. Indeed, we have been witnesses to your meeting and subsequent history with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. But...have you been in love before, Mr Darcy?”

“I cannot claim to have experienced true love prior to my acquaintance with Miss Bennet. My heart was untouched until I met her.”

“What do you love most about Elizabeth Bennet?”

“What I love most about her is her remarkable intelligence that challenges me at every turn. Her unwavering integrity that inspires me. Her authenticity that allows me to see the world from a different perspective. And the profound emotional connection we share that has transformed my understanding of love itself.”

“It may bring back unpleasant memories, but, Mr Darcy, how did the idea of writing Miss Elizabeth a letter after she rejected your first proposal come to you?”

“It was all Miss Austen’s fault! You see...I was pacing my room at Rosings that evening and...”

Jane Austen : (with a teasing lilt) “Ah, Mr Darcy! I see you have mastered the art of making a grand entrance into despair. Was that how you planned to win Miss Bennet’s heart? By displaying your talent for melodrama?”

Mr Darcy: (sighing) “I assure you, Miss Austen, my intentions were far from theatrical. I merely wished to express my feelings with sincerity.”

Jane Austen : “Sincerity is indeed commendable, but perhaps a touch more tact would have served you better? A proposal delivered with less, shall we say, ‘pride’ might have yielded different results.”

Mr Darcy : (raising an eyebrow) “And what would you suggest? A sonnet? Perhaps a serenade under her window?”

Jane Austen : (laughing lightly) “Now that would be quite the spectacle! But no, I think a simple acknowledgment of her worth and your admiration—without the added weight of social standing—might have sufficed.”

Mr Darcy : “You speak as if it were so easy! How does one convey deep affection

without revealing one's vulnerabilities?"

Jane Austen : "Ah, therein lies the rub! Vulnerability is often perceived as a weakness by those who do not understand its strength. You must learn that love is not merely about declarations; it is also about understanding and respect."

Mr Darcy : (nodding thoughtfully) "Perhaps I misjudged her character as much as my own approach. It seems I am not only at odds with society but also with my own heart."

Jane Austen : "Indeed! And while you ponder your next move, remember: even the proudest hearts can learn humility through love's trials."

Mr Darcy : (smirking slightly) "So you are suggesting I take lessons from my own story? How delightfully unconventional!"

Jane Austen : "Precisely! After all, every good tale requires its moments of folly before reaching a resolution. Consider this your character development arc."

Mr Darcy : (chuckling softly) "Very well then, Miss Austen. If I must endure this trial for the sake of growth, let us hope it leads me back to Miss Bennet's good graces sooner rather than later."

Jane Austen : You can count on me!

"Hahaha... I understand now, Mr Darcy! It seems that you have a sense of humour after all!"

"I have to keep up with my Elizabeth."

"I can see that. Next thing you know, you may even make a joke..."

(Mr Darcy is sipping his tea, thinking. A mischievous expression makes him look younger.)

“You know my old friend Bingley’s sister? Miss Caroline Bingley? She could not bear to be without her morning tea. I suppose one could say she had quite the steeped interest!”

“Speaking of relatives. You are now several months married, and the delightful Miss Bennet is now Mrs Darcy. Miss Austen kept her promise and helped, but how did you propose the second time?”

"You cannot really expect me to reveal this? (He is smiling.) Suffice to say, she considered it tolerable enough to tempt her... But the details were for Elizabeth’s ears only."

“I am certain you made quite the impression, Mr Darcy. For a man of few words... But where is Mrs Darcy?”

“She is supervising the preparations for her mother’s visit.”

“Mrs Bennet? She will come to Pemberley? So soon? How do you feel about that?”

“While I must admit that I have concerns regarding how her mother’s presence may influence our household and even our standing within society, my feelings for my wife outweigh those considerations significantly. Her happiness is paramount to me; if having her mother close brings her joy or peace of mind, then I shall endeavour to accept this arrangement unreservedly.”

“I suppose this ‘arrangement’ will not disturb your time spent together, alone, in each other’s company.”

“I would not find the right words to express the profound joy and contentment that

her presence brings to my life. Our life is one of a deep emotional bond that has transformed my understanding of love and companionship. We shall continue to spend our evenings in the cherished ways we have done until now.”

“And how do you spend your evenings now, Mr Darcy, if you would allow me to enquire?”

“Intimate conversations with Elizabeth, engaging in discussions about our thoughts, dreams, and aspirations. I find great pleasure in her wit and intelligence; thus, our dialogues range from light-hearted banter to more serious topics concerning society, literature, and our future together.”

“Miss Bennet once refused to engage in discussing books with you.”

“You must allow me to repeat myself: I suppose I managed to tempt her to find this activity tolerable enough. (He smiles.) Elizabeth’s love for reading leads us to select books that we both enjoy, allowing us to read aloud to one another or discuss the themes and characters within those works.”

"Is Mrs Darcy as pleased as Miss Bennet once was with the park at Pemberley?"

“I have always found solace in nature, and I believe that the evening walks with Elizabeth are a delightful way to unwind after the day’s activities. Strolling through the gardens or along the countryside paths near Pemberley provide us with an opportunity to enjoy each other’s company whilst appreciating the beauty of our surroundings. Lastly, amidst all other social activities and gatherings, there will be quiet moments where we can simply enjoy each other’s presence—perhaps sitting by the fire with tea or sharing stories from our pasts that reveal more about ourselves than words alone can convey.”

“I am certain you will do your utmost to make everything you said true, Mr Darcy. I thank you for your candid answers! One last question though, because you mentioned

books.”

“Yes?”

“What think you of Mrs Michelle d’Arcy’s books?”

“While I hold great respect for Miss Austen’s original narrative—her keen observations on society and human behaviour resonate deeply with me—I find myself intrigued by the various interpretations presented by Michelle d’Arcy. Each variation offers a fresh perspective through which one may examine the complexities of love and personal introspection and evolution.

I appreciate the creativity involved in reimagining characters who are so dear to me, to us; it allows for exploration beyond the confines of their initial portrayals. However, I would hope that any adaptation remains true to the essence of what makes ‘Pride and Prejudice’ enduring—the interplay between pride, prejudice, self-awareness, and ultimately, redemption through love.

In particular, I am curious about how these variations address my own journey towards understanding my feelings for Elizabeth—whether they enhance or detract from the sincerity of my transformation.”
